

# Police abolition: the transitional method

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*In this article, KD Tait examines the call to ?abolish the police? emerging from the Black Lives Matter movement, and makes the case for a transitional approach which rejects the utopian illusions of anarchists and liberals.*

The murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis on 25 May generated an international movement against police racism and violence almost without precedent. With young Black Americans and other people of colour at its heart it also drew in large numbers of young white people ?carrying the slogan ?Silence is Violence.?

The movement has struck a sympathetic echo not only in the imperialist democracies but also in countries like India, Kenya and others, where police forces regularly run amok beating workers, farmers and minorities demanding their rights. In the USA demonstrations have toppled monuments to the ?heroes? who fought to defend slavery, and in Europe key figures in the history of colonialism and imperialism which litter our towns and cities.

The killing of George Floyd and subsequent police repression of protests, sparked a massive international rebirth of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, targeting the common experience of racist discrimination and violence at the hands of police forces. It is a spontaneous and in this sense leaderless movement, not an organisation, though groups have developed in many cities.

For now, the movement remains most advanced in the United States, where a toxic combination of the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow, and the unfettered power of police departments and police unions, has long inculcated a vicious and officially-sanctioned policy of racist police terror.

An aggravating factor bolstering the new anti-racist uprising is the policy of Donald Trump, who has transformed his presidency into a conscious backlash against America?s first Black president (albeit one who was no radical when it came to combatting racism) encouraging a movement saturated with white supremacist tropes. This November?s presidential election bids fair to be a carnival of racism.

## **Black Lives Matter**

Despite the first wave of BLM protests in 2013-2016, high profile killings of Black people continued, Breonna Taylor, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and many others. In fact, the trend of fatal police shootings in the United States has continued to rise. In 2018, there were 996 fatal police shootings, in 2019 this figure rose to 1,004.

BLM demonstrators have called for a variety measures for the personal safety and democratic rights of black and other people of colour in the US. These start with the arrest and charging with murder of officers responsible for deaths; an end to de facto impunity for police officers involved in such deaths. They have demanded genuinely independent investigation of all such cases; the sacking of notorious police chiefs

responsible for racist policies in their cities and police trade union officials guilty of obstructing justice.

A broader demand raised by the Black Lives Matter movement is to 'defund the police', and this is often tied to calls to spend this money on communities suffering deprivation. This is no surprise when the budget for the Chicago police at \$1.8 billion is almost double that spent on all its social services put together. No wonder Los Angeles decided to cut \$100million from its police budget, and the Minneapolis city council to 'dissolve' the city's police department, (albeit to replace it with a reformed one).

Police budgets have tripled over the past forty years and incarceration rates have risen by 500% whilst social programs have stagnated or declined and crime rates risen. On top of this Covid-19 has seen cities further cut housing, education, culture and youth programs; up to now police budgets have been regarded as sacrosanct.

Socialists and trade unionists should certainly support every serious measure to weaken the police's repressive powers, deprive them of funds for it and massively increase the money spent on social needs. We should demand accountability for their crimes to democratic authorities and to the communities targeted by the cops.

Racial profiling, stop and search, use of the drug laws to harass black youth must be stopped. Fighting to impose such restrictions on the police is a huge task in itself, requiring mass direct action and mobilisation to change the laws that enable them to get away with these actions today.

But at the same time socialists need to make it clear that even such vital reforms will not in themselves prove to be the solution to the whole question of the police as an inherently repressive and racist instrument outside the control of the citizens.

### **Abolish the police?**

The most radical slogan raised by demonstrators is 'Abolish the police'. It asserts, correctly, that reforming the police will not fundamentally change the situation we face today. Every revolutionary Marxist is in favour of it as an essential part of smashing of the forces of coercion, the foundation of the capitalist state, an essential prerequisite of the social revolution.

Its widespread use shows a growing awareness that in order to fight racism you need to fight the police force per se, not pursue the liberal pipe dream of a non-racist or even anti-racist police force, one which limits itself to protecting the population against genuinely antisocial crimes, (rape, murder, theft), whilst capitalism still continues to exploit us.

But if it is dislocated from the issue of what sort of protective force is needed to protect ordinary people - from the 'democratic state' itself as well as from genuinely antisocial crime, one able to enforce their democratic and social rights, then it will remain a utopia - a dream without the concrete means of achieving it.

