OUTRAGE, PROTEST, AND REBELLION OVER REFUSAL TO INDICT MICHAEL BROWN'S KILLER

written by Saulo Colón, Dan La Botz | November 26, 2014

Pain and anger at the police killing of Michael Brown became transformed into protests that swept across America just before Thanksgiving. Thousands of people in the town of Ferguson, Missouri, and tens of thousands in cities throughout the country reacted with indignation, anger and in Ferguson with violent protests after the grand jury failed to indict Officer Darren Wilson in the shooting death of 18-year-old Michael Brown.

The killing took place on August 9 when Wilson stopped Brown and a friend. A struggle broke out between Wilson and Brown in the course of which the officer shot and killed the African-American teenager. Wilson first fired his gun wounding Brown, who was unarmed, but then nevertheless continued to fire a total of 12 shots, six of which hit Brown, the last shot apparently killing him. Wilson claimed he feared Brown who was moving toward him, though some witnesses said that after being shot Brown had raised his hands as if to surrender. Wilson kept firing anyway and killed him. Contrary to all routine procedures, Officer Wilson was never arrested, was allowed to keep his gun for some time before it was turned in as evidence, and was permitted to speak with others about the events.

African Americans and many others who were already angry about the many police killings of young Black and Latino men and women were outraged that Ferguson District Attorney Robert McCullough, refused to seek an indictment of the officer. McCullough, whose own father was a police officer killed by an African American, should have recused himself but failed to do so. McCullough pursued an extraordinary legal course in an attempt to protect Wilson from prosecution, first declining to seek an indictment and then using the grand jury as an opportunity to justify Wilson's action. McCullough selectively examined witnesses to strengthen Wilson's case that he killed Brown in self-defense. As opposed to a jury trial, the grand jury did not include a rigorous cross-examination of witnesses. Yet, while this was a virtually unprecedented legal strategy—sending a case to a grand jury without a recommendation to indict—still it was characteristic of the way in which police departments and district attorneys protect officers involved in such homicides so that few are tried and fewer convicted of wrongdoing when they have shot and killed a Black man.

With no recommendation from the district attorney, the grand jury brought no indictment against Wilson who walked free. The Michael Brown case is seen by many Americans as another in a long series of unjustified and unaccountable killings by police officers. And that, of course, represents the logical outcome of racial profiling, harassment, and routine police violence toward African American, Latino, immigrant and LGBT communities.

Protests in Ferguson and Nationwide

When the verdict was announced on the night of November 24, the crowds in Ferguson, made up mostly of African Americans and young white activists who had been expecting and preparing for just such an outcome, continued to peacefully protest as they have been doing for months. Others, however, in response to their own anger and indignation at this reminder that Black lives don't matter, and to the continued militarization and aggressiveness of a police presence (and to the use of language like "rules of engagement") as well as to the deployment of the National Guard as if it were a colonial occupation, went through the town's business district breaking windows, setting fire to businesses and automobiles, shooting firearms, and looting stores.

Much of the violence was carried out by youth who, no doubt, identified with the young Michael Brown. Some Ferguson residents and protestors attempted to stop the violence, but others expressed sympathy and support for the young people who were destroying the business district, feeling that it was the only way to force some reaction from the powers-that-be. The Ferguson police, who had earlier talked about their preparedness, were unable to stop the violence despite numerous arrests, while fire fighters left the scene after hearing gun shots.

Protestors were furious not only at the authorities and the police, but also at the media that had so often portrayed Michael Brown and other African American men as beasts or demons and Black protestors as savages. The progressive media criticized the corporate coverage, while crowds in Ferguson chanted, "Fuck CNN."

Throughout the country's major cities on Nov. 24 and 25—in New York, Philadelphia, Minneapolis, Chicago, St. Louis, Atlanta, New Orleans, Seattle, Oakland, and Los Angeles, among others—there were spontaneous as well as planned protests of hundreds and in some places of thousands. In New York City on Nov. 24, for example, a thousand protestors first gathered at Union Square and then marched several miles through Times Square on their way to 125th street in Harlem.

When New York Police Commissioner William Bratton appeared at Times Square, protestors, outraged at a recent police killing of a Black youth in a New York housing project, threw red paint representing blood at the commissioner. Later, many of these saddened, indignant, and angry and youth realized their unity gave them power and together blocked several bridges. While Wilson, who shot Brown walks free, Diego Ibañez, the teacher and Occupy activist who threw the paint at the commissioner has been indicted on several criminal charges and if found guilty could face years in prison.

The most militant and disruptive demonstrations outside of Ferguson took place in nearby St. Louis and in Oakland, California, where crowds blocked streets. Everywhere protestors told of their anger not only at the killing of Brown and the distortion of the justice system in the Wilson case,, but also spoke of the dehumanization many have experienced due to police harassment, stop-and-frisk, unjust detention, unfair trials, and many other aspects of the system of massive incarceration and social control that targets poor and working class communities of color. Some expressed their hope that the Michael Brown case and the reaction to it would represent a turning point.

The Liberal Establishment Fails

The liberal establishment had hoped to keep things in Ferguson under control by having figures like Rev. Al Sharpton and Rev. Jesse Jackson exert their moral authority to keep protests peaceful and political aspirations within the political channels offered by the Democratic Party. Crowds in Ferguson booed them, demonstrating the degree to which figures like Sharpton and Jackson are out of touch with young poor and working class African Americans. The historic Black leadership is too

integrated into mainstream politics, too separate from the lives of ordinary African Americans to be able to exert much influence. At the same time, it is clear that no new national African American political leadership has emerged which might have led protests into a new social movement.

Some young people, however, are radicalizing due to the events of the past few years and becoming leaders themselves, at times connecting with older organizations like the Organization for Black Struggle or with newer groups from other parts of the country such as the Dream Defenders, which formed after Trayvon Martin's murder. Some of these young people are also building coalitions with other exploited and oppressed youth like the United We Dream immigrant activists or forming national organizations like Freedomside, which linked to veterans of Freedom Summer at this past summer's 50th commemoration event. Clearly if new national leadership develops it will come from these newly radicalized youth.

The police killing of Michael Brown and grand jury's refusal to indict the officer represent symptoms of the continuing pathology of American society's racist and unrelenting destruction of the lives of the young and poor. The criminal justice system, though, is only part of the larger system that grinds down communities of color. The capitalist economy's inability to provide living wage jobs, and the government's refusal to create, maintain, and expand affordable housing, to actually establish universal healthcare, and to build the infrastructure necessary to transition to a non-fossil fuel economy demonstrates that neoliberal capitalists and their politicians and bureaucrats—as well as the majority of the media who justify their actions—have chosen to ignore the economic, environmental, and social crisis of their decaying society in order to maximize and maintain the extreme inequality they have created. They, and their capitalist system, can no longer be considered rational or civilized.

This system is far more violent and destructive than any protest against it. Capitalism, which was founded on slavery and blood, has now clearly regressed back into a race-based colonial "injustice system." Equally troubling is the failure so far of multiple generations of activists to converge and coalesce, out of the Occupy, abolitionist, queer, and environmental movements, into a social force capable of sustaining a new organizational vehicle, a socialist party for the 21st century that fights for hegemony and power. Yet there are signs that new resistance movements are emerging. They will be essential, because we still need a socialist revolution in order to transform this barbaric system.