Biden uses “systemic racism” narrative to obscure class character of police violence

Niles Niemuth
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In response to the guilty verdict in the trial of former Minneapolis, Minnesota police officer Derek Chauvin for the murder of George Floyd, the Biden administration and the media have pushed the narrative that police violence is the product of “systemic racism” and “white supremacy.”

Speaking Tuesday night, shortly after the verdict was announced, Biden declared that Floyd’s death had exposed “the systemic racism that is a stain on our nation’s soul. The knee on the neck of justice for Black Americans… The pain, the exhaustion that Black and brown Americans experience every single day.” He insisted that suppressing police killings requires “acknowledging and confronting head-on systemic racism and the racial disparities” in policing and the justice system.

Without exception, police violence in the United States is presented in the media and political establishment as a racial conflict. The disconnect between this narrative and the reality of police violence is staggering.

According to data collected by the *Washington Post*, 6,222 people have been killed by police in the US since the beginning of 2015. Nearly three times more people have been killed in encounters with police in just over six years than US soldiers were killed in Afghanistan over the last two decades.

Breaking it down by those victims who have been identified by race, 2,885 are white, 1,499 are black, 1,052 are Hispanic, 104 are Asian, 87 are Native American, and 47 are classified as other. From a standpoint of percentages, 46.4 percent are white, 24 percent black, 17 percent Hispanic, 1.7 percent Asian, 1.4 percent Native American, 0.75 percent other and 8.8 percent unidentified.

Relative to the entire population, there is a disproportionality in the number of African Americans and Native Americans killed by police, while whites, Hispanics and Asians are killed at a rate lower than their share of the population. Native Americans are killed at a rate that is seven times higher than their share of the population, while for blacks it is roughly two times higher.

There is no doubt that racism is a factor in many police killings, but it is not the racism of the entire society. It is racism in a particular segment of society, the police and military forces. The ruling class cultivates within its apparatus of repression all manner of fascistic and reactionary conceptions.

However, once the socioeconomic background of where the victims were killed—typically areas with low median household income and high rates of poverty—is factored in, most of the disparity is accounted for by economic factors.

Given the data about police killings, the exclusive focus on black victims is not only a distortion of reality, but it also vastly underestimates the scale of police brutality in the United States. Explaining this social phenomenon through a single factor, racism, leaves out a majority of the victims. The media’s presentation implies that police killings of whites and others are legitimate.

The state and mainstream media, most explicitly in the *New York Times* 1619 Project, have invested an enormous amount in promoting a racialist narrative of American society, that the United States is divided between “white America” and “black America.” What accounts for the effort to interpret all American history and contemporary politics through the prism of race and reinterpret all social problems as racial issues?

The alternative to a racial analysis of American society is a class analysis. By blaming “systemic

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racism" and "white supremacy," the reality of capitalism and class oppression disappears. The issue of social inequality is no longer about the rich against the poor, but white against black.

The responsibility of capitalism—a specific political and socioeconomic system that dictates the life outcomes for billions around the world—for this level of police violence is dissolved. In its place, a psychological attribute, race hatred, is attached to an entire segment of the population. Chauvin is presented as nothing other than a particularly naked expression of a universal hatred of black people by white people. Such a perspective precludes any form of collective action between black and white, driving a massive wedge through the working class and dissolving class antagonisms into race hatred.

Biden's remarks also whitewash the crime committed by Chauvin in order to cover for the police, by transforming it into a crime of the nation, resting in its "very soul." The nation, however, did not kneel on Floyd's neck; it was Chauvin who killed him. And he had accomplices. The three other police officers who helped him kill Floyd, were white, African American, and Asian American. All were acting, not in accordance with the color of their skin but in their capacity as the uniformed and armed defenders of the state and private property.

Those who appeal to "systemic racism" as the cause of police brutality cannot explain why the largest share of those killed by the police every year are white. Nor can they explain why police continue to kill three people per day on average, despite all the protests and promises of reform.

During Chauvin's trial, which began on March 29, there were at least 56 police killings across the US. Among the victims who have been identified by race, nine were white, nine were black, seven were Hispanic and one was Pacific Islander. On the day of the verdict, 15-year-old Ma'Kiah Bryant was shot and killed by a police officer in Columbus, Ohio. There were also fatal police shootings in Detroit, Michigan, Lakewood, Colorado and Worcester, Massachusetts.

Under conditions of immense social inequality, accelerated by the pandemic, the primary concern of the Democratic Party is to block the emergence of a united class movement against the capitalist system. While the fascistic Trump responded to the mass multiracial protests against police violence sparked by Floyd's killing with a ferocious law-and-order campaign, deploying federal Border Patrol agents to suppress protests, the Democrats have their own approach.

No less ruthless than the Republicans, the Democrats mobilize the National Guard to patrol the streets and back up police crackdowns while deploying racial politics in order to divide workers against each other. They seek to obscure the class character of the opposition to police violence and undermine a class movement against police violence. To this end, tens of millions of dollars have been poured into the Black Lives Matter movement and associated organizations to promote the idea that policing is an issue of whites against blacks.

Chauvin's trial refutes this racial narrative. A mixed-race jury quickly came to the decision that he was guilty of murder. Witnesses, black and white, testified to their horror over witnessing the cold-blooded killing. As the verdict was read, a multiracial crowd gathered outside the courthouse erupted in celebration.

As a social phenomenon, police violence does not emerge from "white supremacy" or "systemic racism"; it is fundamentally rooted in the capitalist order, which police departments were created to defend. Only a working-class movement, united across all racial, ethnic and national divisions, fighting to overturn capitalism and establish workers democratic control of society, can put an end to the reign of terror by the police.

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