Thus we must support all substantive measures which hamper the police capacity to kill, and injure out of racist vindictiveness - to repress protests and strikes; our right to freedom of assembly and speech, we must make it clear that to abolish the police means to replace them with forces and institutions based on the democracy and self-defense of the exploited and oppressed themselves.

These organizations will have to be built in the course of our daily struggle by taking real practical steps. These should start with defence of BLM protests and working class communities of colour against the police and white racist vigilantes.

### **What are the police for?**

To understand why the present police force cannot be reformed we need to clarify their character and function, and the body from whom their authority derives? the state. Early in his political life Karl Marx developed his analysis of the essential nature of the state from a critique of the German philosopher Hegel's view that the state represented 'the actuality of the ethical Idea' and 'the actualisation of freedom'.

According to Hegel, the actual state of the day - whether republic or constitutional monarchy - and with it the police, the judiciary, and the administration are 'the representatives of a civil society which administers its own universal interests in them and through them'. In contrast Marx insisted that these institutions are 'the representatives of the state, whose task is to administer the state against civil society', i.e. against the exploited and oppressed classes i.e. the majority'.

Marx and Engels went on to assert that states arose historically with the development of antagonistic classes, as structures by which the dominant, ruling class imposes and defends its rule over subordinate, exploited classes, by establishing 'a special, public power' which consists 'not merely of armed men but also of material adjuncts, prisons, and institutions of coercion of all kinds'.

These 'institutions of coercion' today include the civil police departments and their specialist units, but also the national guard militias, the border and prison guards, the security agencies, (in the US the FBI, CIA, ICE, etc.) and the military itself. Just as the bourgeoisie has developed a division of labour in production, so the most advanced states deploy a division of labour in the apparatus of repression.

Whether it is called gendarmerie or police, whether controlled by the Minister of 'Defence' or the 'Interior', whether they profess a philosophy of 'policing by consent' or not, these 'special bodies of armed men' have the same essential character in every country 'the organisation of the state's monopoly of violence and the disarmament of the racially oppressed and the exploited.

Recruited largely from the ranks of the petty bourgeoisie, they constitute a separate, professional caste of hired thugs for capital, whose loyalty is bought with material privileges and a certain degree of exemption from the law. This is true irrespective of the existence of formal democracy or not in a given state. As a means of maintaining the security of property against the urban working class, the ideology of most of these agents necessarily aligns with that of their employers, that is to say, it is defined by chauvinism, and above all, fear and hatred of the independent spirit of the class conscious proletariat.

In every period that is approaching revolutionary crisis, and during one, the police are augmented by the fascist bands, and in every successful uprising, the police are the first instruments of the regime to disappear from the streets. If this remains a political rather than a social revolution - i.e. the ruling class is not overthrown but only the old regime, then the police will sooner or later reappear in new uniforms, under new chiefs, the moment the new rulers judge the masses have been sufficiently demobilized and disarmed.

In every real popular revolution, whether democratic or socialist, the arming of the people and the disbanding or dispersal of the police is one of the first acts. In this context the partial withdrawal or disintegration of the police signals the febrile pre-revolutionary character of the situation in the United States.

### **The revolutionary tradition**

Given that the police are the definitive constituent part of the bourgeois state, any discussion of how communists relate to demands for reform or abolition of the police must start from an appreciation of how the bourgeois state is to be overthrown, and what kind of state will replace it. The communist programme

for the overthrow of the bourgeois state is predicated on the emergence through the class struggle of structures for its replacement with a state of a new type, based on councils of workers delegates. This programme was elaborated first by Marx and Engels from the experience of the Paris Commune, and reached its most developed form in the Bolshevik revolution of 1917.

In *The State and Revolution* (1917), Lenin cites Marx's description of what the Paris Communards did from *The Civil War in France*: "The police, which until then had been the instrument of the Government, was at once stripped of its political attributes, and turned into the responsible, and at all times revocable, agent of the Commune."

In the context of the dual power situation existing in Russia between the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies and the Provisional Government, and against the attempt by the capitalist parties to restore the police, Lenin raised the slogan "Abolition of the police, the army and the bureaucracy." (The April Theses).

