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Torture and death in America's prisons

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Viewed from the high-rise multi-million-dollar apartments lining the South side of New York's Central Park, colloquially referred to as Billionaires' Row, Rikers Island looms just over the East River. The sprawling island prison complex, which warehouses over 12,000 inmates in squalor and misery, lies between Manhattan, home to a fifth of America's billionaires, and the Bronx, where half of all children live in households that do not have enough to eat.

"There's lots of brutality... Horrible brutality," the former director of mental health services at Rikers told the *New York Times*. On Monday, the newspaper reported, based on a review of internal prison documents, that over a single eleven-month period, 129 inmates were beaten so severely by prison guards that their injuries were "beyond the capacity of doctors at the jail's clinics to treat." In four out of five cases, the prisoners were beaten after they had been handcuffed.

The *Times* article describes blood-splattered examination room walls and inmates bound and beaten unconscious with brass knuckles, even as medical staff begged the guards to stop. This is not happening in some remote "third world" dictatorship, but in the financial center of world capitalism. All the brutality of class relations in America, where an oligarchy of a few tens of thousands gorges itself while condemning millions to misery, is expressed in America's teeming prisons.

Rikers Island is the rule, not the exception. Last month, the *Miami Herald* ran an interview with an inmate who recounted how he had been roused by guards early in the morning to clean up “large chunks of human skin” that had peeled off of Darren Rainey, a 50-year-old inmate scalded to death the previous night by guards at Miami’s Dade Correctional Institution.

The guards had turned one of the prison’s showers into a torture chamber, controlled from a nearby mop closet. They made a regular practice of locking their victims in the shower, laughing, cracking jokes, and asking, “Is it hot enough for you?”

Over the July 4th weekend, three more bodies were found in Florida state prisons under mysterious circumstances, bringing the total number of in-custody prison deaths currently under investigation in Florida to ten.

Such incidents, widespread despite being only occasionally and superficially reported in the press, make a complete mockery of America’s pretensions to being a model of democracy and defender of democratic rights around the world.

A large share of those who are killed or tortured in US prisons are mentally ill or handicapped. According to one BBC investigation, “More than 80 people with mental health problems have died as a result of abuse or neglect in US jails since 2003.”

The report notes that there are more than a million people with mental health problems in US prisons. Due in part to reduced government funding for mental health, correctional facilities hold up to 95 percent of the institutionalized mentally ill population in the United States.

Conditions are emerging in America reminiscent of the debtors’ prisons of Dickensian England. Last month, a 55-year-old mother of seven died in prison while serving a two-day sentence for failing to pay truancy fines imposed because her children missed too many days of school. She was one of tens of thousands of poor people who are put in jail for failing to pay fines or other court costs.

In the United States, every social problem, whether gun violence or domestic abuse, is treated as a policing problem and reason for imposing longer sentences and hiring more police. The US imprisons more people than all other developed countries combined, in a sprawling prison system that sweeps up hundreds of thousands of people every year.

The latest revelations of torture and murder in US prisons touch on just one aspect of the intimidation, violence and brutality inflicted every day by police in America. Since 2010, the Albuquerque Police Department has killed 26 people, including James Boyd, a mentally ill homeless man whose killing sparked nationwide outrage. Last week, it was reported that the Albuquerque Police Department was purchasing at least 350 more assault rifles similar to those used to kill Boyd.

According to official statistics, the police on average commit between one and two “justifiable homicides” every day in the United States. Over the July 4th weekend, police in Chicago shot five people, two of whom died.

Night-time, no-knock police raids have become increasingly prevalent in the United States, with over 100 raids by SWAT teams taking place every 24 hours. Last month, the American Civil Liberties Union reported that the Defense Department has transferred more than \$4.3 billion in military assets to police departments, including helicopters and armored vehicles.

The growth of police violence is an expression of the brutalization of society amid soaring social inequality and an endless and escalating series of wars. While the wealth of the country's billionaires has more than doubled since 2008, workers' wages are being slashed and social programs gutted. In Detroit, which once had the highest standard of living of any American city, thousands of the city's residents have had water to their homes shut off, while the city's retirees are seeing their pensions slashed to pay off the city's millionaire bondholders.

Police violence currently targets the poorest and most vulnerable elements of society, including the homeless and mentally ill. But these practices are being prepared for use against a far broader section of the population amid the growth of popular opposition to inequality and war.

This is part of the broader attack on democratic rights. The president defends his "right" to order the assassination of American citizens, the CIA steals documents from the Senate with impunity, and Americans' most intimate personal data is collected, stored, analyzed and read by the intelligence agencies. As the trappings of democracy fall away, the dictatorship of the financial elite over society becomes more brutal, naked and open.

Inequality, war, and police violence are not blemishes on an otherwise healthy social order. Rather, they are expressions of the intractable crisis of the capitalist system itself, and the inevitable outcome of growing poverty and misery on one hand and the enormous concentration of wealth on the other.

The only alternative to this state of affairs is the organization of a mass socialist movement of the working class and establishment of a workers' government.