Fury after grand jury fails to charge killer cop

International Secretariat Wed, 03/12/2014 - 16:36
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For the second time in four months images of rioting in Ferguson, Missouri swept around the world. Dave Stockton looks at the widespread racism in the town and across America that fuelled this anger

Furious demonstrations took place for two days and nights in late November in Ferguson, Missouri after a majority white grand jury refused to indict killer cop Darren Wilson for the murder of unarmed black teenager Michael Brown on 9 August.

On 24 November demonstrations broke out in defiance of the state of emergency, which Missouri's Democrat Governor Jay Nixon had declared a week before the decision? a sure sign that he had been warned of the perverse judgement that was to be delivered.

A full 2,200 troopers of the Missouri National Guard had already occupied the suburb of St Louis, while 600 police and state highway patrolmen plus a number of FBI and other federal agents made up the total number of repressive forces. The local police spent $172,669 on gas grenades, rubber bullets and pepper bombs in preparation for the day.

Activists and liberal commentators alike have noted that the National Guard troops were directed to ?protect? the largely-white middle class shopping centres in the west of the city, while, despite the deployment of riot cops to pepper-spray protesters, virtually nothing was done to stop people from looting store to store in the less affluent town centre. This used to be known as entrapment; it certainly smells like a plan to discredit the protesters.

The media was also on hand to twist the story. Millions around the world witnessed Michael?8s step-father urging the crowd to ?burn this bitch down?, but where were the cameras when the police allowed one of their their dogs to urinate over the little roadside shrine the family had set up to mark the spot where their son died, or when a police car reversed over and destroyed it?

Nationwide protests

Protests rapidly spread to other major US cities, including Philadelphia, Seattle, Albuquerque, New York, Cleveland, Los Angeles, Oakland, Minneapolis, Atlanta, Portland, Chicago and Boston. In New York, protesters blocked bridges. In a number of the cities protesting, there have been similar cases very recently, following on from the infamous case of the acquittal of vigilante George Zimmerman, the killer of Trayvon Martin.

Here are just a few examples; there are many more. New York police last week shot Akai Gurley, a 28-year-old unarmed African American man in the Louis Pink public housing projects of Brooklyn. Coming on top of the choking to death of another black male, Eric Garner, on 17 July by an NYPD officer and angry protests in the city, the major response to Brown?8s slaying was no surprise. In Cleveland, Ohio too the
police department is currently defending the murder of a black 12-year-old boy, Tamir Rice, who was shot on 22 November, while playing with a toy gun in a city park.

Protests broke out on university campuses ? including Princeton, Seattle, the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis, Kent State in Ohio, Stanford and Loyola in New Orleans. High school students took part in thousands of walkouts, and sit-ins were organised in Philadelphia, Seattle, Minneapolis and other smaller cities and towns. Police tear-gassed crowds, pepper-sprayed resisters in the face and manhandled many more.

These were well-orchestrated, well-prepared police clampdowns, which also included the kettling of demonstrators and large-scale arrests. In Oakland the Democrat Mayor Jean Quan presided in person over a heavy police attack on 2,000 protesters that resulted in the arrest of 40 of them. Oakland was the scene of another unpunished police murder in 2009: that of a 22-year-old African American, Oscar Grant.

US justice ? racist justice

The announcement that Wilson would not be charged ? even with manslaughter ? has been recognised around the world as a total travesty of justice. In London over a thousand picketed the US embassy, then blocked Oxford Street and marched via Parliament to police headquarters, Scotland Yard in a demonstration called by the London Black Revolutionaries.

Refusing to present charges directly to a judge, Rob McCulloch, the prosecutor of St. Louis County, referred the matter to 12-person grand jury, which held a three-months long secret hearing. Now the transcript has been released, it is clear that proceedings amounted to a prosecution of the victim Michael Brown and the systematic discounting of eyewitnesses to the killing.

The process was smattered with irregularities. Nine of the jury were white, three black, totally disproportionate to the 68 per cent black suburb of Ferguson. Sixteen witnesses testified that Brown had his hands in the air or out in the open when he was shot, but the jury chose to believe the two that claimed the opposite. Photographs proved that the rumour Wilson suffered a broken eye-socket when Brown assaulted him was a lie.

Most unusual were three courtroom incidents. First the jury was misdirected by being handed copies of a 1979 ruling that it was legal for a cop to shoot to kill a ?fleeing felon? even if they posed no threat, but were not told that this judgement had been overruled in 1984. Officer Wilson was also allowed to give a four-hour, barely cross-examined account of the shooting, even though grand juries very rarely hear suspects? defence ? their job is simply to recommend a full trial or not. While other witnesses, who saw Brown raise his hands, were disparaged, Wilson?s account, in which he says Brown ?looked like a demon?, was virtually uncontested.

Most damning of all, Prosecutor McCulloch refused to allow an outsider to preside over the politically charged case and failed to direct the grand jury, so making the verdict not to prosecute more likely. After the case, McCulloch?s clearly biased, 20-minute speech has been likened to an incitement to riot.

