Ferguson and Staten Island

written by Dan La Botz, Stephen R. Shalom, Julia Wrigley | January 9, 2015

The killings of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, by police who were not indicted by grand juries in Missouri and New York, represent only the latest in a string of such police or vigilante killings—sometimes clearly murders—of African-American or Latino men.

The Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, an activist anti-racist organization, reports that police kill an African-American man every 28 hours, almost one for every day of the year. Police killings of people of color—often unarmed, some while being held in custody, some mentally ill—represent the predictable outcome of a system of racial profiling, police harassment, manhandling, unjustified arrests, trumped-up charges, lack of adequate counsel, disproportionate conviction, and excessive imprisonment.

The U.S. prison population has grown from 500,000 in 1980 to 2.3 million today. The United States has a larger proportion of its population in prison (743 per 100,000) than any other nation in the world. U.S. federal and state governments spend more than $60 billion a year on incarceration. The growth of the prison population has been largely driven by the blatant racism of the system.

One of every three black men and one of every six Latino men in the United States will be imprisoned during their lifetime, compared to one of every 17 white men. African Americans make up just 13 percent of the U.S. population, but are 40 percent of the prison population; Latinos are 16 percent of the population, but 21 percent of the nation's prisoners. African Americans and Latinos make up more than half of the death row inmates, and though about half of all U.S. murder victims have been black, almost 80 percent of those executed were convicted of killing whites.

America's so-called "justice system" is rigged against African Americans, Latinos, and poor people. The entire system—from the cop on the beat and the prosecutor, to the judge and the prison guard—fails to provide justice to virtually anyone caught up in it. The system that evolved over more than two centuries out of class interest, political opportunism, and racial prejudice is a horror and a scandal. We need not only to stop police and vigilante killings, but we must transform justice as it is now—one based on retribution and emphasizing fear, violence, torture, and killing—into another approach entirely, based instead on rehabilitation and restorative justice.

Behind the criminal justice system, however, stands the capitalist system that continually engenders and accentuates social inequality, leaving many unemployed and often in poverty. As long as inequality and discrimination persist, the police will be an occupation force in our poor communities. Where there is a lack of education, health care, housing, employment, and living- wage jobs, there will be no justice in the criminal justice system.

We have seen Ferguson and New York City's cries of pain turn into enormous protests against these specific police, prosecutors, and grand juries, but also into demands for an end to police killings across the nation, as well as for replacing the whole unjust criminal justice system. New organizations are appearing and new networks developing. These represent the beginnings of the mass social movements we will need to stop the police killings of people of color and transform our criminal justice system. They are the prototypes of what we need in order to junk the intertwined nightmares of capitalism and white supremacy in America.

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Footnotes