

Democrats, Cops and Screws: Agents of the Oppressors

Lock Up Mehserle— Throw Away the Key!

Since the murder of Oscar Grant by BART cop Johannes Mehserle on New Year's Day 2009, thousands of people have mobilized to demand "Justice for Oscar Grant" and oppose attempts to let Mehserle walk free after his conviction on the far lesser charge of "involuntary manslaughter."

Involuntary manslaughter usually carries a sentence of two to four years, but if a gun was used, the judge can add three to ten years to the sentence. Mehserle is a dangerous racist killer who should be locked up for life, but 14 years would be a lot better than what Judge Robert Perry, who conducted his trial, is probably intending to give him. Perry was responsible for the official cover-up of the LAPD Ramparts scandal in which more than 70 police officers were implicated for planting evidence, framing innocent people and taking pay-offs from drug dealers while organizing robberies, beatings and shootings. Tony Pirone and Marysol Domenici, two other BART cops who were complicit in Grant's murder and withheld information during Mehserle's trial, also deserve long stretches in prison.

Outrage at this murder has come from many places, so it is no surprise that there are different ideas about how to take the struggle forward. We have to start by recognizing that responsibility for this crime goes beyond Mehserle, the BART police and the BART board. Oscar Grant's murder was a product of the routine functioning of the American social system and particularly the racist administration of "criminal justice." Responsibility for Oscar Grant's death is therefore shared by all those who materially support and perpetuate the system, including many of the local politicians who made a show of protesting Mehserle's crime.

While many innocent people like Oscar Grant have been killed by cops, no police officer has *ever* been jailed for murder in the State of California. The popularity of the slogan "I am Oscar Grant" reflects widespread awareness of the profound injustice of this racist system. There is no way justice for Oscar Grant can be achieved by reliance on institutions that exist to maintain and defend the status quo—or on those who run them.

To suppress the growing social tensions resulting from the decline of American capitalism over the last 30 years, ruling-class politicians (Democrat as well as Republican) have ramped up state repression and vastly expanded the police and prison system. In California between 1988 and 2008 the number of prison guards increased at four times the rate of other state agencies. In the 2009-2011 City of Oakland budget, the police department eats up an incredible 43 percent of the general fund, compared to a measly 2 percent for community development and human services. An Oakland cop's salary averages an astounding \$162,000 a year.

It is obvious to tens of millions of working-class Americans that capitalism is unable to provide meaning-

ful employment or meet the most elementary needs of the population for housing, health care and education. And in this racist system people of color and youth are always the hardest hit. Today the official unemployment rate for blacks stands at 15.6 percent (compared to 8.6 percent for whites) while more than 40 percent of black youth are unemployed. As the economy pushes more and more workers downwards and jobs dry up, the prison population is rising.

All of the Democrats running for election this November in Oakland are tied to law enforcement one way or another. Indeed, the majority of them are directly funded by the police and prison guards. Democratic Assemblyman Don Perata, a frontrunner in Oakland's mayoral race, has accepted \$409,000 from the Prison Guards' Union since 2009 and has made it clear that he intends to increase the police budget. Jerry Brown, the Democratic candidate for governor, helped push through the "Police Officer's Bill of Rights" in the 1980s during his first term. This was cited by Mehserle to avoid speaking to BART internal affairs investigators following the murder. Not only has Brown been endorsed by organizations representing cops and screws, he has accepted \$825,000 from them for campaign ads.

Oakland Councilmembers Jean Quan and Rebecca Kaplan are striking more critical poses with calls for increased community "oversight" of the police. But "community control" of the cops will never amount to more than a symbolic gesture, and neither Quan nor Kaplan have any serious intention of trying to rein in the police. Rather than openly talking about the reality of systemic racism, or the need to punish killer cops, they recycle fairy tales about police "serving and protecting" all members of the public equally. This is the kind of pledge of allegiance to the status quo that anyone who wants to pursue a career as a Democratic politician has to make.

Councilmember Desley Brooks, who has been closely associated with the Oscar Grant movement and was one of the main speakers for the "Mothers Taking a Stand" event in September, told protesters commemorating the first anniversary of Oscar's murder outside the Fruitvale BART station that "justice might not look like what you expect!" This amounted to a not-so-veiled appeal for trusting the BART board (which had provided the stage and sound equipment for the event) and accepting the decision engineered by a "justice" system that first moved the trial to Los Angeles and then put together a jury without even a single black on it.