America?s first black President could manage only egregious personal sympathy to the family with condemnation and threats aimed at the demonstrators. ?We are a nation built on the rule of law, so we have to accept this decision was the grand jury?s to make.? This amounts to an endorsement of an infamously racist police force?s total impunity for its regular slaying of African Americans. There is ?never an excuse for violence?, he said ? referring to the protesters, not Ferguson?s police force.

The responses of the state, both at state and federal level was to exonerate its police, whatever they do,
and to repress all protests or resistance. Ferguson, though far from being the most deprived of suburbs, is a microcosm of what faces black people, especially youths on the streets of their own communities.

Race and class

Despite the fact that 68 per cent of the 21,000 residents of Ferguson are African American, its police chief Thomas Jackson and its mayor are both white. Of its six City Council members only one is black. The local school board has six white members, one Latino and no African Americans. Of the 53 commissioned officers on the police force, only three are black.

The consequences are daily harassment by the cops. According to a report by the Missouri Attorney General in Ferguson last year, 80 per cent of car stops and 92 per cent of stop and searches involved African Americans.

Obviously the authorities are hoping that as in previous cases, after the initial anger has died down and demonstrations have been repressed, the cops can return to business as usual. They will be helped in this by reliable community leaders like Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton, as well as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), integrally linked to the Democratic Party - reliable because they will protest but not mobilise.

Here it has to be recognised that murders by cops like those in Ferguson ? and all the day-to-day harassment and humiliation of which they represent only the tip of the iceberg ? have an integral component of class oppression as well as racism.

Therefore neither the Democrats within the African American communities, the NAACP and the churches, nor separatists like the Nation of Islam, or the New Black Panther Party can provide an effective strategy or leaders.

Certainly the anger provoked by the killer cops and the judicial cover-ups must not go to waste; that would be a terrible disservice to the young victims and their grieving families and friends. The young black activists who have mobilised around the shocking cases over the last year or so, along with white anti-racists and revolutionaries need to come together to plan and launch a new movement against police murders and all forms of harassment and humiliation.

It needs to link this to the systemic political oppression of African Americans. Most striking is the mass incarceration of black men; more than 40 per cent of the USA's 2.1 million male prisoners, i.e. nearly 1 million, are black, six times the rate for white men. This is related to the stealing of votes, since many states disfranchise discharged felons.

But underlying these conscious and overt measures of domination is the persistent inequality in terms of jobs, the sheer fact that the black unemployment rate has consistently been twice as high as the white unemployment rate for 50 years. Neither has the gap in household incomes narrowed, with the number in poverty being triple that of their white fellow citizens. The median white household income in 2011 was $61,175, as compared to $39,670 for a black one (and £40,007 for Hispanics).

New movement

Latino-American communities, who also suffer from systemic discrimination, are, despite cultural barriers, natural allies. And today their number ? 53 million or 17 per cent of the population ? makes them powerful potential allies. But so too are the growing number of poor white workers. More than 19 million whites fall below the poverty line of $23,021 for a family of four, accounting for more than 41% of the nation's
This is critical because it show that the US African-American population – some 42 million or 13.6 per cent – is not simply an outnumbered minority once the issue of class in brought into view, something of course the ruling class, its economists, academics and media try at all costs to prevent happening.

This layer of highly-paid professionals regularly refer to those newly made homeless and destitute by the Great Recession, or those whose real wages have been steadily declining for decades, as ?middle class? ? a practice most Europeans find astonishing. Astonishing because the existence of mass workers? parties in Europe for well over a century has raised working class self-awareness and self-respect.

Recent breakthroughs for socialist candidates in cities like Seattle, the political campaign for $15 an hour minimum wage by precarious workers, hitherto considered unorganisable, rank and file led strikes, like the 2012 Chicago teachers? strike, the 2,000 militants at the Labor Notes Conference in Chicago this year: these could be straws in the wind for a militant trade unionist and socialist revival. If so then the role of black workers and youth will be a critical component.

A new movement for the liberation of the racially oppressed in the USA – including Latinos and indigenous American people – will have to take up political demands: abolishing the various racist attacks on the right to vote, winning citizenship for millions of ?illegal? immigrants, radically changing the justice system and making it affordable for even the poorest. Linked to this is the struggle for the right to organise, to join a trade union, to repeal all the ?free labor? anti-union laws that have accumulated in the constitutions and law books of many states.

But it will have to combine these with economic and social demands: employment for the unemployed and under-employed, a living wage, a free, universal system of healthcare and social security.

Above all, to weld together a powerful coalition of the different parts of the working class and the racially oppressed, of youth and women, a new mass party is urgently needed.

This cannot wait for the backing of the top union bosses, tied as they often are to the Democrats, handing over resources and funds to them and getting little or nothing in return. No, as struggles in Seattle, Chicago and now Ferguson show, the fight will have to come from below, from the rank and file, who should form local and state-wide centres of resistance. But its goal must be a national, indeed an international organisation.

With such a force, police atrocities like Ferguson or Cleveland can be met by a nationwide uprising – including strikes and occupations – that forces major reforms from the ruling class as merely the first down-payment on the road to a socialist and workers government of the USA.

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