Ferguson, Militarization, Federal Jurisdiction in Police Brutality

written by Howie Hawkins | August 22, 2014

[We re-post here a statement by Howie Hawkins, Green Party candidate for Governor of New York.—eds.]

Staten Island, Syracuse, Ohio, and Ferguson. Garner, Grant, Crawford, and Brown. Add these locations and names to the long list of young black unarmed men (and women) who are racially profiled and injured or killed at the hands of Police Departments around the country. From every corner of the US there are daily reports of police brutality and misbehavior.

As Chris Hedges recently wrote, being the object of unwarranted deadly force by police officers is part of what it means to be black and poor in America. But no matter how much blacks raise their voices against indiscriminate police violence "the killings keep coming." The police have always been the primary means of social control. But now we are witnessing the increasing militarization of the police force, with tanks and tear gas rolling through the streets of Ferguson.

The poor, especially people of color, are unjustly targeted and victimized by our criminal justice system. From stop and frisk and broken windows, to police misbehavior, to the lack of adequate defense, to sentencing disparities, and post-conviction collateral consequences, the criminal justice system is deeply racist. The era of mass incarceration of mostly black and brown people is the backdrop of recent protests in Ferguson, Missouri.

Multiple reports and eye witnesses have sworn that Michael Brown, a young black unarmed man just days away from his first day of college, was shot 6 times, twice to the head, by a member of the Ferguson Police Department while on his knees and with his hands up in the air. He was then left to bleed for four hours where he was gunned down.

The response of the community was a rising anger and frustration but also a bold and courageous protest. We applaud the citizens of Ferguson for coming together in huge numbers, marching and chanting "Hands up, Don't shoot." The response of the Ferguson police to the protesters exemplifies the erosion of civil rights and American democracy. Officers militarized in riot gear and armed with tear-gas, sniper rifles, rubber bullets, and armored vehicles responded violently to unarmed and peaceful protesters. The Mayor of Ferguson declared a state of emergency and instituted a curfew from 12am-5pm. The Governor of Missouri called in the National Guard.

The Hawkins-Jones campaign extends their condolences and regret to the Brown Family for the loss of their son and stands in solidarity with the people of Ferguson. Howie Hawkins and Brian Jones unconditionally defend the First Amendment right of the people of Ferguson to protest and demand change. Michael Brown's killer, Officer Darren Wilson, must be charged with murder and brought to justice immediately.

The Hawkins/Jones campaign calls for an "independent investigation" with the Department of Justice taking jurisdiction in these cases like Garner and Brown. To effectively hold police officers accountable to the law, federal prosecutors must be appointed who are not tied to the local "old boys' networks" in the local justice system. Whenever the police kill, brutalize, or otherwise violate a citizen's civil rights, the US Department of Justice should be brought in to investigate and file charges if warranted because the DA's and police are constant collaborators. The Attorney Generals

are also too connected to the local police and political establishments.

The recent police killing of Eric Garner in Staten Island is similar to the police murder of Syracuse resident Jonny Gammage in a Pittsburgh suburb in 1995. Syracuse Greens were active in a campaign for a law for federal jurisdiction in these cases. Jonny was suffocated to death by suburban Pittsburgh police during a routine traffic stop much like Garner was. The proposed Jonny Gammage Law would mandate:

- appointment of a federal prosecutor by the US Attorney General whenever a law officer is accused of violating the civil rights of a human being, including bodily injury or death;
- US Department of Justice investigation of whether prosecution is warranted for all charges of civil rights violations and brutality by police officers by credible public or private sources, such as Citizen Review Boards, Human Rights Commissions, and civil rights organizations;
- removal of jurisdiction over such cases from the local and state justice system, including the grand jury, to the US Department of Justice and the federal courts;
- the immediate suspension of an officer charged until the case is resolved.

In addition to demilitarizing the police, our campaign calls state funding for a statewide public defenders' office, an end to the War on Drugs, an end to solitary confinement, educational opportunities for prisoners, "ban the box" on criminal history in employment and college applications, and alternatives to incarceration. We want the establishment of a Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation commission to examine the impact of the war on drugs and mass incarceration on communities of color in our state.

For More Information.

The Jonny Gammage Law: Federal Prosecution of Police Brutality, by Rev. Larry Ellis, Syracuse Greens, http://www.greens.org/s-r/23/23-06.html

"Equal Justice Under Law" Platform of Howie Hawkins and Brian Jones, http://www.howiehawkins.org/platform