

Infiltration of US protests against police brutality used to delegitimize demonstrations, undermine democratic rights

By Adam Mclean
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Since the Memorial Day murder of George Floyd by four officers in Minneapolis, Minnesota, police across the US have carried out a brutal authoritarian crackdown on the popular protests against police brutality. Emboldened by the Trump administration's law-and-order stance, police have adopted the methods typical of the authoritarian regimes and military juntas backed by American imperialism.

Since the initial outbreak of the protests, police have used “less lethal” rounds to blind protesters, rammed their vehicles into groups of protesters, assaulted and arrested journalists—including those from major news networks—without cause, abducted protesters in unmarked vans, and held and interrogated them without charge. The sheer brutality with which they have carried out these actions, in many cases documented over social media and viewed by millions, has reached new levels in the course of these protests.

Mass popular protests have done nothing to slow down the police forces which operate as death squads in urban and rural areas alike with nearly complete impunity. According to killedbypolice.net, which catalogues police killings in the US, at least 150 people have been killed in confrontations with police since the murder of Floyd.

The Trump administration presents an upside-down version of events in which the police violence is a justifiable response to the terrorism and anarchism of protesters who have directly attacked police. In reality the worst offenses of the protesters seldom go beyond vandalism and property damage, and on this point evidence has emerged that it was the police themselves or right-wing provocateurs who were responsible.

In one incident shortly after the protests first emerged

in Minneapolis, video emerged of a provocateur dressed in all black smashing the windows of an AutoZone. As protesters confronted him, he refused to identify himself and continued breaking windows before walking away. The vandalizing of the AutoZone was quickly picked up on by the media and used to demonize the protests. Last month the person was identified by police as a 32-year-old member of the Aryan Cowboy Brotherhood, a white supremacist organization associated with the Hell's Angels biker gang.

Scenes like this have been reported across the country. Police were filmed breaking the glass door of a Target in Seattle. In Chicago, police were filmed breaking the car windows of suspected looters. In Fargo, North Dakota an assistant police chief resigned after being recognized by protesters in plain clothes at a demonstration drinking beer and shouting “f—k the police.”

In each case, the respective police departments have done everything in their power to maintain a plausible deniability. However, there is no doubt that police engage in the regular practice of sending plain-clothes officers as agents provocateur and infiltrators in popular protests. The use of these tactics to spy on and control protests constitutes a fundamental attack on democratic rights.

A recent legal analysis by the liberal Brennan Center notes some of the implications of police infiltration: “Police infiltration of protests also has a chilling effect on protesters’ First Amendment rights. Fear of plainclothes police joining protests to surveil activists, the danger to undocumented immigrants of Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers’

attendance at protests, the presence of agents-provocateur, and the resulting distrust of one's fellow protesters all discourage would-be marchers from participating."

The reality of police infiltration of protests throughout the US, although not a new phenomenon, has a renewed significance at a time when democratic rights and norms are stretched to the point of breaking.

The fundamental democratic rights enshrined in the Constitution have been chipped away over the last several decades by Democratic and Republican administrations alike. The Eighth Amendment prohibition of cruel and unusual punishment has been a dead letter at least since the legitimization of torture during the War on Terror, a policy which was initiated by Bush and continued by Obama. The Supreme Court ruled in June that asylum seekers have no right to habeas corpus under a provision of Clinton's 1996 immigration act. The abduction of protesters without formal charge by unidentified agents, which first emerged as a practice of federal troops in Portland last month and soon after taken up by police in New York City is a clear violation of 4th amendment rights.

The US is in an unprecedented social and economic crisis, and it is in this context that Trump made his coup attempt in June with the protests as a pretext and is continuing to plot against the Constitution. The ruling class' response to the coronavirus has been to bailout Wall Street on a scale far greater than that of 2008. To make good on this, the ruling class sees it as necessary to abrogate democratic rights in order to force the weight of the bailout onto the backs of the working class.

The worst crimes of the Trump administration are accepted by the Democratic Party as necessary to ensure the protection of the financial elite. Former Vice President Joe Biden, for his part, has responded to the protests against police violence by calling for the most inconsequential police reform—in his words, “[teach] a cop... to shoot him in the leg instead of in the heart”—and by selecting Senator Kamala Harris, an ex-prosecutor with a long and proven record of supporting police and prisons and of prosecuting workers, as his running mate.

In the last four years of the Trump administration, the criticism by the Democrats has not once centered on questions of democratic rights. Instead their objections

have been focused entirely on allegations of Trump's closeness with Russia, and with issues of race. Capitalism has decayed to a point where it is no longer compatible with the gains made in the democratic revolutions during the 18th and 19th century. The defense of democratic rights and the fight to end police violence now falls to the working class.

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