

The Police Killings in Louisiana and Minnesota: The Class Issues

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Millions of people around the world have reacted with shock, outrage and revulsion at the latest videos and images of police murder in the United States. Thousands of people took part in demonstrations throughout the US Thursday, with more scheduled today.

The final horrific moments of Alton Sterling, 37, and Philando Castile, 32, have been watched and shared millions of times on Facebook and other social media. On July 5, Sterling was shot by police officers in Baton Rouge, Louisiana at least three times at point-blank range as he was pinned down to the ground. The next day, Castile was shot at least four times during a traffic stop in Falcon Heights, Minnesota, as his girlfriend and child watched helplessly. Both Sterling and Castile were African American.

Less publicized in the media were two other killings that underscore the pervasiveness of police violence in America, and the fact that it is not only African Americans who are targeted. On Thursday, a cell phone video was published by the *Fresno Bee* showing the police killing of 19-year-old Dylan Noble in Fresno, California on June 25. Noble, who was white and unarmed, can be seen lying on the ground motionless as police fire multiple bullets downward into his motionless body. This past weekend, police in Fullerton, California shot and killed 19-year-old Pedro Erik Villanueva, a Hispanic youth who was also unarmed, after a car chase.

The killing of Sterling and Castile, like almost all of the other 600 police killings that have taken place so far this year, and the thousands since the Obama administration took office, would have been “swe[pt] in the dirt” (to use the phrase of Quinnyetta McMillon, the mother of one of Mr. Sterling’s children) had they not been recorded by bystanders on cell phone cameras.

It is now nearly two years since the killing of Michael Brown on August 9, 2014 sparked nationwide protests against police violence. However, despite the pledges of “reform” and cynical professions of concern from the political establishment when one or another killing sparks protests, the reign of violence continues unabated. Indeed, the number of killings so far this year exceeds the number of Americans killed up to this point in 2015.

Certain conclusions must be drawn. It is impossible to understand the epidemic of police violence without understanding the reality of American capitalism. The United States is characterized by vast and growing social inequality, in which mass poverty and joblessness coexist with the almost unfathomable enrichment of a financial oligarchy. While one in seven Americans falls below the official poverty line, 400 individuals control \$2.34 trillion dollars.

The same ruling class that is waging a relentless war on the working class is engaged in unspeakable violence all over the world. Domestic and foreign policy are not separated by an iron wall. The methods used abroad are increasingly being deployed to deal with the social crisis at home. Within the overall apparatus of state repression, the police, armed to the teeth with the most modern weaponry, play a central role.

Police violence is essentially a class question. Understanding that opposition to police violence threatens to become the catalyst for a broader mobilization of the working class, politicians and the media have rushed to present the killing of Sterling and Castile as motivated exclusively by racism.

Racism no doubt plays a role in many police killings. However, the claim that police violence can be solely explained in racial terms is self-contradictory and untenable. While African Americans are disproportionately victimized by police violence, half of those killed by police are white, according to an analysis by the *Washington Post*. In many cases, such as in the killing of Freddie Gray in Baltimore, the officers themselves are black or Hispanic. In some cities with the worst police violence, such as Baltimore and Philadelphia, a majority of police officers are minorities, and local governments are headed by black police chiefs, black city council members and black mayors.

Perhaps most significantly, the unending stream of police murders has taken place under the presidency of Barack Obama, an African American. The Obama administration has used federal investigations to whitewash police killings, has sided with the police in every use-of-force case brought before the Supreme Court and continues to oversee the transfer of military weaponry to local police forces throughout the country.

The Obama White House presided over the deployment of militarized police and National Guard to crack down on demonstrations in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014 and Baltimore, Maryland last year following the killings of Michael Brown and Freddie Gray.

Speaking in Warsaw, Poland on Thursday, Obama defended the police while seeking to present the killings in racial terms. He pointed to “biases across the criminal justice system” that make it so, “black folks are more vulnerable to these kinds of incidents.” He added, “If communities are mistrustful of the police, it makes the officers—who are doing a great job—that’s making their jobs harder.”

Obama’s statements came the same day that the *New York Times*, which has in recent weeks stepped up its campaign to bury the issues of social inequality in the United States, ran a column entitled “Alton Sterling and When Black Lives Stop Mattering,” presenting the killings as the result of a “world where too many people have their fingers on the triggers of guns aimed directly at black people.”

Another column, posted on the *Times*’ web site Thursday night, insisted that “white America” will “never understand” the experience of “a nation of nearly 40 million black souls inside a nation of more than 320 million people.”

Such statements are aimed at undermining the instinctive feelings of solidarity felt by workers of all races to the events of this past week, while at the same time channeling opposition along channels that pose no threat to the ruling class and the economic system that it defends.

The United States is on the verge of major social and political convulsions. Over the past year, the growing political radicalization of workers and young people has found reflection in the support for Bernie Sanders, who presented himself as a socialist and focused his campaign on questions of social inequality and the power of the “billionaire class.” As Sanders moves to endorse Clinton and seek to convince his supporters to back the candidate of Wall Street and the military-intelligence apparatus, the media and Democratic Party are seeking to change the subject: from social inequality to race and identity politics.

The speed with which the media and political establishment have sought to present police killings as merely a matter of race reflects the fear that widespread opposition to police violence might be linked up with the growing social and political radicalization of the working class.

But this is precisely what is required. The fight against police violence, like the defense of all democratic rights, can only be taken forward on the basis of a struggle to unify the working class of all races and ethnicities in a common struggle against the capitalist system.

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