Likewise Leon Trotsky, in the *Action Programme for France* (1934), under the heading "Disbanding of the Police, Political Rights for Soldiers", adds: "All the police executing the will of capitalism, the bourgeois state and its corrupt political clans must be dismissed. Execution of police functions by the workers' militia."

The passage from pre-revolutionary to a revolutionary situation leads to situations of actual or partial dual power where a disintegrating bourgeois state confronts the nascent power of the working class. Of these three examples, 1934 is a pre-revolutionary situation - is obviously the closest parallel to the United States today.

But what is clear is that, for communists, the actual abolition of the police, like the abolition of the rest of the bourgeois state apparatus (bureaucracy, army, judiciary), is not a reform that can be won peacefully from the existing state, but rather the consequence of the bourgeois state being disintegrated ("smashed") by the revolutionary classes in an uprising and superseded by the organs of new workers' council/soviet state.

But a workers' militia poses the question of what authority or controls it, and this poses the question of power. Although the "arming of the people" was an essential demand of the democratic bourgeois revolution, those militias' rapid substitution by a professional police is a necessary feature of the mature bourgeois state's supremacy.

The permanent replacement of the police with a workers' militia is therefore part of the transitional programme to a new kind of state, not a democratic reform. Because the demand for the workers' militia is a direct challenge to the state's monopoly of force, it is an infringement on the ability of the ruling class to impose its will. It is therefore something that cannot be brought about concretely, outside of a situation of dual power, or civil war.

The materialist analysis of the state, and the revolutionary tradition, shows that, divorced from a programme to smash the capitalist state, and outside of the actual insurrectionary moment (dual power), the call to "abolish" (or "defund", where this is meant as a euphemism for abolition) the police is a piece of petty bourgeois anarchist or liberal utopianism. To demand the state give up its ability to enforce the security of private property, without changing the class character of that state is to demand the cessation of the class struggle. To implicitly or explicitly direct the call to abolish the police force to the capitalist state is to send it to the wrong address.

The task of communists is of course, on the one hand, to make propaganda exposing the nature of the

police, the state, and the property relations which govern our lives, and the ultimate goal of replacing (abolition) the bosses? police with a workers? militia. But in order to get from here to there, we have to propose demands and organs of struggle which establish the foundations of an effective prosecution of the class struggle to its revolutionary conclusion: that is to establish elementary measures of black and labor movement self defence, a political party guaranteeing its political independence from the bourgeoisie, and a programme for social revolution.

We raise the call on the black and working class communities and organisations to prepare their own self-defence and protect themselves from the existing ?forces of order?.

### **Defund, disarm, disband**

The police in any given country reflect the history of development, ideological foundations, and pathological prejudices of the ruling class it serves. The racist, militarized, murderous police departments of the USA are a perfect example. Any talk of the reform of the police to being a true guardian of the people, ignores the fact that its bedrock function, in all states, is to keep the working class of all ?races? in subjection to its exploiters.

The question facing black people (and other people of color and the poor sections of the working class, of youth, women etc.) in America today is how to get the police squads and patrols off the streets. How to break their forces led by white supremacist police chiefs (like in Minneapolis) and bolstered by the police union? How to combat a legal system that systematically accords them impunity for their crimes, killings, beatings, arrests on petty drug offences, which all contribute to the enormously high incarceration rate for African Americans as well as other racially oppressed communities.

In the cities and communities with black majorities or sizable minorities, the predominantly white police force acts like an occupying army. Therefore, we support or raise as immediate demands their unconditional and total withdrawal, demilitarization and disarmament. We also support the sacking of the white supremacist police chiefs and all racists.

We support the disbandment by municipal or other elected authorities of specific police departments with a notorious racist record - not because we have any illusion that they can be ?reformed? or replaced by a ?non-racist?, ?multiethnic?, ?democratic? police force but to weaken their capacity for doing this or to expose their undemocratic character when they defy or subvert these decisions.

We also support any city authorities that halt all funding to the police. At the same time we agitate in the communities under attack and in the trade unions for the formation of community defense guards or militias to defend them from attack by the police, the National Guard, racist and fascist gangs, and to keep order against genuinely antisocial criminals, gangs and organized crime etc.

