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USA

A Missouri city erupts against police murder

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Nicole Colson looks at why the police killing of an unarmed teen in a small Missouri city is having reverberations around the country.

That was the heartbreaking message Louis Head wrote on a piece of cardboard and held up for the community to see after his stepson, Michael Brown, was shot down by a cop in the streets of Ferguson, Mo., on August 9.

The death of the 18-year-old ignited the bitter outrage of a community that says police brutality directed at Black men is all-too-common in this majority-African American suburb outside St. Louis, leading to angry protests two nights in a row.

Mainstream media outlets focused on the damage done to property during the demonstrations, but for millions of people around the country, horror at the police execution of another unarmed Black youth—and the sense that it's time something is done about police violence—were the dominant feelings.

According to the police version of events, a shop owner reported that someone allegedly matching Brown's description shoplifted from their store. Later, an officer—who still had not been named when this report was written—stopped Brown and a friend as they walked down a street, say the cops, and Brown attempted to push the officer into his car and tried to grab for the officer's gun.

Police say one shot was fired from the officer's gun during the struggle. Then, after the unarmed Brown fled, the cop fired several shots at Brown, fatally wounding the teen.

Witnesses tell a completely different story. Dorian Johnson, who was walking with Michael Brown, and Piaget Crenshaw, a bystander who witnessed the shooting, told Fox 2 News that after confronting Brown and Johnson for walking in the street, the officer began assaulting Brown by choking him, and trying to pull Brown into his squad car. His weapon fired at least once at this point.

When both teens ran, the officer then fired a second shot. Johnson told reporters at the scene, "[The officer] shot again and once my friend felt that shot, he turned around and put his hands in the air and started to get down, and the officer still approached with his weapon drawn and fired several more shots."

"We weren't causing no harm to nobody," Johnson said. "We had no weapons on us at all."

Brown's family and friends learned of his death because his lifeless body laid in the street for some four hours while police "investigated"—or tried to get their stories straight about a case of cold-blooded murder, to judge from the eyewitness accounts.

As the St. Louis Post-Dispatch reported, Brown's friends "saw photos of him lying in the street on Canfield Drive where his body remained for hours. Some joined the crowds of mourners and protesters who had gathered there since the shooting in protest of how Brown had died: Black, unarmed and from multiple gunshots."

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THE DEATH of yet another young Black man at the hands of police caused community outrage to boil over in the days following the killingâ€”though this happened only after what many call a deliberate police provocation.

Black residents who gathered for a vigil on the evening of Brown's death in front of the police station were met with a heavy-handed response. Dozens of police had been called in from the surrounding towns, and they were dressed in riot gear, many holding shotguns. The crowd chanted, "The people, united, will never be defeated," and some residents held up their hands to show police that they were unarmed, shouting, "Don't shoot me" at the cops.

Anger in the community built, not only in response to the official police story about Brown's death, but to the media portrayals of Brownâ€”who was to begin his first day of college on Monday.

As TheRoot.com noted, many media outlets chose to use a picture of an unsmiling Brown flashing a peace sign, which some labeled a "gang sign." As Yesha Callahan put it:

You'd be hard-pressed to find mainstream media showing Brown at his high school graduation or with members of his family. Ironically, all of those photos exist courtesy of Brown's Facebook page. Unfortunately, because of Ferguson police, we'll never be able to see a photo of Brown attending his first day of college today.

The following night, August 10, hundreds of protesters gathered for another candlelight vigil. When some took to the streets, chanting "No justice, no peace," they were confronted by hundreds of police in riot gear, armed with attack dogs.

It was widely reported that Black residents began chanting, "Kill the police!" before engaging in what the media generally termed a "riot," including the looting of some local stores. But many people who said they participated in the demonstration took to social media to insist that protesters actually were chanting not "Kill the police," but "No justice, no peace!" Many also stated that protesters were deliberately provoked by the heavy police presence.

At some point, some protesters reportedly began looting and spray-painting several stores, with one convenience store set on fire. Police eventually used tear gas to disperse them.

THIS SO-called riot was an understandable explosion of anger at the rampant racism Black residents of Ferguson face every day, especially at the hands of police.

DeAndre Smith defiantly told Kim Bell of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch that he had participated in the protest the night before:

This is exactly what's supposed to happen when an injustice is happening in your communityâ€”when you have kids getting killed for nothing... You don't have to kill him. He didn't have a gun in his hands. Why'd you kill him? You said Trayvon had a hoodie on, you didn't know what was going on with him. [Michael Brown] didn't have a hoodie on, and his hands were up when you shot him. So what's your excuse?

Smith went on to explain why he was in the streets when the so-called "rioting" took placeâ€”and provided a window into the anger many were feeling:

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I was out here standing side by side with the community. I don't think it's over, honestly. I think we just got a taste of what fighting back means. "In-sane" Louisiana—the last state to abolish slavery. Do they still think they have power over certain things? I believe so, because they're doing stuff like this and getting away with it...I don't think it's over honestly, I just think they got a taste of what fighting back means.

