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USA

# The United States in 2023

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### **TWO YEARS AFTER Donald Trump’s attempted “insurrection” and following the November 2022 midterm elections, the general condition of politics in the United States is described by Kim Moody: [“Stuck in the Mud, Sinking to the Right”](#).**

Here I will focus on recent events that help illustrate the trend: murderous police brutality, our epidemic of gun violence, abortion rights, and a significant although limited upturn in grassroots labor energy.

The savage beating and murder of Tyre Nichols, a 29-year old African American man – an avid skateboarder and photographer who worked at Fed Ex - by five police officers in Memphis, Tennessee on January 7, 2023 is being compared to the 1991 beating Rodney King at the hands of four Los Angeles police.

The five Black officers were part of the elite 40-cop macho unit, Scorpion, formed in 2021 to aggressively patrol “high-crime” areas of the city. It has now been hastily disbanded.

When four views of the police encounter – police body cameras and a bird’s eye view from a stationary video - with Nichols were released to the public on January 27, those brave enough to watch the hour-long videos could witness the sustained beating, hear Nichols’ pleas and watch the five officers alternately complain and brag over their job.

Even when Tyre Nichols was propped up on a patrol car, unconscious, and two medical responders arrive, they fail to provide aid. An ambulance arrives only 24-minutes later as the group mill around.

The five have been fired and subsequently charged; a sixth officer has been placed on administrative leave and the responders are under investigation. The police chief announced the disbanding of the Scorpion unit, and city officials have called the beating a crime against humanity.

While an estimated 25 million internationally demonstrated after the 2020 murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota, demanding an end to police violence, it continues. In fact, federal aid has only fattened police budgets. The Scorpion unit in Memphis was set up after Floyd’s death.

While Washington does not track and report police violence, websites such as Mapping Police Violence, and national newspapers, such as the Washington Post, do. In 2022 police murdered 1,176 people, disproportionately people of color. [1]

In the case of Tyre Nichols the five police officers who shouted, cursed, beat and left him to die were African American men of approximately the same age. Many of the residents of Memphis, a majority Black city, expressed horror and sadness that men in the same community could be so aggressive, so heartless.

But racial disparities are not about the race of the officers, but the race of the victim. Even when officers receive sensitivity training or the police force is majority people of color, the dynamic of racial profiling remains. In encounters with police, African American men are three times more likely to be killed than white men. African Americans identified as girls and women also suffer disproportionately in comparison to white women. The murder rate holds true for Latinx and Indigenous people.

Police conduct hundreds of thousands of traffic stops every year. They pull over drivers for broken taillights, running a red light, driving on a suspended license, reckless driving, having a dangling air freshener or tinted windows. Their trainers and tactical guides emphasize that these interactions are more dangerous for police than almost any other.

After absorbing this training, police are quick to assert control over these interactions. Almost 10% of the death-by-cop encounters begin as the driver is stopped for a traffic violation as happened in the case of Tyre Nichols. Black drivers are disproportionately targeted; figures show at least one African American driver killed somewhere in the country every week.

Whenever police come face to face with civilians there is a danger of aggressive policing. It is well known that Black parents instruct their children, if stopped, to obey police instructions. Police justification for shooting, beating, pepper spraying or suffocating a civilian is that they did so fearing for their lives.

From what has been shown in the Tyre Nichols case, he attempts to follow multiple instructions. A New York Times investigation of the video footage stated: "Police officers unleashed a barrage of commands that were confusing, conflicting and sometimes even impossible to obey." [\[2\]](#)

Other face-to-face situations - when police intervene in domestic disputes or where a person is having a mental health breakdown - are also likely to escalate as officers assert their power. Whether or not someone who is mentally ill has a pocket knife or gun, they are 16 times more likely to end up dead.

Although records indicate that only one-third of all police interactions involve serious "crime," politicians describe police work as keeping criminals off the streets. It is not surprising that when Congress passed the American Rescue Plan in March 2021 to aid state and local programs during the pandemic, at least \$10 billion was allotted to "public safety programs." Although difficult to evaluate the various "prevention" programs, at least \$1 billion was for hiring and retaining police officers.

In mid-May 2022, President Joe Biden urged states and cities to use all unspent money from the previous year's \$1.9 trillion Covid relief package to go to additional crime prevention programs and the hiring more police. This was to be done quickly since supposedly [crime rates rise over the summer](#).

It is true that police departments have been forced to purchase and deploy body cameras, and this has pierced the code of silence that used to exist when police murder occurred. More often these days police and city administration are forced to release the videos.

When Laquan McDonald, 17, was fatally shot 16 times by a Chicago officer in October 2014, the police department reported he had been behaving erratically, refused to put down a knife and lunged at police. His death was therefore "justifiable." But family and protesters kept up the demand to see a video of the incident. When a court ordered it shown, the video revealed that McDonald was walking away when he was shot.

The city had already quietly paid the McDonald family \$5 million in compensation, and the city administration of the mayor Rahm Emanuel tried to suppress the video. The United States Department of Justice subsequent investigation reported that the Chicago police had a culture of "excessive violence" especially against Black and brown suspects.

Of course the Chicago Police Department is only one of 17,985 U.S police agencies. The balkanization of police forces makes it difficult to develop a coordinated response to local police, county sheriffs, state and federal agencies.

The budget for the local police force runs roughly one-third of the total municipal budget. Not only are police heavily armed and trained, they are equipped with the latest surveillance tools including mounted cameras, facial recognition technology and ShotSpotter, a sensor which detects a gunshot-like sound, identifies the exact area and notifies the police. ShotSpotter advertises itself as leading to 27% fewer fatalities.

# The Mass Shootings Epidemic

Last year the United States had 647 mass shootings – cases in which four or more individuals were wounded or killed. This resulted in 14,000 deaths, most carried out by men isolated from family, friends, coworkers. Some shooters kill themselves in the aftermath. Their actions have been labelled as acts of despair. In January 2023, mass shootings have averaged more than one and a half per day.

The largest mass killing in 2022 was a school in Uvalde, Texas where 19 children and two teachers died. Gun manufacturers claim that “guns don’t kill people” and therefore there is no need for regulation. Politicians like to hide behind the Second Amendment of the federal constitution to claim the right to bear arms - although the obscurely worded amendment refers to “a well-regulated militia,” not individuals.

As a result, it is easier in most states to obtain a gun than to register to vote. When adding in those who are murdered or commit suicide using a firearm, the growing total nearly reaches 50,000. One third of the U.S. population owns at least one firearm, with many bought for personal protection. After every school shooting, there is a discussion about how schools should have police presence and armed teachers.

This combination of a population armed for self-protection and a militarized police force goes a long way toward explaining the violent forms a society under stress takes. Here is how Bernie Sanders compounds the stresses 63% of U.S. workers, living paycheck to paycheck, face:

Every day you are living under incredible stress –scared to death that if your car breaks down, if your kid gets sick, if your landlord raises the rent, if you get divorced or separated, if you become pregnant, if for whatever reason you lose your job, you will find yourself in the midst of a financial catastrophe.” [\[3\]](#)

Notice how alone and fearful the individual is! There is no collective in what is a world of vast and growing inequality. Half a million go bankrupt every year because of medically driven debt. The country is the only industrialized one without public health care.

# Reproductive Health and Rights

The privatized health system is a major factor in why the United States has high pre- and post-maternal mortality rates along with high infant mortality. Again, inequality matters, with disparities in access to care as well as in its quality.

Black and Native American women and children 3-to-4 times more likely to die than their white counterparts. Experts at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicate that at least 80% are preventable. Reversing these deaths

also means overcoming food insecurity and access to affordable housing that signify community support.

What is most troubling is that while maternal mortality rates have increased during the pandemic, COVID-19 is not the cause of death but only a contributing factor. But given the U.S. Supreme Court's *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*-decision voiding federal protection for the right to abortion, curtailing access to birth control and abortion in most of the Southern and Midwestern states will worsen conditions.

At the same time, the outpouring both in the streets and in voting for referenda that affirm or add reproductive freedom to state constitutions has been consistent, whether the states be considered Republican or Democratic strongholds.

In Michigan, where our successful reproductive rights referendum opened up a discussion about the broad range of services necessary for bodily autonomy. Our job is now to work to insure not just a legal right, but access. This means instructing patients with accurate information, dismantling unnecessary requirements, providing state-funded parental leaves and more.

Further, although states failed to add an Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. constitution in the 1970-90 period, many state constitutions have provisions for equal rights, the right to privacy, and due process. A number of lawsuits are currently challenging legislative bans on abortion under those provisions. On the basis of the privacy provision, South Carolina's Supreme Court voided the legislature's ban on abortion after six weeks of pregnancy.

With Congress back in session - and most state legislatures as well – a round of laws on both sides of the issue will be introduced, and some passed. While it is a minority who are against sex education, contraception and abortion, it is a fiercely dedicated minority whose coattails rightwing politicians see as an unwavering block of voters.

