

The International Socialist Organization, police violence and the Democratic Party

By Marcus Day
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The release of the video of the police murder of 17-year-old Laquan McDonald on November 24 has precipitated a political crisis in Chicago for Mayor Rahm Emanuel and the Democratic Party. Under these conditions, the pseudo-left International Socialist Organization (ISO) has entered the breach in an attempt to provide political cover for the Democratic Party, obscure the class issues, and contain widespread anger at systematic police violence within the safe channels of identity and protest politics.

Laquan McDonald was shot 16 times by Officer Jason Van Dyke on Chicago's Southwest Side on October 20, 2014. A criminal conspiracy to cover up evidence of the execution-style killing was swiftly organized, in which every major institution in the city is implicated: the police department, the so-called Independent Police Review Authority, the media, the City Council (including its Black and Progressive Caucuses), the state prosecutor, and Mayor Emanuel.

Behind them all stands the Obama administration, which has worked in close collaboration with Emanuel—who previously served as Obama's chief of staff and maintains close ties to the president—in order to both cover up the crime and defuse the subsequent crisis.

On December 1, amid mounting outrage over the protection of yet another killer cop, Emanuel fired Chicago Police Superintendent Garry McCarthy in an attempt to deflect attention away from his own role in trying to prevent the video from ever reaching the public.

The ISO responded to this maneuver with the December 3 article “Toppling Chicago's top cop,” published on its web site, SocialistWorker.org.

The authors begin by asserting, “[W]e need to remember that the power of protest pushed the city machine onto the defensive.” Yet the whole article, and the ISO's function, is aimed at propping up the principle instrument of this “machine”: the Democratic Party.

The ISO and race politics

This is done first of all through the promotion of the idea that police violence is fundamentally about race, not class. The ISO trumpets a group called the “Black Youth Project 100,” which has sought to segregate opposition to police violence along racial lines. On the Facebook event page created to organize the initial protest, BYP100 members stated that the demonstration was to be “Black ONLY,” and “a space for Black rage for Black people.”

The race politics of BYP100, and the ISO, dovetails with the attempt to keep black workers and youth under the political domination of “their own” businessmen, politicians, state officials, police, etc. Indeed, BYP100 issued a statement following McCarthy's firing demanding “a participatory city budget,” the investment of “dollars and resources in Black futures” and the funding of “Black businesses that support Black communities.”

This type of politics is entirely compatible with the Democratic Party. Nowhere in their article do the words “Democratic Party” or “Obama”

appear, despite the fact that the president has coordinated closely with Emanuel throughout the crisis in Chicago. This is not an accidental omission. From the outset, the ISO has sought to use identity politics to promote illusions in Obama, calling his election in 2008 a “transformative event in US politics.”

The authors state without critical comment that “calls for federal investigations flood in from activists and even Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan”—which Emanuel himself has since accepted as necessary to “rebuild trust,” knowing full well that the Obama administration and its Justice Department have intervened repeatedly to protect killer cops and their political backers from any serious repercussions.

Further, nowhere does the ISO mention that while a disproportionate number of victims of police shootings are black, the majority are, in fact, white. Moreover, while referring in passing to charges facing Chicago Police Commander Glenn Evans—a favorite of Superintendent McCarthy's who is notorious for his abuse of protesters and suspects—the authors neglect to mention that he is black.

Along with the promotion of BYP100 is the call for united action with sections of the Democratic Party, including the inevitable Jesse Jackson. The ISO credits the protests that took place in Chicago's upscale “Magnificent Mile” shopping district on Black Friday for playing the pivotal role in forcing Emanuel to fire McCarthy, writing, “Initiated by Father Michael Pflieger of St. Sabina church on Chicago's South Side, the action also got the support of Rev. Jesse Jackson's Rainbow PUSH coalition and other church leaders, in addition to Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) president Karen Lewis, who called on CTU members to join the demonstration and ‘express their outrage and dignity.’”

While the demonstration was larger than the initial protests called by BYP100, the ISO attributes this to the intervention of “church leaders” such as Pflieger and Jackson. In reality, Jackson, a multimillionaire charlatan, is called in when social struggles erupt in order to fraudulently invoke the heritage of the civil rights movement and contain opposition within the framework of the Democratic Party.

While feeling forced to admit that Pflieger and Jackson are “certainly not radicals,” the ISO claims, “The Black Friday protests showed what is possible with a larger coalition of people in the streets.” They refer to the participation of the CTU, and state that “activists need to capitalize on the mobilizing power and solidarity of CTU.”

“With a strike vote by the Chicago Teachers Union looming for December 9, activists have a real opportunity to build a united front against corrupt politicians and the crooked police department that protects them.”

The Chicago Teachers Union and the ISO

In reality, an examination of the record of the CTU reveals that it has been the primary means by which the ISO has built a “united front” with the political authors of police violence: the Democratic Party.

The CTU is a central mechanism through which the ISO, operating as a

faction of the Democratic Party, has sought to contain working-class opposition in Chicago. One of its members, Jesse Sharkey, is the vice president of the organization, and the ISO has close ties to CTU President Lewis. In 2012, the CTU, fearing a confrontation between teachers on the one hand and the Obama administration and the Democratic Party on the other, shut down the nine-day strike of nearly 30,000 teachers.

This betrayal, while cynically portrayed as a “victory” by the ISO, was a total capitulation to Emanuel’s right-wing demands and paved the way for the closure of 50 public schools, the layoff of thousands of teachers and relentless cuts to public education. In return, a CTU affiliate received permission to organize at the city’s largest charter school operation, and the CTU itself was allowed to play a role in “organizing” the school closures, which it at the same time also sought to portray in entirely racial terms.