Two young men who had been part of the crowds police stopped from coming onto the scene expressed similar sentiments to KMBC reporter Brenda Washington.

"I believe that it needed to happen," said one. "I believe that they're too much worried about what's happening to their stores and commerce and everything—they're not worried about the murder. They're not worried about the senseless death. That's what I'm worried about."

"I just think what happened was necessary to show the police that they don't run everything," the second added.

For African Americans, the stories of murders like the killing of Michael Brown are terrifyingly commonplace—taking place once every 36 hours, according to a report by the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement produced after Trayvon Martin was killed in 2012.

Days after Brown died, there was another horror story, this one from a suburb of Dayton, Ohio. John Crawford was shot and killed by police as he talked on the phone to his pregnant girlfriend from the aisles of a Walmart store—because he was carrying a toy gun, and that alarmed two other shoppers.

THE PROTESTS in Ferguson are an expression of deep frustration at years of institutional racism and police brutality that never seems to get any better—or even paid attention to. In an editorial, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch cited statistics showing racial disparities have been getting worse in Missouri, on an almost yearly basis:

Last year, for the 11th time in the 14 years that data has been collected, the disparity index that measures potential racial profiling by law enforcement in the state got worse. Black Missourians were 66 percent more likely in 2013 to be stopped by police, and Blacks and Hispanics were both more likely to be searched, even though the likelihood of finding contraband was higher among whites...

While he wasn't driving a car when he was pulled over and shot, the concept is the same: Nearly every Black man in America has a story of being pulled over, stopped or harassed as a young person for doing something that a white teenager would never imagine might end in being on the wrong end of a police officer's gun. Driving While Black. Walking While Black. Wearing a Hoodie While Black.

In Ferguson, the city where Michael died, the police in 2013 pulled over Blacks at a 37 percent higher rate than whites compared to their relative populations. Black drivers were twice as likely to be searched and twice as likely to be arrested compared to white drivers.

Just three of the 53 members of the Ferguson Police Department are Black—even though two-thirds of the city's population of around 21,000 are Black, according to Reuters.

Antonio French, a St. Louis city councilman, told the New York Times that he found the official police story "hard to

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believe." He added that it was the heavy-handed response of local officials that was responsible for the anger expressed on Sunday night.

"It's a textbook example of how not to handle the situation," he said. "Ferguson has a white government and a white mayor, but a large Black population. This situation has brought out whatever rifts were between that minority community and the Ferguson government."

In fact, back in November 2013, the Missouri chapter of the NAACP filed a federal civil rights complaint against the St. Louis County police, alleging racial profiling against Black citizens and racism in police hiring practices.

And the response of then-county Police Chief Tim Fitch? He complained to the Post-Dispatch that an accusation of racial profiling was "career ending" for an officer.

It's hard to believe anyone, no matter how steeped in law-and-order propaganda, could believe that complaint, given the statistics on, for example, racial profiling in the NYPD's stop-and-frisk program. But Fitch went on to denounce the local NAACP president for having "no regard for the facts and how it's going to affect their lives and their careers."

At a protest on Monday, hundreds of people turned out in front of the Ferguson police station to demand a murder charge against the unknown officer who killed Michael Brown. Police arrested at least 15 people, as protesters held their hands in the air as if they were surrendering and chanted, "Stop the killer cops."

Meanwhile, a Twitter campaign using the hashtag #NMOS14 is leading to local gatherings around the country for a National Moment of Silence to honor Michael Brown. No doubt there will be other protests as the struggle to win justice for Brown's family unfolds—and further powerful social media campaigns like #IfTheyGunnedMeDown, where African American youth are posting two contrasting pictures to draw attention to the fact that the media has been using a picture of the college-student-to-be Michael Brown that makes him seem like a gang member.

This killing in a little-known Missouri town has reverberated across the country precisely because it's a crime so familiar to African Americans—from New York City, where Eric Garner was choked to death by police less than a month ago; to Sanford, Fla., where Trayvon Martin was murdered by racist vigilante George Zimmerman in 2012; and so many other towns and cities in between.

As SocialistWorker.org's Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor commented:

There have been many anniversaries from the civil rights era celebrated this year, including Freedom Summer and the Civil Rights Act that ended Jim Crow in the South. But this year also marks the 50th anniversary of the first wave of urban rebellions that served notice on the U.S. that the rights of citizenship without justice and equality was not real freedom.

From Rochester to Harlem and Philadelphia, African Americans rebelled against racism, injustice and equality and exposed the fundamental lie that is "American democracy"—an important exercise given that the U.S. was carpet bombing Vietnam in the name of "democracy."

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Today, 50 years later, the U.S. government is bombing Iraq for freedom and funding Israel's massacre in Gaza in the name of freedom—while at home, the police are hunting and murdering Black men in the streets for the crime of being Black. Mike Brown was to begin college this week. Instead, his family will be planning his funeral.

Fifty years after Freedom Summer and after Jim Crow, the mass of Black Americans still are not free. Fifty years later, riots and rebellion remain the voice of the voiceless yearning and demanding to be heard

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