

In authoritarian rant, Washington, DC chief of police denounces policies that “coddle violent criminals”

Dmitri Church
10 August 2021

At a press conference Friday, July 23, Washington, DC Police Chief Robert J. Contee III went on an extended rant promoting law and order policies against those who supposedly “coddle violent criminals.” The speech came after a shooting the previous night at a restaurant near Logan Circle near downtown.

'You cannot coddle violent criminals,' the veteran officer told reporters. Contee explicitly ruled out poverty as a factor in violent crime. Criminals “may not want jobs. They may not. They may not need services,' he said. Contee went on to blame the court system for releasing supposedly violent offenders from jail during the COVID-19 pandemic for the growth of lawlessness in the city.

Washington, DC has seen a recent rise in violent crime, including a 19 percent increase in homicides from 2019 to 2020. However, this cannot be understood outside of the massive economic and social pressure placed upon the population by the pandemic and the utter failure of the city’s Democratic Party-led establishment to address it.

Officials and the capitalist press have seized on recent shootings, including the tragic death of 6-year-old Nyiah Courtney, shot last month in the neighborhood of Congress Heights, to insist that crime in the city is spiraling out of control and that more police are needed.

Contee, echoing right wing figures at the national level, denounced discussion about police reform as “fluffy stuff” and pointed the finger at groups protesting police violence, and particularly those calling to defund the police. He complained that the Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) has 200 fewer officers compared to last year, and demanded

community support for increasing the size of the department. Contee would go on to push for greater police funding in comments to Fox News: 'There’s been intentional efforts to not provide the full resources, in my opinion, the police department needs. Right now we’re in this budget season. The police department’s budget should have been fully supported.'

While Contee claimed he was not talking about “mass incarceration,” his speech left little room for alternatives. DC Court spokesman Douglas Buchanan replied to Contee in remarks made to Fox News, explaining that only jury trials were postponed due to the pandemic, and only 5 percent of felony cases make it to a jury trial. Later, Chief Judge Anita Josey-Herring of the DC Superior Court released a written statement defending the courts, saying they are doing their part to keep people locked up.

Contee, a longtime DC police officer, was appointed by Democratic DC Mayor Muriel Bowser in January to replace outgoing MPD chief Peter Newsham, who was leaving to become Chief of Police for nearby Prince William County in Virginia. Bowser said she did not interview other candidates, explaining 'what was most important to me is that we had solid and steady leadership at the Metropolitan Police Department and not a prolonged human resources process.’’ The mayor described the MPD as one of the 'largest and most critical' agencies of her government.

Contee, who is African American, was confirmed unanimously by the Democratic Party-led DC Council on May 4. Speaking at his confirmation, Democratic councilwoman Janeese Lewis George said, “I want Chief Contee to be successful, and our communities need him to succeed as chief, but that means putting

words into action.” George is seen as the council member most critical of the police, and was endorsed by both Black Lives Matter and the Democratic Socialists of America. Contee was backed by the DC Police Union and DC Attorney General Karl A. Racine.

Anti-police brutality activists had protested Contee's nomination, citing his leadership of the MPD's Narcotics and Special Investigation Division, which came under scrutiny for its aggressive tactics used in operations during his tenure.

Contee's elevation to chief of police came on the heels of global protests against police brutality following the brutal murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police on May 25, 2020. Many millions of people registered their outrage with the police and were universally met with repression.

During the protests in DC, Bowser sought to posture as a defender of the protests. To much media attention, she renamed the two blocks of 16th Street leading to the White House 'Black Lives Matter Plaza' and emblazoned the slogan on the pavement. The mayor, a notorious advocate of big business and a career Democratic Party official, traded barbs with then-President Donald Trump, who deployed the National Guard and armed police against anti-police brutality demonstrators in the city in June of last year near Lafayette Square.

These events marked Trump's open break with Constitutional forms of rule, which culminated in the fascist-led coup attempt of January 6, which sought to stop the confirmation of Democratic President-elect Joseph Biden.

Since this time, the Democratic Party at the national level has downplayed the significance of Trump's dictatorial moves. No sooner was Trump out of office and Biden inaugurated than the Democrats turned their attention to the tasks of pushing for the reopening of schools and workplaces despite the current sweep of the pandemic while funneling more funding to police departments across the country.

Significantly, Contee's rant last month garnered support from right wing commenters on Twitter, and Bowser herself retweeted a post praising Contee for his statements, saying, 'This is what real leadership looks like.' Last week, Bowser proposed giving the MPD \$11 million to hire 20 more officers in the remainder of this year, and 150 in 2022. At the same time, a proposal to

provide funding so that every school in DC has a full-time librarian was dead on arrival in the Democrat-led council.

The latest developments further expose the right-wing and authoritarian character of the entire Democratic Party political establishment in Washington, DC. At the beginning of the protests last summer, Bowser denounced the protesters as looters. She has worked to withhold body camera footage from the public, and blocked the council from passing reform bills saying, “Anything that would hinder an investigation and prosecution, we would be concerned about.”

Earlier in June, an attorney for the MPD conceded in court that their officers had participated in the brutal repression of protesters the previous summer. MPD attorney Robert Sobiecki argued that “discharge of tear gas in that direction [of the protesters] was not unreasonable” because “the curfew, violence of past nights, chaos created by federal defendants” justified it.

Bowser and Contee's actions, as with the entire political establishment since the protests last summer, are part of a ruling-class strategy to prevent broad popular anger from developing along revolutionary lines. This has gone along in tandem with a establishment-led effort to downplay the significance of President Trump's coup efforts, which developed in response to the mass protests that erupted.

In June, the Biden administration fought to have an ACLU lawsuit against Trump dropped for the former-president's actions in 2020. He and congressional Democratic leaders have sought instead to minimize the seriousness of the threat of dictatorship in the US and have appealed to their fascistic Republican counterparts as “colleagues,” enacting right-wing and pro-business policies in tandem.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact