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On Racial Profiling and the Michigan State Police Report

Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin

A couple of weekends ago, the Southwest Michigan Coalition Against Racism and Police Brutality conducted a community workshop in Kalamazoo on racial profiling. From the questions that followed after my presentation, one thing that stood out is that although we hear about all these terms in the media like "driving while Black", "police brutality", "racial profiling", most of us don't really know what all this means.

Racial profiling, the systematic use of police detention and traffic stops of a racial or cultural group, without probable cause or at least some reasonable suspicion of the actual commission of a crime, is a form of racism and police brutality, not just "bad policing by rogue cops". It is social control of the Black community by police agents of the government, not by some individual with a badge who just doesn't like Blacks.

This is important because the Michigan State police recently issued its first report on traffic stops for the first quarter of the year 2000. The report included almost 135,000 drivers, and included most state police posts all over Michigan. Although the report

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itself clearly showed that disproportionate numbers of Black males and Latinos were subjected to traffic stops and ticketing, the cops claim otherwise. "At this point, we do not believe we have any problems of profiling". Of course, they do, they are just in denial. We, on the other hand, cannot afford such escapism. Every time they stop us, our lives are in danger.

When they stop Blacks or Latinos, it's not just "your license and registration please", but rather the belief that they have stopped drug dealers, bank robbers, or other criminals. To the cops, we are "born criminals" or a menace to society anyway, so we are subjected to "close policing".

Black people, engaged in no other "crime" than going to and from work, have been subjected to life threatening gestures like drawn guns, to race baiting comments, and to illegal searches of their cars and their person. They have been beaten, shot and even killed all over the country in many of these chance encounters. So, to hear the state cops dismiss it all in such a blase' fashion, and say that "we don't have a profiling problem" is sick delusion and a political coverup.

What caused the current rise in cases of racial profiling? The rise of racism in American society since the 1970's is one factor. Clearly with the defeat of the civil rights and Black power agenda after the 1960's and the rise of social conservatives in the government, and especially the Reagan Administration, which outright attacked civil rights gains, it laid a climate for racial antagonism among the white population. Reagan's right-wing public attacks on Affirmative Action policies, among civil rights issues generally, encouraged the police establishment to criminalize the entire Black population, but especially the youth.

Another factor is the rise of the war on drugs, and the new drug laws giving cops new powers of stop, search and arrest. These powers have been used by the government to virtually suspend the 4th amendment to the Constitution, which was enacted to prohibit illegal search and seizure. In most American cities since the 1970's,

paramilitary police forces roam the streets of inner city Black and latino communities, kicking in the doors of alleged or suspected drug dealers, and intimidating the Black population in the process. But because there was no major outcry, the police resorted to phase two, and that was to create a racial profile of drug dealers as Black and Hispanic males. This allowed them to stop the suspected criminals on highways and city streets before they could "ply their trade". If most people in such sweeps were innocent, that's too bad, because the cops are just doing their jobs. So everyone should understand.

Finally there is the rise of a police state to consider. How a government use its police is a real determinant as to whether it is really a democratic regime. No one can deny that the rise of police brutality and police murder in the USA, where upwards of five hundred to a thousand persons are killed each year by the national police forces, is a dangerous development. The fact that the government refuses to use existing civil rights laws to put down police brutality, or punish its perpetrators should tell us that a new game plan is being played out. The government is using or allowing brutal and killer cops as a social policy measure. "Blacks get killed, the cops go free; that to the rich is democracy".

One thing the Michigan State police report shows us is that we cannot allow the government or the police to decide how or if they will deal with DWB/racial profiling issues. The Black community and anti-racists must get themselves organized and press the issue. We must not just be satisfied with new laws that call for "studies" of whether or to what extent the cops are stopping Black or non-white motorists, we must demand it stop now! We have to demand community control of the police, and call on community groups to monitor police operations at the neighborhood level, where most precincts are located. But most importantly, we call on black communities and others victimized by racial profiling by the cops to protest all police crimes and to fight for human rights. This is one of the most important civil rights issue of our times.