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Summary: Protests in the USA over the police murders of Black youth have exposed the great divides in American society. Has a critical mass been formed that raises the possibility of real movement against the system? - Editors

Ferguson Protests Place American Civilization on Trial: A Symposium

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Introduction

The mass outpourings in the USA protesting the growing epidemic of police murders of Black youth have exposed, more than ever, the great divides in American society. Whilst people of color in the US feel ever more threatened and angered by a gendarmerie newly-militarized with deadly hardware surplus from overseas wars, the supporters of the Republican Right act as if it is their degenerate political and economic system that is under threat. Right-wingers have reacted by electing ever-more extreme representatives to positions of legislative power, and given the ongoing legacy of the Tea Party mobilizations, there is danger of a backlash in which the visage of "fascism American-style" might once again begin to show. This is evident in the attempt by the Police Union to turn the funeral of the officers murdered in New York City into a political protest against politicians suspected of wishing to make the police more accountable. The drama of division is heightened by the CIA leaders' hostile reaction to the US Senate committee's verdict on the agency's lawless and barbaric practices in the so-called War on Terror.

More important than the division between "mainstream" liberalism and conservatism on Ferguson is the divide between those doing the protesting on the ground and those claiming the mantle of "Black leadership," from Obama down to those such Jesse Jackson

and Al Sharpton who, as always, are attempting to hijack the campaigns for their own political agendas. Crucially, the youth protesting on the streets having been vociferous in rejecting these mis-leaders.

The current situation raises a number of questions. Have the protests formed a critical mass (literally) that raises the possibility of real movement for new organizational beginnings in the class struggle? How do we see the danger that the post-Ferguson mobilizations will, like others previously, peter-out due to disillusionment over the possibility of changing the status quo? Are the old forces, such as Maoism, Stalinism and social democracy, obstructing the much needed rethinking and development of an alternative to capitalism? Are there new forces on the Left rising to the new challenges? How does the sickness of police brutality and CIA torture relate to the role of US imperialism and its allies in the wider world? Will the disgust of world opinion translate into real movement for liberation or regression into narrow nationalism, campism and knee-jerk anti-Americanism?

– David Black, author of *The Philosophical Roots of Anti-Capitalism*

Thoughts on Ferguson and New York: A New Generation Hits the Streets

As with the rest of the U.S., demonstrations in Southern California have persisted since the Ferguson Grand Jury decision not to indict over the police killing of Michael Brown and the similar one in New York in the case of Eric Garner. Never has the utter impunity with which police gun down Black people been so dramatically exposed at a national level.

In the San Francisco Bay Area, demonstrators have shut down highways and streets, at one point confronting the Oakland police department right outside their headquarters.

Santa Barbara

At a demonstration I attended in Santa Barbara right after the Ferguson decision, some 200 took to the streets of downtown. The very young crowd comprised high school as well as college students, a significant number of them Latino/a, Asian, or African American. Police allowed us to take over and march down State Street, the main shopping area.

Los Angeles

Along with slogans like “Don’t shoot’ many also chanted “Whose streets, our streets,” expressing a sense of empowerment and youthful energy. A few weeks later I was able to attend a rally in downtown Los Angeles, this one after the Eric Garner “I can’t breathe” decision came down. Marching in bright sunshine, some 200 of us took over the streets of downtown LA, staging several die-ins. This crown contained a larger proportion of Blacks, Latino/as and Asians, as well as whites, and included all ages. The event was sponsored by the Stalinoid ANSWER Coalition, which thankfully left its pro-Assad and pro-Putin posters at home. The march included a cross-section of LA progressives much wider than ANSWER, as seen in the unusually warm reception we received when distributing the IMHO statement on Ferguson.

As we think about the wave of protests that has emerged in Ferguson and then nationally over the past six months, two points could be considered. First, this is a new movement of the 21st century, bound neither by the Black Nationalist nor the leftist politics of the 1960s. It also constitutes a forceful challenge — Reverend Sharpton to the contrary — to the notion of an “inclusive” liberal politics as expressed by the Obama administration. Not since the early 1960s has there been such a large and persistent interracial movement in this country. While the new movement has emerged from some of the deepest and most oppressed layers of society, Black and Latino/a urban youth, it also intersects with more middle class social groups that came out of the Occupy and “anti-globalization” movements.

