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Tens of thousands join protests against police killings in the US

By Joseph Kishore

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Tens of thousands of protesters participated in demonstrations against police violence in New York City, Washington, DC and other US cities on Saturday.



A section of the demonstration in New York City

In New York, at least 50,000 gathered at Washington Square Park and marched through the streets of Manhattan. In Washington, DC, 25,000 participated in a protest that far exceeded the expectations of the organizers, including the National Action Network, led by Democratic Party operative Al Sharpton. Some 3,500 participated in a demonstration in Oakland, California.

The mass demonstrations are an expression of growing popular outrage over the reign of police violence in the United States. This anger has been compounded by the recent decisions of heavily manipulated grand juries not to charge police officer Daniel Pantaleo for choking to death Eric Garner in New York City in July, or Darren Wilson for fatally shooting Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri in August. Both Garner and Wilson were unarmed when they were killed.

Protesters who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* denounced not only police killings, but also the broader assault on democratic rights in the United States and its connection to military violence abroad and social inequality at home.

“The poor in this country are so oppressed that cops can just kill an innocent person,” one protester in New York told the WSWS. Another, in Washington, DC, denounced President Obama’s declaration, following the decision not to indict Wilson, that the US is “a nation of laws.” “Nothing is further from the truth,” he said. “The government doesn’t abide by any laws.”

Family members of the victims of police violence participated in both demonstrations. The demonstration in DC included Lesley McSpadden and Michael Brown Sr., the parents of Michael Brown; Gwen Carr, the mother of Eric Garner; and Samaira Rice, the mother of Tamir Rice, the 12-year old boy shot and killed by police in Cleveland, Ohio in November as he played with a toy gun.

Protest organizers in New York, DC and other cities sought to channel popular anger behind the Democratic Party. The demonstration in Washington was organized by Sharpton in close collaboration with the Obama administration and took on the character of an officially-sanctioned event.

Earlier this month, Obama met with Sharpton to coordinate their response to outrage over police violence. This was followed by the White House’s announcement of a “Task Force on 21st Century Policing,” headed by Philadelphia Police Commissioner Charles Ramsey, who has a long history of attacking democratic rights.

In addition to Sharpton himself, Democratic Party operatives who spoke at the Washington protest included Newark, New Jersey Mayor Ras Baraka; US Congressman Al Green from Texas, a member of the Black Congressional Caucus; Cornell Brooks, the president and CEO of the NAACP; and Mary Pat Hector, the National Action Youth Director from Atlanta, Georgia.

There was no mention of Obama from any of the speakers. Nor was there any mention of the recently released report on CIA torture. The demonstration was held only two days after Obama’s CIA director, John Brennan, gave a press conference at CIA headquarters defending the agency’s “enhanced interrogation” program.

Police violence was presented by the speakers entirely as a question of racism, obscuring the more fundamental class questions and covering up the role of the Obama administration in the build-up and militarization of the police as a critical component of the apparatus of domestic repression.

The protest was centered on the call for the Republican-controlled Congress to pass various minor reforms, a maneuver aimed at deflecting attention from the role of the White House and the Democrats. While declaring, “We are not anti-police,” Sharpton urged greater federal intervention in state-level investigations of police killings. He also called for an expanded role for special prosecutors in making decisions on indictments.

“We need legislation and intervention to save us from state grand juries,” Sharpton declared, adding that he was “inspired when I saw a black man put his hand on the bible and become president.”

In fact, the federal government has played the central role in promoting the militarization of police throughout the country, a process that has been expanded under Obama. Earlier this month, the White House fully endorsed the network of military programs that have funneled billions of dollars in combat equipment to local police departments throughout the country.

The wave of police killings is part of the process of transforming local police departments into paramilitary organizations, tasked with policing the unprecedented levels of social inequality in the United States.