

5 years since the police murder of George Floyd

Jacob Crosse
25 May 2025

On May 25, 2020, 46-year-old George Floyd, an African American man and father, was murdered by Minneapolis police, who pinned him to the ground and knelt on his neck for over nine minutes as horrified bystanders pleaded for them to stop. Cell phone footage of the killing sparked mass outrage and triggered a wave of protests across the United States and around the world.

In the footage, Floyd cried out for his mother, pleaded that he was going to die, and told the officers more than 20 times, “I can’t breathe.” Derek Chauvin, a 19-year veteran of the department and the senior officer on the scene, responded to Floyd’s desperate pleas by keeping his knee on his neck and taunting the dying man: “Stop talking, stop yelling, it takes a heck of a lot of oxygen to talk.”

Floyd’s death at the hands—and knees—of the police unleashed a powerful surge of social anger among the working class and youth. An estimated 26 million people in the United States took part in multiracial, multiethnic protests against police violence.

The protests extended far beyond major cities, with thousands of demonstrations erupting in every state across the country. Between May 24 and August 22, 2020, the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) recorded more than 7,750 protests in the US alone. Demonstrations against police violence took place on every inhabited continent and in over 60 countries—underscoring the global and class nature of police repression.

The killing of Floyd was the immediate trigger for the mass protests, but their scale and persistence reflected deeper social conditions. Decades of unchecked police violence, soaring inequality and the government’s indifference to the mounting death toll from COVID-19 had created a tinderbox.

The response of the US ruling class to the mass protests took two complementary forms: violent repression and the

promotion of racist politics aimed at dividing and derailing the movement.

Under the first Trump administration, police were unleashed across the country to crush the demonstrations, with the backing of both Democratic and Republican state and local governments. Over the summer of 2020, more than 10,000 people were arrested for participating in overwhelmingly peaceful protests. Thousands more were injured as police deployed militarized units, tear gas, rubber bullets and other brutal tactics against unarmed demonstrators.

In Minnesota, Democratic Mayor Jacob Frey imposed a curfew in Minneapolis, while Democratic Governor Tim Walz deployed the National Guard against protesters. Ultimately, more than 30 states enacted curfews, and several activated National Guard units in a coordinated effort to suppress the protests.

Terrified that the mass movement would spiral beyond the control of the police, military and political establishment, the Trump administration attempted to stage a coup. In a June 1 address from the White House Rose Garden, Trump threatened to invoke the Insurrection Act and announced the deployment of “thousands and thousands of heavily armed soldiers, military personnel, and law enforcement” to suppress the protests.

Politically, however, the central role in derailing the mass protests was played by the Democratic Party and its affiliated organizations, including the Democratic Socialists of America, which promoted racial politics to divert the movement into harmless and essentially reactionary channels.

This was the high-water mark of the 1619 Project, published by the *New York Times*—an organ of the Democratic Party—the previous September. Its racist narrative, which presented American history as a struggle between “white” and “black” rather than a class struggle, was realized in practice in the denial of any class basis to

police killing, which instead became another manifestation of “systemic racism” and “white supremacy.”

“Black Lives Matter” was embraced by the Democratic Party, corporate America and the media and flooded with hundreds of millions of dollars.

The campaign was aimed at covering up the fact that the majority of those killed by police in every country are working class, poor, or suffering from a mental health crisis. While racist and fascist attitudes are cultivated and promoted within police departments—and by the US ruling class—the police function as an instrument of *class rule*. They are granted extraordinary powers by the capitalist state to kill with impunity in defense of private property and the rule of the financial oligarchy.

In an attempt to sabotage the mass movement against police violence, the Democratic Party-led racist campaign turned its sights on the American Revolution and the Civil War, demanding that, as part of a “racial reckoning,” statues of Thomas Jefferson, George Washington and even the Great Emancipator himself, Abraham Lincoln, be torn down.

Opposition to police violence and inequality was then channeled behind the presidential campaign of Joe Biden and his running mate, Kamala Harris, the former prosecutor and friend of police, whose candidacy was hailed as “historic” by the media and Democratic Party operatives because of her race and gender.

After Trump’s failed fascist coup attempt on January 6, 2021, Biden came to power as the head of a government of militarism and war. Police violence has steadily increased.

Floyd was one of more than 1,160 people killed by police in the United States in 2020. This number rose steadily over the next four years. In 2024, the last year of the Biden administration, police killed at least 1,226 people—a nearly 6 percent increase—according to figures compiled by Mapping Police Violence.

Under President Joe Biden, the wealth of US billionaires soared, while more than \$300 million was funneled into police departments. Token efforts at police “reform” and “accountability” were quickly abandoned, even as militarized “cop cities” were constructed over the objections of local residents.

Following the October 7 attacks and the mass protests against the US-backed Israeli genocide, these same police forces were turned against peaceful demonstrators demanding an end to the slaughter. Biden and the Democrats joined their Republican colleagues in

slandering all opposition to mass murder as “antisemitism.”

The character of the Biden administration created the conditions for Trump’s return. While overseeing a historic transfer of wealth to the ruling elite and expanding war abroad, the Democrats promoted the reactionary politics of race and gender to divide the working class. This provided fertile ground for Trump’s reactionary demagoguery.

Now back in the White House, Trump has made clear that his administration of, by, and for the oligarchy intends to dismantle even the most limited Department of Justice investigations and reforms into police departments. At the same time, it plans to massively expand the powers of the immigration Gestapo to carry out mass deportations—not only of immigrants and students, but also of so-called “home grown,” that is, US citizens who oppose the regime’s policies.

In the erection of a political dictatorship, Trump intends to complete in his second term what he began in the summer of 2020.

Five years after the police murder of George Floyd, the central lesson of that experience is that the derailment of mass opposition by the Democratic Party and its satellites has proven politically fatal. What began as mass protest was redirected into the dead end of racial politics, providing a political opening for the return of Trump and the far right.

The events of the past half-decade have confirmed that the fight against police violence is inseparable from the fight against dictatorship, the capitalist state and the financial oligarchy that rules America.

The fight against police violence must be waged as part of the broader struggle of the working class to defend democratic rights, oppose fascism and war, and reorganize society on socialist foundations. This requires the building of a revolutionary leadership. We urge all workers and young people who agree with this perspective to join the Socialist Equality Party and take up the fight.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact