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USA

Why We Can't Breathe

- IV Online magazine - 2015 - IV479 - December 2014 -

Publication date: Friday 26 December 2014

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THE BRUTAL INJUSTICE and the social eruption in Ferguson, followed by nationwide outrage over the on-video murder of Eric Garner and police impunity, are suddenly reshaping the U.S. political climate. “We Can’t Breathe” and “Hands Up Don’t Shoot” express the righteous anger, especially of young people of color, in response to an unresponsive system — a system that’s politically blocked and utterly indifferent to the desperate conditions facing those at the bottom in capitalist America.

The targeting and routine police abuse and humiliation of African-American youth, and communities of color in general, is an everyday manifestation of the deeper politics of repression and economic austerity that throw those communities onto the scrap heap. Mass incarceration, police impunity and the epidemic of killings by “law enforcement” are only the visible and inevitable products of an unfolding social disaster. And it’s also about imperialism: A system that tortures prisoners abroad will also murder people at home.

“We Can’t Breathe” is certainly about murderous police violence, but also so much more — the entire matrix of structural racism in the United States economy and its gerrymandered, voter-suppressing political system. That’s why the dying gasps of Eric Garner have become the banner of a new civil and human rights uprising, perhaps even more dramatically than “We Are the 99%” drove the Occupy movement’s spirit of protest against the financial gangsters.

In some ways, this new movement can be viewed in an international context alongside such diverse upheavals as the pro-democracy occupations in Hong Kong, indigenous peoples’ resistance to oil pipelines and the destruction of their lands and forests, the early mobilizations of the Arab Spring, the current social explosion in Mexico over the mass murder of students by police and drug gangs, and many others — a much bigger theme that will require a separate discussion.

In the U.S. setting, this issue of *Against the Current* covers a number of topics including police violence, mass incarceration and the incredible rise in murderous white racism and Black resistance in the World War I period. It’s also important to see killings by police in Ferguson, Staten Island, Cleveland and elsewhere, and the magnificent upsurge in response, as the real-life context in which we need to examine the November 2014 midterm election results and what they may portend.

The right wing is taking over Congress, but people in the streets are moving independently of the political establishment — and in the process forcing some action from Barack Obama who, during most of his presidency, has been notoriously cautious at best in speaking out on racial injustice.

In fact, the entire pattern of the Democratic Party’s behavior in regards to the social crisis has been a sad spectacle while it had the chance to act. When the Democrats held sizeable majorities in the U.S. Congress following Barack Obama’s election in 2008, they made precious little use of them beyond passing the badly flawed Affordable Care Act.

Banksters who brought down the financial system went unpunished; millions of families facing crushing debts on their “underwater” mortgages went with little if any assistance; rhetoric of “comprehensive immigration reform” hid the reality of record mass deportations.

African-American communities devastated by the Great Recession and decades of structural racism got no help at all; teachers who poured out in support of Obama's election were rewarded by being kicked in the teeth with "Race to the Top" and the spreading for-profit charter school plague. Any wonder "we can't breathe"?

Immigration, Pipeline Battles & "War Too

Those initial Obama "change you can believe in" promises evaporated long ago. Finally, after the midterms, the president got around to his long-promised executive action on a partial immigration reform. It's inadequate, cumbersome and above all late in the game &" and Obama and his Republican opponents both neglect to mention the fundamental realities behind the immigration crisis.

The president's victim-blaming phrase &" that the undocumented should be allowed to "make amends" for their illegal status &" is particularly odious. Quite the contrary, it's the United States that hasn't made amends to the countries it's destroyed: by the U.S.-sponsored genocidal repression and wars in Central America in the 1970 and &"80s; the insane "war on drugs" that has bred the murderous narco-syndicates of Mexico, Colombia and El Salvador while also producing mass incarceration in U.S. communities; and topping it off, those much-praised bipartisan "free trade agreements" wiping out family farmers in Mexico. They can't breathe!

Still, Obama's promised deferral of deportation for perhaps four or five million longterm undocumented immigrants with U.S. citizen children (perhaps 40% of the undocumented population in this country) is enough to stir the pot of vicious racism that's the main political asset of today's Republican right wing. As the Republicans take over Congress, Obama's immigration action will be one of the looming battles.

That president Obama has taken any action on immigration, and promised at least to do something about police militarization and brutality, is testament to the bravery, determination and independent struggles of the communities affected and especially of young people. On immigration as in the atrocities in Ferguson and Staten Island, it's street heat, not the two-party electoral cesspool, that's the driving force for change.

The other two flash points are the Keystone XL tar sands pipeline &" a leading symbol of the environmental forced death march on which capitalism is driving the planet &" and interlocking crises and wars in the Middle East. After repeatedly kicking the Keystone XL decision down the road until after the midterms, president Obama is now caught in a political tar sands trap of his own making, with a chunk of his own party ready to oppose him. ("Repealing Obamacare" will remain a rightwing slogan, but no longer a real legislative objective given that the private health insurance industry is now reaping big profits from it.)

