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Police violence and the American gulag

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4 June 2014

Recent weeks have seen a proliferation of violent and often fatal attacks by police in cities and towns across the United States.

* Last week, an Atlanta SWAT team critically wounded a one-year-old toddler by throwing a flash grenade into a house in an early morning no-knock raid to serve an arrest warrant. The toddler remains in a medically induced coma and is fighting for his life. Such no-knock warrants are becoming increasingly common. Police carried out 50,000 such raids in 2005, up from 3,000 in 1981, and the American Civil Liberties Union estimates that between 70,000 and 80,000 no-knock raids occur each year in the US.

* Last Thursday, the Albuquerque Medical Investigator's office released the autopsy report for James Boyd, the 38-year-old homeless man who was killed by police on March 16, confirming that he was shot in the back. Since that incident, Albuquerque police have carried out two further fatal shootings. The Albuquerque police department has been responsible for 25 deadly shootings since 2010, according to the US Justice Department.

* On May 20, three police officers in Salinas, California fired more than five shots at close range at migrant farm worker Carlos Mejía, killing him as he was backing away from them.

* On May 11, five California Highway Patrol officers in Imperial County, California, beat to death Tommy Yancy, a veteran suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, following a routine traffic stop.

* On April 27, Jason Conoscenti, 36 was shot to death in Long Beach, California as he fled from police officers.

* Last Friday, a grand jury indicted a Cleveland police officer on charges of manslaughter for the 2012 execution-style killing of two unarmed occupants of a disabled car following a chase. The officer “Fired at least fifteen shots ... downward through the windshield at close range as he stood on the hood” of the unarmed victims’ car, according to a federal prosecutor.

According to official statistics, the police on average commit between one and two “justifiable homicides” every day in the United States.

Last week, the Supreme Court provided legal cover for such homicidal attacks. The decision upheld “qualified immunity” for three Arkansas police officers who fired fifteen shots at a fleeing motorist and his passenger, killing both.

There is nothing accidental about the prevalence of violent attacks by police in America. It is of a piece with a massive prison complex that is without equal anywhere else in the world.

Last month, the National Research Council released a 440-page report entitled “The Growth of Incarceration in the United States,” documenting the vast increase in the US prison population. Since 1980, the share of the US population in prison has tripled. In the US, male high school dropouts are almost more likely to go to prison than not. Two thirds of black male high school dropouts born in the late 1970s have served time by their mid-30s.

About a quarter of all prisoners worldwide are kept in American prisons, despite the fact that the US accounts for only 5 percent of the world’s population. The portion of Americans in prison is 50 percent higher than the next-worst country, Russia.

Conditions in American prisons are particularly horrific for the mentally ill and handicapped, who are increasingly being warehoused in America’s sprawling prison system as funding for mental health assistance is slashed.

Last month, a former employee of the Dade Correctional Institution near Miami filed a complaint with the Justice Department claiming that prison guards made a “sport” of abusing mentally ill inmates. He said they “taunted, tormented, abused, beat, and tortured chronically mentally ill inmates on a regular basis.”

The most horrific of these incidents was the killing of Darren Rainey, a mentally ill inmate who died on June 23, 2012 after being forced into a scalding shower for over an hour. Guards had turned the shower into an impromptu torture chamber by breaking the internal door handles and controlling the flow of water from an external valve. No one has been held accountable for his death, and his autopsy has not been released.

The crowning symbol of the barbarism of the American “justice system” is the continuing use of capital punishment. The cruelty of this practice was graphically expressed in the execution on April 29 of Clayton Lockett, who was subjected to nearly three quarters of an hour of agony before succumbing to a heart attack. Lockett’s was the latest in a series of “botched” executions using untested drug cocktails from undisclosed sources.

State violence has always been a feature of capitalist rule in America, including the massacre of striking workers, the brutalization of African Americans in the Jim Crow South, and the routine repression and intimidation carried out by police departments across the country against working class and minority workers and youth. Police violence has been the precipitating factor in mass social upheavals throughout US history, including the ghetto uprisings of the 1960s.

This has been exacerbated since the eruption of the economic crisis in 2008. The escalation of police violence has gone hand and hand with the increasing concentration of wealth at the top, on the one hand, and the growth of unemployment, hunger and homelessness, on the other, as well as the eruption of American militarism internationally.

The reality of state violence and repression in America makes a mockery of Washington’s pretensions to be a beacon of democracy and human rights throughout the world. In fact, many of the tactics used by the police against the US population were pioneered in the US’s colonial wars. And increasingly, police departments are being militarized, with the addition of armored vehicles, attack helicopters, drones and the like.

The growth of police violence parallels the broader attack on democratic rights, including domestic spying, indefinite detention, drone assassinations and the elimination of any remaining restrictions on money in politics.

The United States “justice” system treats the poor and disadvantaged with total remorselessness, stuffing the prisons with people for the most minor offenses, while the bankers who crashed the economy and CEOs of energy companies whose violations of safety laws lead to the deaths of workers are given a free pass.

The American system of state repression and violence is not an accident or a blemish on an otherwise healthy system. It reflects the fundamentally brutal and violent character of the capitalist system, based on the exploitation of the working class. The only way to end the American gulag is to put an end to capitalism.

