

# **USA after Michael Brown' assassination - Ferguson October: A Participant's Report**

Thursday 27 November 2014, by [REED John](#) (Date first published: 17 October 2014).

I participated in five events over the October 10-13 weekend: the protest in Clayton on Friday, the march on Saturday, the rally Sunday evening, and two actions on Monday. I can report what I witnessed at those events; for other events I can only report from what I heard or read.

I was impressed with the organizers' strategizing and flexibility. While some events were planned with an eye towards getting the maximum media exposure, others were conceived with the aim of disrupting business as usual without regard to media coverage.

One of the central features of the protests was the use of text messages. On both Friday and Saturday, organizers had people out on the edges of the protest areas urging everyone coming to the protest to text "handsup" to a certain number. That gave them a count of how many people were involved in the protest (not a perfect count, but something more "objective" with which to counter police and other low-ball estimates). It also gave them a database of activists to communicate to about other actions. Again, it was not perfect. People who didn't text in could be left in the dark about other actions, but it was a much bigger pool of people than those involved in organizing the protests.

The weekend's events began with a protest in Clayton, MO, outside the offices of county prosecutor Robert McCulloch. Clayton is the county seat for St. Louis County, where Michael Brown was killed. It is a government and financial hub characterized by the type of highrise office buildings we in the Midwest associate with downtowns.

Over 500 people assembled in the rain to demand an indictment against the cop who killed Michael Brown. As with past protests, the county police blocked off either end of the street in front of the prosecutor's office to keep demonstrators from spilling over onto other streets. This time, however, protesters did not stay corralled. Protest leaders pushed through one set of barricades and began leading demonstrators in a march through the streets of downtown Clayton at the beginning of rush hour.

Police and civic leaders throughout the St. Louis area were well aware that the eyes of the world were on them and of the negative reaction to their militarized response to protests in Ferguson in August. Instead of pushing back against the demonstrators, police got out of the way and scrambled to block streets to traffic. After marching one block, demonstrators stopped to give police time to close the street to car traffic.

Demonstration leaders explained to police the looped route they intended to take through downtown Clayton to end up back at the formally-named County Justice Center, and police moved ahead of the march to stop traffic along the march route. It was a loud, peaceful march, but it disrupted the start of rush hour traffic in downtown Clayton and disrupted work in the office buildings as people inside flocked to doors and windows to see what was happening.

Friday night there was a "Day of the Dead" themed march in Brown's memory through Ferguson

from Canfield Drive, where Brown was killed, to the Ferguson police headquarters. This march exposed tension, or maybe a clash of cultures, between local activists and the organizers and out-of-town participants in Ferguson October. Local activists reportedly were disturbed by what they thought was an inappropriately festive atmosphere to the Day of the Dead event. Some of the local activists then decided to lead the out-of-towners in an unscheduled action on Saturday night to a QuikTrip gas station near the neighborhood where Vonderrick Myers was killed by an off-duty cop the previous Tuesday after an apparently illegal stop and chase.

St. Louis City police attacked the demonstrators at the QuikTrip with pepper spray and riot clubs and arrested 17 of the protesters. The St. Louis Post-Dispatch, the region's daily newspaper, depicted the organizers of the QuikTrip protest, which was not a part of the official Ferguson October actions, as heartless and manipulative, quoting one of the leaders of the action as saying that they had taken the demonstrators to that QuikTrip because they wanted to teach them that protesting against police violence and repression was serious business and not fun-and-games.

There were very good strategic reasons for targeting that QuikTrip, however, which I will discuss below.

Saturday was the day of the big march in downtown St. Louis, and also teach-ins, seminars and other events. The march was the focal point of the day, but in a scheduling decision that I don't understand, there were two other events scheduled for the same time. Maybe, they were trying to give diverse groups who were backing Ferguson October time to present their own issues, while also hoping that the other events would feed into the rally after the march.