As cultural issues morph into political ones, the Biden administration finds itself pinned in by a House of Representatives under the control of the extreme right, if only by a handful of votes.

Kevin McCarthy traded most of his authority in order to become House Speaker. He give plum assignments to the most conspiratorial wing of the Republican Party – starting with James Comer, chair of the House Committee on Oversight and Accountability Committee and member of the House Committee on Education and Labor; Marjorie Taylor Greene, member of the House Committee on Oversight and Accountability and the House Committee on Homeland Security; Paul Gosar, member of the House Natural Resources Committee and House Committee on Oversight and Accountability; and Lauren Boebert, member of the House Committee on Oversight and Accountability and Committee on Natural Resources.

This group of far-right Republicans is not interested in passing legislation so much as investigating President Biden and his son Hunter and extracting concessions from the Democrats in order to further their Trumpian agenda.

## Labor in Motion

The most important potential events of 2023 are not legislative, but the upcoming Teamsters (IBT) contract at UPS at the end of July and the United Autoworkers Union (UAW) Big Three contracts in mid-September. In both unions rank-and-file caucuses have won important inroads and are preparing for strike preparation as they demand an end to tiered wages and benefits as well as better working conditions.

They also have in front of them the example of the railroad workers' struggle for job safety and the right to paid sick days. In that case, the Biden Administration, while admitting the justness of their demands, nonetheless imposed a contract that did not address those issues.

Aware of the treachery of the Administration, but whose unions are not under the Railway Labor Act that allows the enabled the governmental imposition of a contract, caucuses inside the Teamsters (Teamsters for a Democratic Union, TDU) and UAW (Unite All Workers for Democracy, UAWD) have been able to elect top officials who pledge to stand against the concessions the companies will demand.

With both the restructuring taking place in their industries and a recession unfolding, workers and even well-intentioned top officers will find the companies arrogantly expecting that throwing a bit of money around will guarantee they can win this round.

Currently the runoff campaign to elect the UAW President is underway, with the counting of the ballots beginning on March 1st. The Administration Caucus has been shaken by a dozen officials, all caucus members, pleading guilty to stealing from the membership or taking bribes from the companies, is also in a position of defending concessionary contracts over the past 40 years.

The Administration Caucus candidate, Ray Curry, was picked by the executive board to be the interim president when AC candidate Gary Jones pled guilty. Curry claims he has swept house and is ready to negotiate an impressive contract. He would be the first elected African American UAW President (Rory Gamble previously served in an interim capacity).

His opposition, Shawn Fain, is a skilled electrician who has held local offices and is currently an international representative who opposed the implementation of the two-tier wage system when it was first introduced in Chrysler's 2007 national agreement. Fain has pledged to work with the membership to prepare for the contract, emphasizing the need to build a more democratic union.

In the first round of the UAW election, the UAWD-backed slate won five of the 14 top seats. That included the election of Margaret Mock, the first African American woman to become the union's secretary-treasurer. In the runoff the UAWD is backing both Fain and a candidate for regional director. If both win, the AC, which has been in power since 1948 under Walter Reuther and successive presidents,, will have lost its tight grip on the leadership.

Contract negotiations will proceed on a more militant path. Even if that doesn't happen, the membership has an opening to build a more democratic union.

Ballots have been mailed to all UAW members including retirees, and are beginning to be returned to a company hired to count them. Unlike the first round, when the AC tried to ignore the election and only reach out to the folks they "trusted," this time they see that UAWD-backed candidates with a militant message resonated and they are attempting to reach a wider swath of the membership and distort Fain's record.

The UAW Bargaining Convention will take place at the end of March. That's where the leadership needs to check in with delegates about contract demands and preparation. As for the Teamsters, who elected a reform slate last year, is already working on its strike preparation.

These two unions, with militant traditions, a new leadership and caucuses determined to confront the corporate elite, offer the possibility reversing the despair and fear that characterizes American life today,

This article was written for [l'Anticapitaliste la revue](#).

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[1] *The Guardian*, 6 January 2023, "[It never stops': killings by US police reach record high in 2022](#)".

[2] "71 Commands in 13 Minutes: Officers Gave Tyre Nichols Impossible Orders," by Robin Stein, Alexander Cardia & Natalie Reneau, *New York Times*, January 30, 20, 2023.

[3] "Bernie Sanders on the State of the Working Class in America," *Our Revolution*, January 17, 2023.