Second, this movement occurs at a particular juncture of U.S. capitalism. Even as the economy has moved slightly away from the effects of the economic crisis of 2008, there are whole sectors of society for which there are no jobs, and none in sight. Moreover, the Great Recession hit young people harder than older ones in terms of unemployment.

We thus have an entire generation, many of whom form part of what Marx called the “relative surplus population” or “reserve army” of the unemployed that is endemic to

capitalism. (For a discussion of this in light of the police murder of Eric Garner, see the article by Salar Mohandesi in Jacobin.) This population, which comprises the unemployed and the marginally employed, includes an over-representation of African- Americans.

As ever, US capitalism remains a racialized capitalism. African American slave labor built the southern agricultural economy. This continued in a different form, that of semi-peasant sharecropping and tenant farming, after a measure of political (but not economic) emancipation was won and then lost after the Civil War.

In the twentieth century, Black workers migrated north, filling the urban ghettoes and becoming the most revolutionary element in the burgeoning labor movement of the 1930s and 1940s. (On this, see our recent discussion of historian Jacqueline Jones's account of the life of the cofounder of U.S Marxist-Humanism, the Black autoworker/thinker Charles Denby.) But since the 1980s, those industries have shed workers, not only because of outsourcing abroad, but also due to new waves of automation at home. While some have achieved a precarious middle class status, left behind is a large youthful population with no future under this system, relegated to low-wage and part-time work, if not total unemployment. Expendable under today's capitalism, these young people fill the prisons and are the targets of police brutality and murder.

But at a time when the Great Recession and the uprisings of 2011 and since — which few mention included the massive, multiracial British riots against police brutality of summer 2011 — have caused many around the world to question the capitalist system as a whole, these "expendables" are showing that they refuse to accept their fate, as seen in the anti-police murder movement, or in the strikes of low-wage fast food workers that have been cropping up across the US in recent years.

– Kevin Anderson, author of *Marx at the Margins*

"I Can't Breathe"

In a case chillingly similar to that of Eric Garner in New York, these were the dying words of Jimmy Mubenga. Jimmy Mubenga died while being held down by three security guards on board a plane deporting him from Britain to Angola. After serving two years in prison, he was being deported as a "foreign criminal". This happened in October 2010. In July 2013, an inquest jury found that Mr. Mubenga was unlawfully killed. The guards were employed by G4S, a private security firm contracted by the UK Border Agency to carry out deportations. The coroner, Karon Monaghan QC, found that there was "pervasive racism within G4S". This was consistent with the findings of a parliamentary inquiry in 2012, which looked at the deportation process in general, and found that security guards used racist language and inappropriate force.

A six-week trial at the Old Bailey, where the three security guards were accused of manslaughter, ended on 16 December 2014. All three were found not guilty. It emerged that the jury had not been allowed to see racist texts on the phones of two of the accused, because the judge had ruled them to be “inadmissible evidence”.

Adrienne Makenda Kambana, who was married to Jimmy Mubenga, said: “For the last four years I have fought for justice for Jimmy and our five children. It is hard for me to understand how the jury reached this decision with all the overwhelming evidence that Jimmy said over and over that he could not breathe.” Ms. Makenda Kambana has called for independent monitors to be present on each deportation to observe what goes on. “I can’t stand by and watch this happen to another family. I have to do that for Jimmy,” she said.

In the United States, Eric Garner’s cry of “I can’t breathe” has been taken up and transformed into a cry of protest, a cry for justice. Now this is finding an echo in Britain. It has been chanted and displayed on placards and tee-shirts at protests outside the Home Office and G4S headquarters.

– Richard Abernethy

An Organizational Question

In chapter 9 of *Philosophy and Revolution* (published in 1973), Raya Dunayevskaya lamented that when Black and white got together in the Detroit Rebellion of 1967 it was only the barest of a beginning, but a beginning nevertheless. Since then we have seen many incidences of whites joining Blacks, such as the struggle for justice for Mumia Abu-Jamal. The question is: Is there something new, or potentially new, here and now with all the mass demonstrations that we’ve seen in the last months? Not only are we seeing mass demonstrations in almost every major city throughout the country, but also, with the diversity that is being represented in these mass demonstrations, multiple struggles have the potential to come together. This would be necessary for any movement to seriously challenge capitalism. Is the unity that Dunayevskaya referred to being picked up where Detroit ’67 left off? Perhaps it’s too early to tell.