Organizers again urged people to text "handsup" to a special number when they joined the march, from which they announced a count of 3,000 participants in the march. It likely was the largest protest action in St. Louis since the organizing of CIO unions in the 1930s. Vans brought people into the city from Ferguson, where they were joined by people from across the country.

Relatives of Brown and Myers led the march. I saw groups from New York City (there was a large group from Union Theological Seminary), Pittsburgh, Chicago (there was a group of teachers, another of UE members, and another of fast food workers), Memphis, Kansas City, Little Rock, Fayetteville, and Los Angeles.

In terms of labor, the largest group may have been the fast food workers, who had contingents from several cities, including St. Louis. There were large groups of teachers from Chicago and St. Louis, and the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists (CBTU) had a large, visible presence. Jobs with Justice acted as the umbrella for everyone who served as a parade marshal.

The CBTU's participation gives testimony to how this issue has become bigger than any group. The Organization for Black Struggle (OBS) has provided leadership to the protests that followed Brown's killing and to the organization of Ferguson October. For 20 years or more, the OBS and the political leadership of the CBTU in St. Louis have been at odds in city politics.

Both sides have admitted that some of the alliances they made in their battle against each other were "mistakes," but they still have preferred not to work with each other. On the labor front, the OBS has actively supported fast food workers organizing for better wages, but has not visibly supported Wal-Mart workers. The CBTU has made it a priority to support the organizing of Wal-Mart workers, but has not been active with fast food workers.

The OBS was woven throughout the organization of the event and did not try to have a separate, identifiable presence in the Saturday march. For the most part, Left groups marched under banners

and slogans that were consistent with the objectives of the march, e.g. stop police violence. The parade circled the Old Courthouse in St. Louis and ended in a rally across the street from the courthouse. The Old Courthouse is where Dred Scott and his wife initially sued for their freedom from slavery, because their owner had taken them into a free state to live. Although the state court ruled in favor of the Scotts, the Missouri Supreme Court reversed the decision and the U.S. Supreme Court would rule on appeal that Blacks could never be citizens of the United States and "had no rights which the white man was bound to respect."

Several meetings and teach-ins in different parts of the city and at overlapping times followed the rally. There were more on Sunday morning.

In between, there was the demonstration at the QuikTrip at the intersection of Vandeventer and Chouteau. The QuikTrip was chosen in part because it was close to where Myer was killed and a QuikTrip near Canfield Drive in Ferguson had become the center of protests after Brown was shot down.. But the choice was more strategic than coincidental.

The QuikTrip at Vandeventer and Chouteau is at the heart of the area upon which the local bourgeoisie pins hopes for the future and redevelopment of St. Louis. It is across the street from the construction site for an Ikea store, the first major non-grocery retailer to build in the city in 30 years. It is at the entrance to "The Grove" neighborhood, a night-club strip and neighborhood redevelopment effort aimed to attract childless Millennials, gay and straight, to the city. It is on the edge of Cortex, a biotech research park linked to the Washington University medical school, which is actively courting biotech companies from the northeastern U.S. and high-tech companies from Europe. It is a third of a mile from St. Louis University and a spate of luxury apartment construction projects. It is two-thirds of a mile from the flagship facility of the largest hospital chain in the metro area and the medical campus of Washington University.

Taking the anger over Myers' killing out of the neighborhood to the geographic center of the local bourgeoisie's hopes and dreams was a strategically smart move. The organizers may well have expected a harsh response, but with the eyes of the world on St. Louis for Ferguson October, they also had reason to expect some moderation. Rightly or wrongly, civic leaders in St. Louis believe that European values are more liberal than Midwestern values. Recruiters sent to Europe all return with the message that European companies value diversity, tolerance, mass transit and bicycles.

St. Louis's civic leaders are mostly tied or beholden to the real estate industry. They desperately want European investment, and they are very afraid of the Ferguson protests driving those potential investors away. In taking protesters to the Vandeventer QuikTrip, protest leaders turned globalization to their own benefit and sent a strong message to civic leaders of the potential cost of doing nothing about police violence against African Americans.

