

Police, Media Smear Victim of Missouri Shooting - Shifting Focus Away from Military-Style Occupation

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Global Research, August 16, 2014
[World Socialist Web Site](#)

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Militarization and WMD](#), [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

Police in Ferguson, Missouri have released material to the media which they claim identifies Michael Brown, the 18-year-old victim of a police killing last Saturday, as a participant in the robbery of a convenience store the same day.

At a press conference Friday morning, Police Chief Thomas Jackson finally made public the name of the police officer, Darren Wilson, who shot the unarmed youth multiple times in broad daylight, as he knelt with his hands up. Jackson then distributed 19 pages of photographs and purported eyewitness statements about the alleged robbery, and left without answering any questions from the media.

The documents have several political purposes: to shift the focus from the policeman who pulled the trigger; to provide a pretext for the execution-style slaying of Michael Brown, by smearing him as a violent lawbreaker; and to draw attention away from the massive military-style occupation of Ferguson earlier this week.

Even if the photographs and testimony were conclusive evidence—and they are not—there is no death penalty for grabbing a few packs of candy-flavored cigars, priced at two for 99 cents. And Jackson later admitted that Wilson had no knowledge of Brown's alleged participation in a petty theft when he fired multiple rounds from his service revolver into the young man's body.

These undeniable facts have not stopped the US media from giving saturation coverage to the claims that Brown robbed a store only minutes before he was shot to death, as though that made his killing justifiable.

Conveniently for the police, the principal eyewitness to the killing of Brown, his friend Dorian Johnson, is named in the robbery complaint. This means that the Ferguson police may now lock up and silence Johnson, who has been widely quoted in the press describing the wanton and unprovoked actions of Officer Wilson in shooting Michael Brown.

Speaking through their attorney, Michael Brown's family denounced the police smear campaign. Benjamin L. Crump, who previously represented the parents of Trayvon Martin, said Brown's parents were "beyond outraged." He told the press, "Nothing, based on the facts before us, justifies the execution-style murder by this police officer in broad daylight."

Ferguson residents echoed the family's anger. "I am incensed," Laura Keys, 50, told the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. "I can't believe this is the tactic they are using, bringing up a robbery to make the victim look like he was the person who created this whole mess. Where's the

footage?”

The actions of the Ferguson police had the character of a deliberate provocation against the community, in the wake of the decision by Missouri Governor Jay Nixon to put the Missouri state police in charge of police operations in the town, while relegating St. Louis County and Ferguson police to a backup role.

This maneuver, which placed an African-American police captain and native of Ferguson in command, succeeded at least temporarily in defusing tensions on Thursday night. There were peaceful protests over the death of Michael Brown, and none of the military-style attacks on demonstrators, using teargas, flash-bang grenades and armored cars, seen on four previous nights. No one was arrested.

Both Governor Nixon and Captain Ron Johnson, the Missouri state police officer in command on the scene, denied knowing in advance that the Ferguson police intended to release a load of derogatory information about Michael Brown Friday morning, along with the name of his killer. Johnson said he “would have liked to have been consulted” ahead of time.

It is unclear whether this reveals actual friction between the Ferguson cops and the state authorities, or represents a Missouri version of the “good cop, bad cop” routine, but that matters very little. The crude thuggery of local police and the more sophisticated maneuvering by the Democratic politicians have the same goal: to suppress the popular protests over the killing of Michael Brown and cover up the fundamental class issues revealed in this incident.

Governor Nixon, in consultation with the Obama administration, is using the services of a privileged layer of upper-middle-class blacks, including preachers, Democratic politicians and figures such as the Reverend Al Sharpton, to divert the anger over Michael Brown’s murder into safe political channels.

Sharpton’s comments Friday are particularly significant. The MSNBC talk-show host warned that one night without violence was not enough. “Let’s not act like we’ve solved the problem because we now have the cops marching with the marchers,” he said. “We’re not out of this yet.” Sharpton will appear Sunday at a rally with Brown’s parents and other nationally prominent African-Americans, including Martin Luther King III.

Sharpton cited the upcoming funeral of Michael Brown as a potential flashpoint, asking, “What happens when these kids see their friend laying in the casket? I’ve been through this more than one time. We’re not out of the emotions because we all of a sudden had a good night of marching.”

That is, for Sharpton and those he represents, the “problem” to be “solved” is not the police killing of Brown, but the anger that has erupted in response.

In its editorial Friday morning, the *New York Times* sounded something of the same note, criticizing the brutal actions of local police earlier in the week, while praising the actions of Governor Nixon and the rhetoric of President Obama. It commented that “law enforcement officers in Ferguson did not need to respond to mostly peaceful protests by deploying armored vehicles, pointing sniper rifles at civilians and tossing tear gas and shooting rubber bullets liberally into crowds. These tactics have been an affront to a community that needs to be heard, not suppressed.”

What the *Times* counsels is of consultation between the police authorities and so-called community leaders that changes absolutely nothing in the actual conditions of life for residents of impoverished working-class areas like Ferguson.

The occupation of Ferguson this week by police forces has exposed before the eyes of the country and the world the brutality of class relations in the United States. The militarization of police forces, particularly over the past dozen years, has a fundamental class logic. The US ruling class is building up an apparatus of violent repression to be used against the working class as a whole, the vast majority of the population.

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