Last winter, the CTU then served as the main force behind the mayoral campaign of Jesus “Chuy” Garcia, a longtime Democratic machine politician whom they presented as the “left” alternative to Emanuel’s pro-corporate policies. Garcia was seen by sections of the union bureaucracy, the pseudo-left and the upper middle class as a vehicle both to gain access to increased resources and state influence, and to provide a “progressive” facelift to the increasingly discredited Democratic Party.

Jesse Sharkey, the vice president of the CTU and a leading member of the ISO, announced the union’s support for Garcia, stating, “Chuy will crack down on violent crime and violence against our children, and root out waste and abuse in Chicago’s government so we can start investing in essential services like public safety, schools, and putting Chicagoans to work rebuilding our infrastructure.”

Throughout his campaign, Garcia criticized Emanuel from the right over police violence, calling for the hiring of 1,000 more cops. He remained silent during his campaign on revelations of a police torture “black site,” Homan Square, on the city’s West Side.

Garcia failed to win substantial popular support, due in no small measure to his record of backing hundreds of millions of dollars of cuts at the county level, and Emanuel was reelected amidst low voter turnout in a runoff election in April.

Since then, the CTU has sought to move its alliance with Emanuel into the open as they worked out plans behind the scenes for an even more brutal austerity contract. Immediately following Emanuel’s reelection, Sharkey told the *New York Times*, “Rahm in 2011 is not Rahm in 2015. He really had to get off his high horse to win.”

At a November 23 rally on the eve of the release of the video of McDonald’s murder, the CTU and ISO sought both to chloroform teachers over the attacks they face—including threatened layoffs of 5,000 and a massive pay cut—while simultaneously promoting the Democratic Party and class collaborationist politics under the slogan of “One Chicago.” Notably, neither Sharkey nor Lewis referred to Emanuel in their remarks.

More recently, Lewis has sought to explicitly solidarize herself with the beleaguered Emanuel. In response to the question of whether she thought her relationship with Emanuel has improved, she declared, “Yes, he is better. We do talk to each other. I could pick up the phone and call Rahm and he’ll listen. You have to talk to people. We can’t sit in our respective quarters and cross our arms. Things don’t get done that way.”

Voicing her opposition to the widespread belief that the release of the Laquan McDonald video would have damaged Emanuel’s electoral chances, Lewis told *Chicago* magazine, “I don’t think he would have lost. I think that had he shown the video it would have helped him, shown that he was serious about transparency.”

In a meeting December 2, the CTU’s House of Delegates responded to the ongoing crisis over police criminality by voting to support the call for a “Civilian Police Accountability Council.” In its first article on the Laquan McDonald video on November 27, the ISO had also promoted

this proposal, stating, “An elected civilian police review board would be a positive step to muzzle killer cops”—failing to mention that such “civilian” oversight has functioned as little more than a democratic veneer in countless cities around the country.

A section of the CTU has opposed even these toothless restraints on police criminality, concerned that it would jeopardize their friendly relationship with the police union. Sharkey, weighing in on the debate, reportedly told the delegates meeting, “You can look at our relationship with the cops first, and then there’s our relationship with the parents and students. Then you turn on the news and see a cop shoot someone in the back. So we have to try to be balanced here.[!]”

Revealed throughout these statements is the real attitude of the CTU and the ISO towards the police, their relationship to the state and their class orientation.

The ISO and the Democratic Party

The ISO is a tendency within bourgeois politics, functioning as a faction of the Democratic Party. They speak for layers of the affluent middle class, such as highly paid academics and trade union bureaucrats, who accept the legitimacy of both the police and the Democratic Party as defenders of their own wealth and privileges. Their criticisms amount to friendly “advice” on how this big-business party might better manage its image.

For their own part, sections of the Democratic Party rely upon the services of pseudo-left groups such as the ISO and unions such as the CTU in disorienting workers and youth opposed to police violence and in smothering the class struggle.

For the ISO, the role of self-interest also plays its part in their efforts to serve as a “loyal opposition.” They hope to prove their usefulness and be rewarded with more resources and greater political influence. As they write, “The disarray of Rahm’s administration, combined with the decrepitude of the liberal establishment, means a competition for leadership and the direction of our movement.”

The ISO smells positions for itself and its allies in the apparatus of the state. Karen Lewis already considered running for mayor last year. Sharkey may well see himself as next in line, leveraging his position in the CTU apparatus into a position of political power of some form in Chicago.

If one were to ask what the logical conclusion of the ISO’s perspective on the police is, one has only to look to Greece, where Syriza gives an indication of what such pseudo-left groups are capable of if they gain hold of the state apparatus. Since coming to power at the beginning of the year, Syriza—which the ISO has consistently supported and collaborated with—has rammed through brutal austerity measures and deployed the police against anti-austerity demonstrators and against refugees fleeing imperialist violence in the Middle East.

Ultimately, the drive towards police state forms of rule arises inexorably from the growth of gigantic social tensions in countless cities such as Chicago around the world. The ruling class is well aware of the opposition its antisocial policies are giving rise to, and in its isolation and fear is seeking to maintain its position by brute force and terror.

Workers and young people opposed to police violence confront not just the local corruption and savagery of the Democratic Party in Chicago and its armed thugs, but also the pseudo-left, the trade unions and the entire social order which they defend: that is, capitalism. The only genuine way forward to put an end to the reign of police brutality and murder is to break with all the representatives of the ruling class and mount a political struggle against social inequality and class exploitation. That is the fight for socialism.

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