Without wishing to exaggerate or overly generalize, I would like to contextualize this latest mass outpouring. Dunayevskaya characterized the period following all the defeats of 1968 as the revolution under the whip of counter-revolution. I think it’s fair to say that the last 46 years of World, not just US, history could be so characterized. With varying degrees of success, many struggles continue to this day. If what we are seeing now is, or will soon, represent a significantly new stage in the struggle for freedom, then it will do so in a significantly different milieu. In spite of the virulent racism that still pervades this country, this young generation today is very different than that of the 1960s. And it is they who

have been the initiators and the dynamo of this present movement; and it is they that will, in the end, sustain it; not all the Al Sharpton's and Jesse Jackson's. The furniture in this world house of ours is arranged very differently now than it was in the 1960s. This new generation was reared in the new global economy, an economy that has saddled so many of them with insurmountable debt before they are even out of college! Theirs is the future, and what they see of it they don't like and they're willing to challenge. We saw this played out a bit when a group of young people took the megaphone and podium away from Al Sharpton at the Washington demonstration.

What we are seeing is not taking place in a vacuum. Black youth are being murdered by white police officers at about the same rate as Black men were being lynched in the Deep South prior to the Civil Rights Movement (without forgetting the lynching of a 17 year old football player in North Carolina, which was originally dubbed a suicide). Also, let's not forget how notorious the Chicago police have been, at least in recent past, with their torturing confessions out of prisoners—Black prisoners. And, most of all, let's not forget that poverty is not only the worst form of violence, it is the root of all violence. Why? Because, like any economic category, poverty is not so much a thing as it is a relationship, a relationship that is part and parcel of the economic, social and political system in this country.

With respect to this rising movement, the question of organization is the most difficult. I have not read or heard anything specific about organizational structures spontaneously arising from the activity we've seen since Ferguson. I, of course, do not include what organizations that have previously existed that are now trying to impose some organizational structure on this current movement. It would be very useful to know of and about any of the organizations that have formed spontaneously from the mass actions we've seen. It would be the politics of these groups I'd be most interested in, as I'm sure all of us would be.

These groups, whoever they are, need, I believe, to maintain their *independence*, at least at this time. Already, at this early stage in the movement, we see a great divide in the movement; between would-be leaders like Al Sharpton, and the youth in the movement, who refuse to be led by the liberal/progressive ideologues, who, in the end, will seek to contain the movement within bourgeois legal confines. We saw this at the Washington DC rally the Sunday before Thanksgiving, and, now, in a bigger way since the killing of the two cops in NYC. The youth, since the death of these two cops, have dared to expose and challenge the depths of the racism still in existence in this country by refusing de Blasio's call for a moratorium on demonstrations until the end of these cop's funerals. To the quiet forms of everyday violence and racism in this country, the youth have said: "No!" *This* is the gauntlet they have thrown down to **everyone**. Everyone must include **us**.

– Dan Beltaigne

Police Harass Denver March

Denver March

IMHO members joined the Million Mask #BlackLivesMatter protest in Denver, Colorado on December 13, 2014. The march involved several 4.5-minute die-ins blocking intersections to remember the 4.5 hours that Michael Brown lay dead in the streets of Ferguson. A Denver SWAT team attacked the march and arrested 5 activists.

–Antony H.

Black Lives Matter Protests in Chicago Build on the Groundwork Laid by Long-Term Struggles, and Ongoing Organizing by Black Youth

Chicago has responded to the ongoing crisis of police violence and the recent deaths of Mike Brown and Eric Garner with a series of events and protests that brought out hundreds of people to the streets to march and rally together. Hundreds of people also gathered in packed halls to discuss, learn, and strategize in response to the increasingly apparent disregard for black lives by the police and the "justice" system.

There was a remarkable coordination amongst the different activist factions of the city. These include the Occupy Chicago, anarchist, antiwar, anti police brutality, LGBTQI activists and organizations, and the many left organizations, such as the International Socialist Organization (ISO), the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP), and the Socialist Alternative, among others.

