

Racism and the Right to Due Process

Commentary by Jack Stephens

Very early on New Year's Day, 22-year-old Oscar Grant III was shot and killed in Oakland, California by a Bay Area Rapid Transit agency police officer. Grant was unarmed, his face pressed down against the floor. Onlookers video-phoned the horrific spectacle as his life was taken from him.

The killing of Oscar Grant was not an anomaly. It was a direct outcome of the racist use of police force in capitalism. The inherent racial inequality of the socioeconomic system, as upheld by the judicial system, means that police killings and police corruption are not simply a product of a few "bad apples" within the system but the inevitable reenactment of racism and violence that sustain capitalism within this country.

This system was built upon the genocide of the native population, the enslavement of millions of Africans, the invasion of lands through imperialist wars to expand United States borders, the systematic implementation of racial privileges for whites, the attacking of effective trade unionism, and the expansion of capitalist "free-trade" to other nations and peoples across the globe. These are macro examples of the kind of violence that sustains this economic system.

In advanced capitalism, social control is not accomplished by brute force alone. It is also done by promoting an ideology in which the class interests of the economic elite are considered the interests of all—from street beggars to chief executive officers.

In the United States, this capitalist ideology is built upon white supremacy and racial privilege. The white working class has been given better paid jobs and greater access to the national wealth than the African American (or more generally, people of color) working class. Since

"You never seen the police break up a strike, by hittin' the boss with his baton pipe"

—Boots Riley, The Coup

the very beginnings of slavery in the Americas, the white elite has exploited the African American population and other people of color. It has then used white supremacist ideology to split the working class movement by pitting white workers against the rest.

Because capitalism depends on some level of consent by the working class, the African American history of struggle and dissent against white supremacy creates a major problem for the white elite. Portraying African American men as inherently dangerous—and then shooting them to prove the point—is one piece of the process. Without a subjugated African American population the cogs of capitalism cannot continue to turn.

African Americans and other people of color in the United States are under constant attack from the police. (Witness the arrest and conviction statistics at the county, state, and federal levels.) African American men are shot by police on an almost weekly basis. While the circumstances of each shooting vary, the net effect is to maintain racial and class inequality. A key mission of any urban police department is to harrass and subjugate communities of color in order for white supremacy—and this variant of capitalism—to survive.

What was enacted on that BART platform that New Years day was one more act in a long history of racial violence against African Americans by the police. ■

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