Grand Theft Election 2016?

The Democrats took an electoral butt-kicking, and they've earned it. While the Democrats moved to the corporate center, the Republicans galloped to the right, openly proclaiming their intention to wreck the Obama presidency. Although receiving a slim 52% majority of the votes in the midterm House of Representatives elections, the Republicans will now solidly control both houses.

What's more important, the GOP is essentially guaranteed control of the House in 2016 and probably beyond, with "sure winners in 373 districts, leaving only 14 percent of the House even potentially in play." Thanks to gerrymandered districts drawn up by state legislatures following the 2010 elections, the Republicans were able to

take control of the House in 2012 with only 48% of the overall votes, and would have maintained their majority in 2014 with as little as 45%. [1]

Despite the reactionary state of U.S. bourgeois party politics, there are indications that the popular mood, when able to express itself, is not swinging rightward. In New York state the Green Party gubernatorial ticket of Howie Hawkins and Brian Jones drew a more than respectable 4.8% vote – in the process, outrunning the Working Families Party which put the wretched incumbent Andrew Cuomo on its ballot line.

In Wisconsin, the independent socialist candidate for Milwaukee County sheriff, bus driver and union activist Angela Walker, drew a very impressive 20% of the vote. [2] In the embattled California town of Richmond, a three or four-million dollar smear campaign by Chevron Corporation to retake control of the mayor's office and City Council was beaten back by the activist energy and acumen of the Richmond Progressive Alliance. [3]

We don't claim that there's some kind of invisible mass swing toward the left; indeed, the hollow results of Obama's promises have produced widespread cynicism about the possibilities of positive change. But it's not that the people of the United States are voting for the politics of racism, war and global warming denial; it's primarily the matrix of the two capitalist parties and mountains of billionaire-driven political campaign cash that can make it look that way.

Meanwhile, not content with the rigging of the House of Representatives, and the whole raft of voter suppression laws that have already disenfranchised hundreds of thousands of mostly poor and disproportionately people of color, rightwing Republicans are playing around with an exciting new game of "Grand Theft Election."

There isn't space to detail the scheme here, but as the nasty, brutish and long 2016 electoral cycle already looms, it's being proposed first in the state legislature in Michigan, a state that tends to vote Democratic in presidential elections. Republicans currently control its state government, and are proposing that Michigan's 16 electoral votes should be divided proportionally in presidential elections. The obvious purpose of the scheme, if spread to enough such states, is to steal a close presidential election – inasmuch as no Republican state legislature is going to suggest such a scheme in states that vote Republican.

Certainly, the Electoral College should be abolished and presidential elections decided by the straight-up popular vote. (Mainly, it's basically impossible to steal a national election that way, as the 2000 election was stolen in Florida for George W. Bush with such ruinous results for America and the world.) But that's hardly the right wing's intent here.

Can We Breathe?

The fireworks between Capitol Hill and the White House, and the internal battles within each capitalist party, shouldn't distract us from a basic reality of how positive change happens. There are real-life examples of movements winning gains by organizing and fighting independently. That's the example now being set by the eruption against murderous police, and by the Dreamers who stood up "undocumented and unafraid," marched and sat in at Obama campaign offices, and ultimately forced this administration to quit stalling and do something – late and insufficient as it is.

Also, as we've noted on previous occasions, the LGBT movement has made real gains – under Republican as well as Democratic administrations – at least in the civil rights arenas of anti-discrimination and marriage equality. Enormous unfinished struggles remain, particular for transgender and marginalized Queer people outside the

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economic “mainstream,” but it’s remarkable how overt gay-bashing has faded as a vote-winning strategy in such a short time.

Struggles around a living wage have swept through states and cities — four localities voted for raising minimum wages in November — and are challenging corporate giants like Walmart and the fast-food industry. The Occupy movement put rampant inequality on the political agenda, and despite the repression of that upsurge, the Fight for 15, anti-foreclosure housing campaigns and other local efforts have kept it there.

We also note that while some mainstream environmental organizations are stuffed with corporate and foundation cash and have trimmed their programs and policies accordingly, there’s a powerful grassroots pushback against not just the Keystone XL pipeline but the whole ecocidal tar sands drilling project, encouraged and inspired by Native communities and activist resistance in Canada.

Anger over shale oil and natural gas fracking is deepening, as shown by the vote in Denton, Texas to ban it — although it’s alarmingly true that fracking is expanding, globally as well as in the United States, more rapidly than the movement has been able to contain it.

In the halls of power, “We Can’t Breathe” where the cards are stacked and the votes are rigged. As always and now more than ever, from Ferguson to the fracking fields it’s the movements that hold the progressive energy and our hope for survival.

[Against The Current 174](#), January/February 2015.

[1] See Rob Ritchie, [The Nation](#).

[2] See our [article](#).

[3] See “Why Did Progressives Win Richmond?” by Mike Parker, [Richmond Progressive Alliance](#).