Brooks, along with Alameda County Supervisor Keith Carson, Minister Keith Muhammad of the Nation of Islam and various other black clergy, co-signed an "Open Letter" prior to the demonstration at 14th and Broadway on 8 July,

the day the verdict was announced, calling on citizens to “shut down outside agitators.” This statement provided political cover for the cops to carry out the mostly random arrests of more than 80 people, including Oakland School Board member Jumoke Hinton Hodge.

No Democratic politician will tell the simple truth that any sort of real “Justice for Oscar Grant” can only be won outside a racist justice system which has long validated state-sanctioned murder. To be a member of the Democratic Party is to be a cog in a political machine committed to the maintenance of a social order based on the exploitation of the working class and the special oppression of black and brown workers who are segregated at the bottom of the economic pyramid. The role of the Democrats is to keep the lid on potential mass struggle by promoting the illusion that electoral politics—organized on the principle that every dollar is equal— can offer an avenue for ordinary people to achieve real change. Reliance on the Democrats will undermine any possibility of winning “Justice for Oscar Grant.”

The police, as the front-line defenders of social inequality and capitalist privilege, are the natural enemies of workers and the oppressed. Blacks, other minorities and “illegal” immigrants face continuous intimidation, harassment and violence from cops and other agents of the state. Defenders of capitalism like to portray the police as neutral enforcers of “the law,” but everyone knows that laws are written by politicians who are bought and paid for by big business. The role of cops during major labor disputes throughout American history has been to escort scabs, bust picket lines and even, in some cases, murder strikers. In the 1934 West Coast Maritime Strike that founded the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) the police killed seven people coast-wide, including Howard Sperry and Nicholas Bordoise in San Francisco.

In 2003, Oakland police fired wooden bullets and tear gas without warning at ILWU members and anti-war protesters at the Port of Oakland. It later came out that the California Anti-Terrorism Information Center had been intercepting dockers’ emails prior to the protest. A few weeks ago, under the guise of “national security,” the FBI raided anti-war activists in Minneapolis, Chicago, Michigan and North Carolina, absurdly claiming that supporters of the Freedom Road Socialist Organization and the Arab-American Action Network are “terrorists”

because they solidarize with the Colombian FARC guerrillas and the Palestinians.

The bureaucratic leadership of the labor movement eagerly welcomes the affiliation of police “unions.” The International Union of Police Associations has belonged to the AFL-CIO since 1979. In a 12 May 2009 letter to the Labor Council, the president of the San Francisco Police Officers’ Association, reported that in the previous year his organization had donated \$25,000 “to the labor community and members of the San Francisco Labor Council for everything ranging from golf tournaments to installation dinners.”

The ILWU’s San Francisco Local 10 Constitution stipulates that no cop can be admitted to the union. This is a policy that should be adopted by every self-respecting union: *cops out of the labor movement!* Local 10’s initiative in launching today’s port shutdown and labor-community rally to demand justice for Oscar Grant provides a glimpse of the enormous impact a militant, politically-conscious labor movement could have in waging the struggle against racism and all other forms of social oppression.

Whatever sentence Mehserle gets on 5 November, it won’t be enough to pay for his crime. Effective struggle against the racist social order that permits such outrages starts by breaking with the Democratic political agents who administer it, as well as the armed thugs who “serve and protect” it. A labor movement led by people tied to the ruling class will never be able to launch a serious struggle to advance the interests of its members, much less other victims of capitalist injustice.

In the end, the only way to secure justice for Oscar Grant and the thousands of others murdered by racist cops over the years is by breaking up the existing police force and all the rest of the capitalist apparatus of repression. This requires a social revolution to expropriate the ruling elites and establish a collectively-run, democratically-planned economy in which all important decisions are made, not by a tiny handful of ultra-wealthy individuals, but by workers’ councils organized on the principle that those who labor should rule. The International Bolshevik Tendency is committed to the struggle to build a party capable of leading such a revolution and opening the way to establishing an egalitarian, socialist regime in every country on the planet.

***Cops out of the the labor movement!
Break with the Democrats—
Build a revolutionary workers’ party!***

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