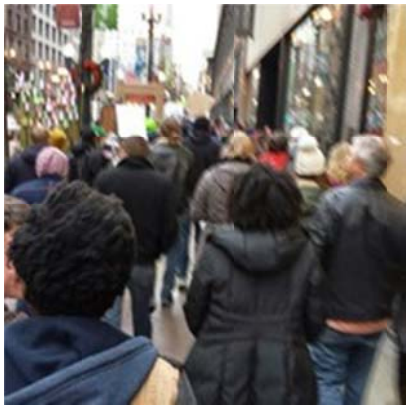
IMHO members attended some of these events. One was held on the 7th of December to commemorate and protest the murder of 22 year old, unarmed Rekia Boyd by an off-duty police officer in March 2012. The court date for the case against the officer had just been pushed to late January 2015. About 60 people marched from the west side neighborhood of Rekia Boyd, on their way to meet with hundreds of other marchers who were converging

downtown from other marches and protests held across the city by a broad range of entities, including churches and community organizations. While many present were from the southwest side neighborhoods of Chicago, some were allies from other neighborhoods.

The Chicago police were joined by state police in dozens of vehicles and on foot to corral and harass the protestors. They used their vehicles, sirens, megaphones, and foot soldiers to command the marchers to walk on the sidewalks, not the streets. We were heading down Jackson towards State Street when they became quite insistent. The march organizers decided to take a break in a vacant lot to discuss our course of action. As some gave emotional speeches about the need to protest the unconscionable killings of black and brown bodies by the police, those gathered also discussed the pros and cons of doing what the police said instead of risking arrest. It was decided that since we were small in numbers and had children amongst us, we should take the sidewalks until we reached downtown and were reinforced in numbers.

During that discussion, the divide that became very apparent was not the one between those who wanted to take the sidewalk or remain on the streets, but between those who thought that the police were a needed presence to keep their communities “safe”, but needed to be accountable and respectful to the communities they served, and those who thought that the police were an oppressive force that did not need reform, but abolition along with the rest of the “law enforcement” and prison industrial system. Some speakers even addressed the police as they stood a few feet away, surrounding us with their heavy handed presence, to tell them that they respected them and wanted them to respect the communities they served. At this, others in the group spoke up and registered an opposition to speaking with the police, but the speakers were allowed to finish. Once all speakers had finished, we started on our route again, taking the sidewalks.

On the 13th of December, another protest and march was organized which culminated in another march, starting from State and Jackson. While the protest at State and Jackson was ostensibly called for by the RCP and its allies, it was very clear that they were only a very small part of the large, at least 500-participant march that took place that evening. It was a diverse march with black youth leading strong. Many left organizations were present in support.



Police presence was again visible in strong and overbearing numbers. At one point, the police arrested 3 or 4 protestors and handcuffed them to put them in the paddy wagon. When the crowd became aware of what was happening, they started to shout, “Let them go!” The shouts were insistent and lasted even after the arrestees were placed in the wagon. The crowd eventually started to move again, but the collective reaction and anger at the arrests seemed to have reenergized the people in solidarity against the oppressive, brutal, and unjust police. At least 23 protestors were arrested that day and all of them received jail support.

Over a course of several weeks since the sad day that Mike Brown was shot on August 9, Chicagoans, especially black youth, continued to organize protests, even shutting down Lake Shore Drive when the news of Darren Wilson’s non-indictment broke. They marched down Michigan Avenue and the LSD in indignant insistence that Black Lives Matter. Many of these protests took place outside police headquarters in downtown Chicago, which was not only a place of protest against the extrajudicial and unaccountable killings of African Americans, but also a place for conducting jail support, as most protestors arrested were taken to this location. As protestors were arrested at almost every protest, a loose group of activists, anchored by the National Lawyers’ Guild, organized their defense and bail, fundraised for them, visited them, and arranged rides home.

Chicago is home to a long-term opposition against police brutality, as well as a center of transformative justice work, which is rejuvenating a new generation of youth of color to

rise up and create new pathways to hope and justice. This wave of protests served to further galvanize the opposition to police brutality and racism.

If anyone feels despondent in the face of such awful events as the killings of innocents with impunity, let them look to the youth of Chicago, such as the We Charge Genocide delegation that went to the UN Committee Against Torture in Geneva recently to testify and present their report on police brutality in Chicago. Watch the young poet-activist Malcolm London speak of his friend, Damo, whose life was cut short by a police officer. These brave youth are not only at the forefront protesting, but also forging a new way ahead for their communities and all of us.

– Rehmah Sufi