

Hundreds protest police violence in Brooklyn, New York subway

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More than a thousand people protested police violence in the subways Friday night in Brooklyn, New York, as longstanding anger at police was compounded with opposition to two recent instances of police brutality in particular: a viral video of police and teenagers exchanging punches last week and the arrest at gunpoint of a young unarmed man on a crowded subway car.

A portion of the protest, involving hundreds of people, hopped subway turnstiles in defiance of the escalation of policing in the subways. The Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA), which runs the subways, is flooding the system with 500 additional police, ostensibly to prevent people from not paying the fare, and installing surveillance cameras in front of turnstiles.

Marching to the Barclays Center, protesters held signs including “NYPD hands off our kids, brutality for \$2.75,” “No new police,” and “Justice for Saheed Vassell.” At least one police car had graffiti on it saying “NYPD KKK.” Two protesters were reportedly arrested, one for graffiti and another for allegedly spitting at police.

While many protesters, along with the organizing groups, framed police violence and the subway crackdown in racial terms, the turnout was motivated by much broader concerns of poverty and the grinding social crisis in the largest city in the country.

One protester, 19-year-old Aviance Emmanuel, told NYU Local: “The fact that police take advantage of their jobs and they make us feel unsafe when they’re supposed to make us feel safe is really fucked up. ... Rent is high in New York, people go to school, and we can’t afford to pay for the train every single day of our lives.”

Decolonize This Place, an anti-gentrification group,

along with other groups focused on race, organized the November 1 protest in response to the “brawl” between police and teenagers on October 25 in the Jay Street–MetroTech Station. Video posted on Twitter shows a group of officers piled on top of someone being arrested as the crowd voice their opposition. An officer then punches a teen in the face, apparently for pushing on another officer.

The officer who punched the first teen then runs up and punches another youth, apparently unprovoked, also in the face. The two exchange blows before the latter is arrested.

Five teens were arrested by police, who claim that they were responding to a fight between two groups of youth that spilled onto the subway platform.

One of the teens punched and arrested, 15-year-old Benjamin Marshall, plans to sue the city for \$5 million. His father told a news conference that Marshall was going to the subway to get his backpack and was in the wrong place at the wrong time and that he suffered a concussion. His mother told the press that he was detained for 11 hours without medical attention.

The assaulting officer has reportedly been placed on desk duty.

Brooklyn Defender Services has identified one of the officers involved on October 25 as Shawndell Latham, who ripped a 1-year-old infant from his mother’s arms in a food stamp office in Brooklyn in December 2018 and then brandished a stun gun at the outraged crowd.

Anger over the “subway brawl” was compounded by another viral video, also from October 25, of a swarm of police with guns drawn arresting a young unarmed man with his hands up in a subway car. The harrowing video shows about a dozen police pointing their guns at 19-year-old Adrian Napier. Other passengers, afraid of the police—not Napier—retreated to either side of the car,

while filming the incident in case it escalated further. After the subway doors open police bodily arrest Napier.

While police claim they were responding to reports that Napier had a gun, he was unarmed and appears terrified with his hands up when he was arrested. He was charged with “theft of services,” i.e., fare-beating.

Hundreds of thousands of working-class New Yorkers find \$2.75 per trip on the subway to be an intolerable financial burden, especially when taking into account the poor service. They either take the slower but cheaper MTA buses or enter the subway system via an emergency exit gate, or by jumping the turnstile.

In response to the rise in “fare-beating,” politicians and MTA officials have blamed the crisis on workers struggling to pay onerous and rising transit costs, or on MTA workers supposedly abusing overtime rules. In reality, the MTA has been systematically starved of sufficient resources and looted by the bond market, paying out the nose to service its \$44 billion debt.

Hiring 500 cops to police the subway is unlikely to recoup much more in fares than their wages and benefits, but it does serve to intimidate the population and MTA workers under conditions of a brewing struggle among transit workers and the growth of class struggle internationally.

Inequality finds sharp expression in New York, which contains Wall Street and Central Park penthouses on the one hand and poverty and homelessness on a mass scale on the other—a recent report found that one-tenth of all New York City schoolchildren are homeless.

Under these conditions, police in New York, as is the case across the country, increasingly view the population as a hostile mass that must be repressed. This, above all, explains the growing repression in the subway system and more broadly.

Racism plays a role in police brutality, but those groups that frame police violence exclusively or primarily in terms of race obscure the fundamental causes in economic inequality and the fear of the ruling class that mass protests, as in Iraq, Chile, Puerto Rico, Lebanon and elsewhere, will find their way to the mainland US.

So far this year, New York police have killed 11 people, including five in a one-month span. The *New York Times* notes, “By comparison, there were four

such [fatal] shootings [by police] all of last year; eight in 2017; seven in 2016; and six in 2015.” Police kill around 1,000 people annually in the US.

Opposition to the reign of police terror is also mounting, with instances of teenagers throwing water on police during the summer and a group of people throwing boxes and other trash onto a police car on October 31.

Despite growing attacks on transit workers and riders alike, nothing can be expected from the Transport Workers Union (TWU). At its first rally during the current contract cycle, held October 30, TWU executives mouthed empty “militant” rhetoric but put forward no way to fight back against the MTA’s plans to “Amazonify” working conditions beyond trusting in the union.

Union executives led chants of “No contract, no work,” despite having left workers on the job without a contract since May.

Transit workers and working-class passengers can only guarantee decent wages, working conditions and an end to police violence by mobilizing the working class in the struggle for socialism. This includes breaking from the unions and fighting to build a Marxist leadership in the working class.



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