

The paramilitary occupation of America

12 March 2015

It is necessary to call things by their right names. The obscene regularity of police murders in the United States has reached the point where it is appropriate to speak of the police as an occupying army, whose daily violence and brutality can best be described as a war against the country's poor and working people.

Practically every day brings a new outrage. The death toll mounts relentlessly, against the backdrop of harassment and beatings that are daily facts of life in much of the country. The government does not publish figures on police killings; however, according to statistics compiled from media reports, some 1,000 people lose their lives as a result of police violence every year in the United States. That averages out to almost three fatalities a day.

The list of victims reported just over the past three weeks includes:

- Anthony Hill, 27, Atlanta, Georgia. Unarmed, naked, suffering from mental illness, reportedly seen hanging from his balcony and crawling on the ground. Shot dead by a police officer on March 9.

- Anthony Robinson, Jr., 19, Madison, Wisconsin. Unarmed. Shot dead by a police officer who forced his way into the victim's apartment building on March 6.

- Naeschylus Vinzant, 37, Aurora, Colorado. Unarmed, wanted on an arrest warrant. Shot and killed by a heavily armed paramilitary SWAT team on March 6.

- Derek Cruice, 26, Volusia County, Florida. Unarmed, killed in his home. Victim in a "no-knock" SWAT raid that turned up a few ounces of marijuana. Fatally shot in the face on March 4.

- Ernest Javier Vanepa Diaz, 28, Santa Ana, California. Unarmed, killed in his car. Father of four, working two jobs. Shot dead on February 27 after, in the words of the local police chief, he "did not cooperate."

- Ruben Garcia Villapando, 31, Euless, Texas. Unarmed, killed in his car. Shot dead on February 20 after he allegedly disobeyed an officer's commands during a traffic stop.

- Antonio Zambrano-Montes, 35, Pasco, Washington.

Unarmed. Accused of throwing rocks at police. Shot dead as his hands were raised on February 10.

These names must be added to a list that includes Akai Gurley and Eric Garner in New York; twelve-year-old Tamir Rice in Cleveland, Ohio; Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri; and many others.

The mind-boggling level of police violence in the United States far exceeds that of any other major industrialized country. In Germany, there were eight police killings in 2013 and 2014 combined. In Canada, about a dozen people are killed by police each year.

In the past year, more people were killed by the police in Pasco, Washington (population of 68,000) than in all of Great Britain (population of 64,000,000) over the past three years.

Some of these killings are captured on videotape and become national news. Many more are barely reported or go unmentioned.

One web site that compiles local media reports, "Killed by Police," documented 212 police killings in the first 70 days of this year, including at least seven on Wednesday alone. One brief media account is indicative: "A suspect has been fatally wounded after a brief police pursuit... The sheriff's deputy discharged his weapon at the car after it finally stopped. The suspect was pronounced dead..."

The above incident could have happened in Iraq or Afghanistan. Such atrocities against civilians are commonplace in the countries occupied by the American military. There have been countless reports over the past 14 years of cars shot up by US military patrols because their drivers did not follow orders; of homes raided by American troops, their occupants beaten, arrested or shot.

Like the military, the police are trained to see the population as a hostile force. They demand that anyone they encounter act with complete submissiveness. Failure to obey is punishable by a beating, a jolt of electricity, arrest or summary execution.

The local police have intimate ties with the uniformed military and Pentagon. The latter has transferred billions of dollars in heavy weapons and military-grade

equipment—including armored vehicles, helicopters and automatic weapons left over from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq—to police departments across the country, in a program fully endorsed by President Obama.

Aurora, Colorado, for example, where Naeschylus Vinzant was killed last week, has received \$500,000 in military equipment since 2006, including a Mine Resistant (MRAP) vehicle, shields, and dozens of automatic rifles.

Volusia County, where Derek Cruice was shot, has received \$1,251,000 in military equipment, mainly in the form of automatic rifles, a \$250,000 personnel carrier, and a MRAP valued at nearly \$700,000.

To account for the militarization of domestic policing over the past half-century, one must examine the far-reaching changes in the structure of American society that have occurred. While police violence—overwhelmingly directed against the working class and its struggles—has long been a basic feature of American life, the systematic militarization of the police has developed alongside the transformations that have taken place since the 1960s.

Heavily armed SWAT teams first made their appearance in the latter years of that decade, in response to the urban uprisings and social upheavals of the period. By the end of the decade, the ruling class was repudiating the policy of social reform it had followed since the New Deal of the 1930s.

At the end of the 1970s, the political establishment launched an offensive against the jobs, wages and living standards of the working class that has continued ever since. “Law and order” politics became the political cover for a rapid buildup of the police powers of the state, including a vast expansion of the prison system and the transformation of the police into a paramilitary force.

These processes were intensified after 9/11 under the banner of the “war on terror.” The police were integrated more directly into the massive military-intelligence apparatus—the FBI, CIA, NSA and Pentagon. The local police today are tied by a million threads to the national system of repression and control.

This is what underlies the Obama administration’s insistent interventions in defense of the police, including Obama’s statement supporting the exoneration of Darren Wilson, the Ferguson cop who killed Michael Brown, and his declaration last week that “the overwhelming number of law enforcement officers” do their job “fairly, and they do it heroically.”

The political establishment views the whitewash of

Wilson not as a local question, but as a national necessity. In defending the police, in ensuring that there is no accountability for their crimes, Obama is upholding a critical part of the apparatus of repression.

The police carry out “heroic” work not in the service of the people, but in defense of the capitalist system and the ruling corporate-financial oligarchy. As social struggles develop, the police are called on to ever more directly use the violent methods honed by the military abroad against the working class at home.

Police violence is not fundamentally a question of racism, as claimed by the various organizations that orbit the Democratic Party. Whatever role racism may play in any given act of brutality, police violence is embedded in the irreconcilable conflict between the interests of the capitalist class and those of its opposite—the working class. This basic class division of society has grown all the more explosive with the colossal growth of social inequality.

This is why the fight against police violence must be rooted in the unification and mobilization of the working class, and the working class must see the fight against police violence as central to its own interests.

In drafting the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson included among the “long train of abuses and usurpations” of the British King the following: “Quartering large bodies of armed troops among us” and “protecting them, by mock Trial, from punishment for any Murders which they commit.” Then it was a question of overthrowing the British monarchy. Today it is a question of overthrowing the capitalist system.

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