The wave of mass demonstrations and the willingness of the demonstrators to fight back against police and vigilante violence pose the need, the justification and the possibility of elementary organisations of self-defence.

In the 1938 Transitional Programme Trotsky illustrates how a workers? militia arises out of, and rests upon, forms of organisation thrown up by the class struggle, and which can develop into the physical force needed to smash the bourgeois state.

?Strike pickets are the basic nuclei of the proletarian army. This is our point of departure. In connection with every strike and street demonstration, it is imperative to propagate the necessity of creating workers? groups for self-defense. It is necessary to write this slogan into the program of the revolutionary wing of the

trade unions. It is imperative wherever possible, beginning with the youth groups, to organize groups for self-defense, to drill and acquaint them with the use of arms.?

Concretely this means black and labor (trade union) self-defence, which can protect working class communities from racist attack and deal with criminal and anti-social elements within those communities. In the context of community self defense and working class struggle, this means establishing some democratic authority - a council of action, composed of elected and recallable delegates from the trade unions and oppressed communities.

In the present Black Lives Matter movement the solidarity expressed by trade unionists and socialists indicates that is a real possibility. The 40 million unemployed and the looming recession indicate that working class people, the poor, the unemployed will need to struggle militantly in the coming months and when they do they will need to protect themselves against the police and the National Guard as well as Trump's white supremacist and fascist forces.

### **Where to begin?**

The establishment of the workers' militia depends on the tempo of the class struggle, but once at a certain level the dissolution of the police will become a concrete task. The goal is the disbandment or abolition of the police and its replacement with working-class self-defense guards, specifically including in their ranks the racially oppressed, and integrated into workplaces and communities.

But this goal does not mean that partial immediate demands are to be rejected since these will necessarily be the first steps. Such demands include:

Immediate and unconditional withdrawal of police forces from the black and working class communities where they have carried out outrages and been repressing demonstrations;

The disarming and disbanding of all riot squads, special immigration forces (ICE), tactical support and other units which are at the front line of the state's offensive against black people. The National Guard must be dissolved as a militarized force and its rank and file integrated into a people's militia;

Against the investigation of racist beating and murders by the official 'watchdogs', we fight to get state recognition of independent workers' inquiries, into such incidents, constituted from elected representatives from working class and anti-racist organisations of the black community, the labour movement and anti-racist legal experts;

Exclude police unions from all labor union federations;

Against the ingrained prejudice of a judicial system that criminalises black people we are for the election of all judges and magistrates, as a basic democratic measure and for the right to have a minimum of 50% of black people on juries in cases where the defendants are black; but even with these reforms the racist justice system can never become class neutral - and just as we are for workers' defence organisations we are also for workers' tribunals;

America has the highest incarceration rate in the world. Though only 5 per cent of the world's population lives in the United States, it is home to 25 per cent of the world's prison population - some 2.3 million.

Police arrest over 1 million people per year for drug possession, many received prison sentences and thus a criminal record that blights their job opportunities for life and in some states disenfranchises them. In 2018, black Americans represented 33% of the sentenced prison population; nearly triple their 12% share of the U.S. adult population

Whites accounted for 30% of prisoners, about half their 63% share of the adult population. Mass incarceration is a major part of US racism. We must demand the release of prisoners, not guilty of violent crime or who represent no danger to others; we must restore their full civil rights and end all other aspects of voter suppression.

End the War on Drugs. All those incarcerated on petty drugs offences should be released and their civil rights restored without prejudice. The police use the fact that all drugs are illegal to harass and criminalise black people and working class youth in general. All drugs should be legalised and made available under a state monopoly with related healthcare.

A massive programme of house building, job creation, free medical care for all, and access for all to high quality schooling and higher education with living maintenance grants and free tuition fees. All paid for by heavy taxation of America's giant corporations and super rich starting with the country's 621 billionaires;

Trade unions and socialist organisations like the DSA need to rally in ever greater numbers to defend the BLM movement against the violence of white supremacists, the police unions, and Donald Trump. The opportunities and the dangers of today show the urgent need to create a working class party, completely independent of the Democrats, one struggling for an American socialist revolution that will end racism, along with exploitation, for good.

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