

# Race, class and the police killing of Tyre Nichols

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In the aftermath of the release of the video last week showing the brutal police assault of Tyre Nichols that led to his death three days later, President Joe Biden and the capitalist press have sought to present the killing of Nichols as the latest expression of “systemic racism.”

The facts of the incident make this argument a difficult one. The police who have been charged with second-degree murder in the killing of the 29-year-old FedEx worker—Demetrius Haley, Tadarrius Bean, Emmitt Martin III, Desmond Mills Jr. and Justin Smith—are African-American, like Nichols.

No evidence has been presented that the January 7 “traffic stop” of Nichols, and subsequent police assault, were motivated by racism. And while racist and backward attitudes are cultivated by the ruling class in police departments around the world, the racial composition of the Memphis Police Department roughly corresponds to that of the working class population of Memphis.

Of the nearly 2,000 cops in the department, nearly 60 percent are black, close to the 64 percent of the Memphis population that identifies as black. Six out of the nine members of the Memphis police leadership “executive command staff,” including police chief Cerelyn Davis, (who spearheaded the creation of the “SCORPION” unit that killed Nichols) are also black.

In light of these facts, representatives of the ruling class who advance the racist narrative to explain unending police killings in America claim that when it comes to “black cops” killing “black people,” the race of the police officers does not matter because American society in general is systemically racist.

In commentaries published in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, the two leading newspapers affiliated with the Democratic Party presented the Nichols killing as confirmation of “systemic racism” in the US.

In a January 29 editorial titled “On violent policing, we say ‘never again’ but we get ‘once again’” the *Post* asked, “How many more times will *Americans*, and their leaders in government and law enforcement, vow ‘never again’ about

such an incident, only to find ourselves ruefully saying, ‘Once again.’” (Emphasis added)

With a bit of verbal sleight of hand, the *Post* attempts to foist onto the *American people* as a whole the responsibility for the endless killings carried out by the police, which is an institution of the state, operating under the direction of both capitalist parties. Since coming to office following Trump’s failed coup, Biden and the Democrats have sought to outflank their fascistic “Republican colleagues” from the right in their support and funding for the police.

This is combined with an effort to whitewash the role of the Memphis police as a whole. The *Post* writes that there are some “encouraging aspects to this episode,” including the claim that Memphis Police Chief Cerelyn Davis “took her own skeptical look at the initial reports and fired the men 12 days later.”

In fact, the initial statement put out by the Memphis Police Department was not “skeptical” of anything. It claimed that only a “confrontation” between Nichols and the police had occurred and that Nichols was taken to the hospital after he “complained of having a shortness of breath.”

The false police statement was a main driver in prompting the parents of Nichols to protest multiple times outside the police station following his death, and to publicly release a photograph of their child’s mangled body, likening the treatment Nichols received to the fatal violence inflicted on Emmett Till by Mississippi racists in 1955.

While assuring its readers that “most police officers do a difficult and necessary job,” the *Post* concludes that the change that is needed “is the kind that cannot come from laws and policies alone: cultural.” That is, the problem, in the end, is racism.

The racist narrative is developed in an even more overt manner by the *New York Times*’ Charles Blow in his January 27 column headlined, “Tyre Nichols’s Death Is America’s Shame.”

Blow pours scorn on the mass demonstrations of youth and workers of all races that erupted in 2020 following the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He

writes that they were populated by “evanescent allies, poll-chasing politicians and cooped-up Covid kids who had used the protests as an opportunity to congregate.” Blow cynically likens the protests to a mass psychological episode, a “cabin-fever racial consciousness” brought on by “Covid lockdowns” that “melted away like ice cubes on a summer sidewalk.”

In the wake of the protests, he writes, “Americans shifted to other priorities” and “the broader public became desensitized to police killings, or it callously started to see the police killings as unfortunate but ultimately acceptable byproducts of much-needed increased policing at a time of rising crime.”

The police killing of Nichols is a consequence, he declares, of the fact that “America has once again failed Black people... America should be ashamed.”

This is at once a disgusting slander and a political cover-up. It is a slander against the millions of Americans who braved police violence and fascist terrorism to oppose police violence in the summer and fall of 2020. And it is a cover-up of the role of Democratic Party politicians and their spokesmen like Blow himself who channeled this opposition into the bankrupt politics of racial identity.

Amid the outpouring of commentary (the *Post* editorial and the Charles Blow column are only two examples of many) on the “systemic racism” revealed in the killing of Nichols, there is no mention of the fact that police violence affects workers and poor people of all races.

While blacks, Native Americans and Hispanics are killed at a disproportionate rate compared to their share of the general population, of the over 1,000 people killed by police in the US every year, a plurality are white men.

According to figures for 2022 from *Statista*, of the 1,192 people killed by police in America in the course of the year, 502, or 42 percent, identified as white. Black, Asian, Native American, Pacific Islander and “unknown” combined accounted for 474 deaths, or 41 percent. Hispanics accounted for 216, or roughly 18 percent of the deaths.

Among the most horrific police killings captured on video in recent years, which went largely unreported in the mainstream media, was the killing of Jerod Draper. Draper, who was white, died inside a Harrison County, Indiana jail after “his bare feet [were] stomped, his pressure points [were] prodded, he [was] Tased multiple times,” while “he loudly plead[ed] for the pain to stop,” according to a December 2021 investigation by the *IndyStar*.

To the extent that racism plays a role in police murders, it is due to the fact that the ruling class cultivates in police departments the most backward and lumpen social elements to defend, not a racial hierarchy, but the capitalist system and the ruling class’ unearned wealth and private property.

What the victims of police violence and murder have in common is that they are overwhelmingly working class.

The arguments of the *Post*, the *Times* and countless others are aimed at denying the roots of police violence in the reality of American capitalism, while dividing workers against each other on the basis of race.

Where is the real explanation for the horrors of police violence to be found? Here, two factors must be emphasized.

First, the United States is the most socially unequal of any major capitalist country, presided over by a ruling class that has amassed unimaginable wealth amidst the destruction of social services, the gutting of cities and a pandemic that has killed more than one million people.

Second, and this deserves particular emphasis, is the operation of American imperialism throughout the world. The US government spends \$1 trillion a year to finance the instruments of death. The Pentagon has engaged in 30 years of endless neocolonial wars and interventions throughout the world, which have now developed into a direct conflict with Russia. In the interests of world domination, the ruling class has built up a massive apparatus of militarist violence.

But there is no dividing line between the organized institution of violence abroad and the organized institution of violence at home. Indeed, there are innumerable connections between the military and the police, both in terms of finances and personnel. They are, moreover, both instruments of the state and the capitalist ruling class that controls it.

It is this essential class function of the police that the narrative of “systemic racism” is aimed at obscuring. But it is the essential basis for the working class of all races to oppose police violence by opposing capitalism.



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