

The class issues in the police killing of Tyre Nichols

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Friday evening, after weeks of protests by the family and community members, the city of Memphis, Tennessee released video footage documenting the January 7 fatal police beating of Tyre Nichols.

The footage from police body cameras and a stationary camera near the site of the police assault documented the savage attack on Nichols by at least five Memphis police officers, which resulted in his hospitalization and death three days later.

The gruesome footage, watched by millions across the US, evoked shock and outrage, triggering protests in Memphis, Atlanta, New York, Washington D.C. and other cities. The protests are expected to continue over the weekend and spread to other cities. On Friday evening, police reportedly arrested protesters at Times Square in New York.

The 29-year-old father and FedEx worker was attacked after he was stopped, supposedly for a traffic violation, by members of the Scorpion (“Street Crimes Operation to Restore Peace in Our Neighborhoods”) unit of the Memphis Police Department, created in the fall of 2021 by the Democratic city administration.

Driving unmarked vehicles, the police aggressively advanced on Nichols’ vehicle and surrounded the terrified and completely innocent man. Like Nichols, all of the police officers involved—Demetrius Haley, Tadarrius Bean, Emmitt Martin III, Desmond Mills and Justin Smith—were African American.

The video shows that Nichols ran after he was surrounded by the police, who attempted to tase him. The police caught up with Nichols and viciously beat him for many minutes, using batons, tasers, fists and boots. As the police assaulted him, Nichols, who was roughly 100 yards from his mother’s house, repeatedly screamed out for his mother and questioned why he

was being attacked.

The cops took turns mocking and pummeling Nichols until he lost consciousness. They could be heard yelling, “Give me your f*****g hands,” and, “I’m going to baton the f**k out of you.”

The stationary camera video shows that for more than 25 minutes at least a dozen cops, by then gathered at the scene, refused to offer medical aid or get the limp police beating victim to a hospital.

In an attempt to tamp down anger ahead of the release of the video on Friday, the Memphis Police Department announced the firing of the five cops who killed Nichols, and on Thursday the Shelby County district attorney brought multiple felony charges against them, including second-degree murder, kidnapping and oppression. While all five cops were booked into the Shelby County jail on Thursday, as of this writing, four had bonded out.

The killing of Nichols is the latest in an unending series of murders at the hands of police. So far this year, at least 79 people have been killed, according to a tracker maintained by the *Washington Post*. At this pace, roughly three killings a day, 2023 will meet or top the 2022 toll of more than 1,100 people killed by police officers in the US.

The fatal beating of Nichols by five African-American police undercuts the racist narrative of police violence advanced by the Democratic Party and its identity and racial politics allies. It shatters the claim that the answer to police brutality is to “diversify” police departments.

Police violence, like every other social evil under capitalism, is fundamentally a class question. There are more white people killed by police in the US than

blacks or Hispanics, although blacks and Hispanics are killed in numbers disproportionate to their percentage of the population. Racism plays a part, but a part secondary to social class. The police are recruited from more backward layers of the population, and police departments are known to be riddled with fascistic and white supremacist elements, including many veterans of US imperialist wars around the world.

What the overwhelming majority of victims of police violence and murder have in common is that they are part of the working class. Racism is itself an ideological and political weapon long employed by the capitalist class to divide the working class, in accordance with the strategy of “divide and rule.”

Racist politics buttress this ruling class strategy. Memphis is a clear example. The second largest city in Tennessee has a population of 635,000, over 65 percent of which identifies as African-American. Roughly 56 percent of the police likewise identify as African-American, including female police chief Cerelyn Davis. Within four months of being sworn in as police chief on June 14, 2021, Davis created the Scorpion unit, which has become notorious for its brutal and repressive methods.

The tragedy of Tyre Nichols underscores the dead end of subordinating social opposition among workers and poor people to the Democratic Party and its promises to “reform” the police.

Following the police murder of George Floyd in May 2020, millions of youth, students and workers of all races marched together in opposition to police violence in cities and towns across the US, as well as in countries around the world. The Democratic Party and its allies intervened to derail the protests along racist lines and channel them behind the election campaigns of Democratic politicians, including then-presidential hopeful Joe Biden.

In the nearly three years since the police murder of Floyd, billions of dollars have been spent on police departments around the country, and the killing of workers and poor people of all races has continued unabated.

In June 2021, five months after taking office, President Biden announced that states and localities could 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.

In a speech last March unveiling his 2023 budget, Biden said, “The answer is not to defund our police departments. It’s to fund our police and give them all the tools they need... The budget puts more police on the streets for community policing so they get to know the community they are policing.”

An example of this “on the streets community policing” is the Scorpion unit in Memphis.

Under conditions of an unprecedented economic, social, political and geo-political crisis of the global capitalist system, marked by a drive toward world war, the growth of fascistic forces and breakdown of democratic forms of rule, and a revival on a world scale of working class struggles, the ruling oligarchies must bring forward the repressive forces of the state to defend their wealth and power.

As Lenin explained in *State and Revolution*, paraphrasing Engels, the police are one of the “special bodies of armed men” of the capitalist state. They exist to repress the resistance of the working class, with whatever violence is needed, to defend the property and wealth of the ruling oligarchy.

In a society so catastrophically unequal as the United States, it is impossible to rule without the savagery of police violence, which will increasingly be turned against striking workers.

Ending police violence requires the unification of the working class armed with a political understanding that the defense of democratic rights, including the right to life itself, requires a struggle to put an end to capitalism and reorganize society on an egalitarian, that is, socialist basis.



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