



Speak Out Now

speakoutsocialists.org bayarea@speakoutsocialists.org (510) 343-9105

The Origins of the Police

For most of human history, daily issues of society were settled by people themselves, in their communities. There weren't always police on every street corner with the power to stop, search, and harass people in the name of the law. Police forces were introduced by governments controlled by the wealthy, not to protect people but to protect the wealth of the rich from the threat of the masses of people.

Our modern police force is modeled on the police system developed in countries like Britain during the 19th century industrial revolution. Before the 19th century, a small police force called "constables" existed. They were few in number, elected by the residents in a given territory, and were unpaid. Some territories had no police at all. Most daily disputes were settled by people themselves, between neighbors, families, or in larger town meetings.

But during the 19th century things changed—industry was growing and many businessmen were becoming incredibly rich by exploiting workers. The 19th century workers in the cloth mills and factories of Britain worked more than 20 hours per day and often died of work-related illnesses before the age of 30. British cities like Manchester were described as a kind of hell on earth, where factories poured out smoke and workers were condemned to live lives of misery.

In conditions like these it is no surprise that people revolted and fought their bosses. The first workers' strikes of the 19th century caught England's factory owners by surprise. The few police that existed were in no way able to stop

thousands of workers from undertaking strikes and protests. Without a sizable police force to rely on, factory owners, their families, and upper class students from colleges like Oxford fought workers in the streets in order to defeat strikes and stop the rising tide of worker's struggles.

Soon factory owners began to demand their governments control the working class by increasing the number of police to control workers' strikes and organizing. But the government needed an excuse. They found it by accusing poor and working people of being criminals who need to be watched and controlled. The new police forces took over the work of solving daily disputes, controlling domestic violence, theft, and small crimes. By taking control of these basic functions of society, the new system guaranteed that the property of the wealthy was protected from the poor and working class.

The truth is people were able to live together for thousands of years before the police were introduced – not to protect people, but to control them. If we take responsibility for the problems of our community and our society, there is no reason we should need to tolerate the presence of the police.

