

Police Killings in America: The Class Issues

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Once again, a police officer has been let off without charges after killing an unarmed man on the streets of an American city.

The decision by a Staten Island grand jury not to indict New York City police officer Daniel Pantaleo for choking Eric Garner to death in July is another judicial travesty, coming only two weeks after a similar failure to indict the Ferguson, Missouri cop who shot Michael Brown.

In some ways, the exoneration of Pantaleo is even more egregious than the non-indictment of Darren Wilson. Garner was accosted for selling loose cigarettes. He was tackled to the ground for no reason, strangled with a chokehold long banned by the police department and pinned to the ground as he cried out repeatedly that he could not breathe. After he passed out, cops stood around for seven minutes before administering first aid.

The entire incident was captured on video, seen by millions of people around the world. The city's medical examiner ruled the death a homicide. Yet there is to be no trial, no opportunity for the facts of the case to be considered by a jury and punishment meted out according to the law. Instead, as in Ferguson, a grand jury, in secret proceedings, guided by a prosecutor with close ties to the police, has decided not to indict.

The grand jury decision in the Garner case has produced a wave of outrage throughout the country. Thousands have poured into the streets in angry spontaneous protests that have blocked highways and filled streets in New York City, Chicago and other US cities.

Millions of people are asking themselves: If a police officer can strangle an unarmed man to death, with the entire incident recorded on tape, and *still* get off without even being charged for a crime, what is not permitted? The anger is entirely justified. It must be guided, however, by a clear and informed political understanding.

It is impossible to talk seriously about police brutality without talking about capitalism, without recognizing the connection between the violence of the state and the massive social inequality that is the defining feature of American life. It is this basic fact that the ruling class and its various spokesmen seek above all to obscure.

The response of the political and media establishment to the Garner non-indictment betrays a nervousness over its implications. Politicians of varied stripes, Democrat and Republican, have rushed to call for further inquiries, for a federal "civil rights" investigation, for various measures aimed at restoring "public trust." There is a general understanding within the ruling class that the "civic fabric of the United States" (a phrase used by the *New York Times* after the non-indictment of Wilson) is frayed to the point of breaking.

These maneuvers have been led by President Barack Obama, who met with New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio on Thursday to work out a common political strategy in response to the protests over Garner's killing. According to White House press secretary Josh Earnest, "the two pledged to work together to help strengthen the trust and bond between law enforcement and the local communities that they serve."

These measures are to consist of various palliatives, such as proposed funding for police body cameras (irrelevant in the Garner case, since the entire incident was filmed anyway) and more police "training."

Following the meeting, Obama declared that "too many Americans feel a deep unfairness when it comes to the gap between our professed ideals and how laws are applied on a day-to-day basis." Beyond the discrediting of the police and legal system, Obama said, there was "a larger question of restoring a sense of common purpose."

What Obama cannot acknowledge, however, is that the absence of a "sense of common purpose" is not a question of perception or failure to communicate, but rather an objective reality. There is no "common purpose" between the corporate and financial aristocracy, determined to pursue a policy of endless war abroad and social counterrevolution at home, and the millions of workers and young people who confront a relentless attack on jobs, wages, social programs and democratic rights.

Amidst this social divide, the state, including the police, is not a neutral body, but an instrument of class rule. Obama himself has encouraged and augmented the powers of the state at every turn, from the building up of a massive and unconstitutional spying apparatus; to the declaration of his right to assassinate anyone, including US citizens, without due process; to the militarization of domestic police through the provision of billions of dollars in armored vehicles, weapons and other equipment—a policy that the president endorsed again this week.

In its attempt to cover up the basic class issues at stake, the Democratic Party has deployed its various auxiliary groups and media organs, along with proponents of identity politics like Al Sharpton, to insist that the fundamental issue involved in police violence is race and "race relations." The corollary to this claim is that Obama, the first African American president, will be "serious" about addressing police brutality.

While racism plays an undeniable role in the criminal operations of the police, it is entirely subordinate to the fundamental class divide. Indeed, central to the political crisis facing the ruling class is the fact that the political mechanisms it has deployed in the effort to undermine class consciousness—including racial and identity politics—are themselves deeply discredited, due in no small part to the experiences of the Obama administration itself.

The aim of police violence is not racial, but class oppression. Not only are workers of all races the victims of police brutality, but the instruments of repression built up systematically and consciously by the ruling class are being readied for use against strikes, protests, demonstrations and other forms of social and political opposition to the dictates of the banks and corporations.

Opposition to police brutality and the erection of police-state forms of rule in the United States must be rooted in a political movement of the working class, mobilized as an

independent force, in opposition to the capitalist system and the state apparatus that serves as the enforcer of social inequality.

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