

Using record number of homicides as pretext, Portland Mayor proposes \$5.2 million to expand police force

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Portland, Oregon's Democratic mayor, Ted Wheeler, announced a public safety spending plan of \$7.8 million last week, out of which \$5.2 million will be used to expand the city's police department. The proposal includes the purchase of body-worn cameras for Portland Police Bureau (PPB) officers, \$25,000 signing bonuses for 50 new PPB recruits, and hiring additional personnel to reach three dozen unarmed public safety specialists.

Portland has a surplus budget this year of \$62 million, with \$31 million in one-time funds to spend on city programs. The additional funding came from "an unexpected boost in revenue from Portland's business license tax on large companies, from grocery chains to home improvement retailers, that continued to turn profits during the pandemic," according to the *Oregonian*. The total budget of PPB for fiscal year 2020-21 is \$248.3 million. The Portland City Council is expected to vote on Wheeler's proposal on November 17.

Wheeler is proposing that 25 percent of the allocated surplus be spent on policing. The bulk of the spending, \$2.9 million, would go to body-worn cameras, which Wheeler assures will increase police accountability, while in reality, serves as a cover to build up the police department.

Wheeler aims to hire a total of 200 additional sworn officers and 100 unarmed "community safety specialists" by 2024.

The city also plans to open its own police training academy in the Portland area with \$856,000 to assist with recruitment. Another \$400,000 would be used to hire an independent consultant to review police procedure on crowd control methods, as a way to appease public outrage over PPB's use of violent and illegal measures against left-wing protesters, including kettling.

The proposal is being painted as an attempt by the city to address public safety issues. "This is the deadliest era in modern times for the city of Portland," Wheeler stated when he announced his funding plan on November 3, referring to

the record surge of violent crime that has led to more than 70 killings in the city so far this year.

"Many Portlanders no longer feel safe in their city," Wheeler declared. "Business owners have closed up shop for fear of doing business in high-risk areas. Commuters fear for their safety, whether taking public transit or going by foot. Parents are scared to let their children play outside. People are leaving for work, going to the supermarket or grabbing drinks with friends and not returning home."

Political officials and major media outlets have attributed the rise of violent crime to the reduced funding, staff and public support for the Portland Police Bureau in the wake of last year's protests against police brutality. The city reduced PPB funding by \$2.9 million in 2020, just over 1 percent of the current budget, and the department now reports a vacancy rate of 13.9 percent.

Left out of the discussion about crime is the reality that the most fundamental change in the past two years is the economic and social devastation triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has killed over 5 million globally and nearly 5,000 in Oregon as the virus has been allowed to run rampant among the population by the ruling class in the name of corporate profits.

Rather than address the deep social issues of inequality that have forced working-class people into conditions of desperation, the rise in shootings is being used as a pretext to expand the police force, which will continue to target working class neighborhoods and left-wing protesters.

Portland Democrats are providing further cover to their right-wing militarist policies by promising police reform. "You can't build trust in policing if you don't have accountability and transparency in policing," Wheeler said in explaining the funding of body cameras and an oversight board.

Wheeler's proposal joins the efforts of City Commissioner Jo-Ann Hardesty to provide \$2.9 million of additional funding to expand operations of the Portland Street

Response (PSR), which sends a team of social work professionals in response to emergency calls about mental health and homeless issues.

Mayor Wheeler's funding proposal is part of the broader strategy of the Biden administration and Democratic Party to distance themselves from calls to "defund the police," instead opting to increase funding to police departments in the name of racial justice, reform and public safety.

During the eruptions of mass protests following the police murder of George Floyd, many Democratic governors and mayors expressed sympathy for demonstrators while deploying the police and National Guard to suppress them. The Democrats declared police reform as the solution to the wave of police killings which results in approximately 1,000 deaths every year.

At the national level, the Democrats proposed bills that had no chance of passing in the Senate, such as the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act, which has been stalled for the past two years. The bill was modest, banning chokeholds and no-knock warrants, limiting the transfer of military equipment to local law enforcement and creating a database to document complaints against police officers.

In Minneapolis, immediately following the protests, a majority of the Minneapolis City Council members pledged to defund the city's police department, while three months later backing away from their pledges.

In August of this year, Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey proposed a \$192 million budget for the Minneapolis Police Department. He stated, "Following the murder of George Floyd, Minneapolis became ground zero in the debate around the future of public safety and a case study in the dangers of grand pronouncements with little planning." He added, "While the city has invested in other safety programs, it would be disingenuous to expect these new, complementary programs to succeed simply by breaking down the work of others."

In Seattle, the city council "cut" the police budget by transferring police functions, such as parking enforcement and 911 dispatch, to other city departments. Facing a vacancy rate of 15 percent, Seattle Mayor-elect Bruce Harrell will likely follow the path of Wheeler to boost police funding and expand the department's personnel and resources.

President Joe Biden has encouraged states and localities to use any portion of the \$350 billion in pandemic relief funds allotted them under the \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan to fund their police departments. "This is not a time to turn our backs on law enforcement or our communities," Biden declared in June.

Biden falsely claims that more funding in policing will lead to more support and outreach for vulnerable

communities. "It means more police officers, more nurses, more counselors, more social workers or community violence interrupters to help resolve issues before they escalate into crimes," the president said.

The reality is that a few more social workers and counselors will not change the dire, desperate, social and economic conditions that the poor and the working class find themselves in.

Mayor Wheeler, along with the rest of the Democratic Party, serves the interests of the capitalist system and thus guarantees social inequality, which produces the very conditions that lead to increased violence. Police brutality will not go away so long as capitalism stays intact, as a militarized police force serves as a means to protect the ruling class, private property and corporations.

Last year's multiethnic and multinational global protests demanding an end to police brutality demonstrate how the ruling class responds when the working class says, "Enough!" Cities imposed curfews, President Trump and more than 30 states activated over 96,000 troops from the National Guard and other military agencies. Police rioted and rampaged throughout US cities, overseen by both Democrats and Republicans. In both Seattle and Portland, local governments stepped up brutalization and legal actions against left-wing protests over the past year, preparing for an intensification of strikes and demonstrations in the coming period.

As the working class advances its fight against the pandemic and social inequality, through struggles such as in the pending strike of 32,000 Kaiser Permanente health care workers on the West Coast and over 10,000 John Deere workers across the US, the ruling class will respond with more brutal and open forms of repression. Workers and youth must break with the Democratic Party, as well as its circle of pseudo-left apologists, and take up the struggle to unite the working class in a common struggle against capitalism and for socialism.



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