

What Mike Brown's Death means to Labor



Eighteen years old, unarmed and son of a UFCW Local 88 member, Mike Brown was shot six times by a white police officer in Ferguson, MO on August 9. The killing of Brown is a crime that all workers should condemn. AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka, and officials of APWU, ATU, SEIU, AFGE, UFCW, SEIU, CWA, Coalition of Black Trade Unionists and other labor organizations published statements critical of the shooting. Many rank and file workers joined the protests in Ferguson and in hundreds of cities across the U.S. Every union member should oppose criminal police murders of our innocent African American, Native American, Asian and Latino brothers and sisters.

Numerous witnesses testified Brown was facing Officer Darren Wilson with his arms up in surrender when he was gunned down. Many questions surround police reports that he stole cigars from a store previous to the shooting, but even if true, petty thievery was not why Brown was stopped nor would it justify his assassination. Another report that Brown fractured Officer Darren Wilson's eye socket has also been proven untrue. Brown's body was left in the street for hours before being taken away in a police van - a disrespectful police action which further infuriated the community.

Shermale Humphrey used to work at the McDonald's in Ferguson that sits right across from the scene of Brown's execution. "This [protesting] is something I had to do," she said. "I'm African American, and this could be anyone I know. I just can't let it go on any longer."

Resistance Justified

The Ferguson killing must be seen in a wider context to understand why protests have been so widespread. In recent weeks, there have been many police killings of oppressed people in the U.S. John Crawford III, a Black man, was shot in a southwest Ohio Walmart, while holding a toy air rifle he had picked up in the store. Los Angeles police fatally shot Ezell Ford, an unarmed Black man, who suffered from mental illness, and beat to death Omar Abrego, still wearing his work uniform. Staten Island, N.Y., police choked to death Eric Garner for allegedly selling loose cigarettes. There are many more such deaths - Trayvon Martin, Shantel Davis, Renisha McBride to name just a few, on average one person of color killed by the police every 28 hours in the US.

In addition to the killings are the conditions of poverty and unemployment that prevail in oppressed communities. They are highlighted now in Ferguson, where the effects of gentrification and growing suburban poverty are clearly seen.

Racism - enemy of union solidarity

Every good shop steward fights for equality on the job. When management is allowed to give certain workers privileges and benefits over and above other

workers, worker unity is destroyed. The fight against racism and sexism on the job is critical to the struggle to reverse years of union membership decline. U.S. corporations and their wealthy owners not only increase their profits from the lower wages forced on migrants, women and workers of color through racist and sexist policies, but such discrimination undermines all workers' demands for livable wages, benefits and rights.

Along with the growing poverty and uncertainty in the U.S. caused by the unstable nature of the capitalist system, the neoliberalism that U.S. banks have devastated other nations with is now being used against workers here. It is manifested in attacks on unions and workers who are organizing, with assaults on the right to quality public education and drastic slashes in social welfare programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. With cuts to food benefits invariably come rising food prices.

It is not just oppressed communities that need to fear the growing militarization of the police, but all workers. Police agencies are being trained in military tactics, armed with high-tech and advanced military hardware for crowd control and squashing social unrest.

As more workers demand jobs, higher wages, education, adequate benefits to raise our families and pensions, and come up against the police called by the corporate executives to stop us, it is in our immediate interest to contest the use of a militarized and quick-to-use-violence police force.

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