The keynote event on Sunday was a speech by Cornel West, a prominent Democratic Socialist who also is a professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York. The speech was to be part of "an evening of prayer and reflection" at the Chaifetz Arena at St. Louis University. Roughly 1500 people came to the event. As with many such events, however, organizers paid more attention to the needs of the tendencies represented, in this case religions and various denominations, than to the needs or patience of the audience. West was to be preceded by 20 other speakers.

Two women ministers, one from the United Church of Christ and one from the African Methodist Episcopal Church, nearly stole the show with explicitly anti-capitalist sermons. By the time the president of the NAACP spoke, however, people were getting restless. Cornell William Brooks gave a Martin Luther King-like oration around the theme of "oh say can you see" from the Star Spangled Banner, declaiming such lines as 'Oh say can you see an America without racism? . . . Oh say can you

see a Ferguson, MO, transformed?’

As Brooks finished, a man in the audience, who maybe was in his 20s, stood and shouted “Go to Canfield with that. We’ve got revolutionaries starving . . .” A couple of other people with him stood and shouted, “We’re tired of listening to you. You have to listen to us.” The interruption lasted maybe a minute and seemed to be dying down when a minister on the sidelines walked onto the floor and yelled, “Let him speak.” About half the crowd took up the chant. The rest, farther away from the interruption, had little idea of what was going on, other than that there seemed to be a current of mistrust between younger activists in their 20s and speakers on the stage, who ranged in age from 50 to 91-year-old Holocaust survivor Hedy Epstein, an outspoken pro-Palestinian activist.

A quick caucusing of event leaders on the stage led to an announcement of a change in the program. Skipping over the rest of the ministers, rapper Tef Poe and Ashley Yates were invited to speak. Tef Poe is an activist with OBS. Ashley Yates, who grew up in Ferguson, is a founder of Millennial Activists United. After they spoke, some members of the audience would be able to speak.

Poe started by criticizing the monopoly of ministers on the stage, saying that they aren’t relevant on the street, then adding that the Crips, the Sheikhs, and other gangs should be there, because “they are the ones who got your back” on the street. Then he criticized “scholars” and people who talk “revolution,” saying that they are always talking about revolution, but when the revolution comes, they aren’t there. Yates followed with a defense of anger.

After Poe and Yates, six younger activists from the audience took the stage. One man read a passage from King’s 1963 ‘Letter from Birmingham Jail’ criticizing white moderates, and called on white moderates to donate more money to revolutionaries in Ferguson.

A woman who said she was from Baton Rouge, LA said she had turned her back on Brooks when he was speaking because he always talking, but never doing anything. Another gave an impassioned plea to stop mouthing platitudes and start strategizing. My sense was that these were people who wanted to do more, but had not been involved in any of the planning, so they didn’t know what else was planned.

For a moment, more people began shouting out from the audience and it looked like the meeting might spiral out of control. Then Cornel West took the stage and got everyone’s attention. Declaring that he came to get arrested, not to talk, he began a speech that touched on every one of the issues raised: the need for action now, the need for an inclusive movement that rejects all forms of prejudice and stereotyping, the justified feelings of anger and the demands of young people, and the road to failure that young people are on if they ignore any lessons that are more than five years old.

After West’s speech ended at 10:00, a few hundred activists went the short distance to the Shaw neighborhood where Myers was killed. Around 1:00 a.m., they decided to take the protest out of the neighborhood and move it to St. Louis University. The Shaw neighborhood is separated from university by two interstate highways and a rail yard. Throughways on either end of the neighborhood cross the highways and bridge the train tracks. The demonstrators split into two groups. One, taking the western route, marched through the Grove night club strip and along the side of Cortex to get to St. Louis University. The other, taking the eastern route, passed by Tenet Hospital and through the St. Louis University Medical Center to get to the main university campus.

St. Louis city police appeared in riot gear, banging their nightsticks against their shin guards. Police chief Sam Dotson told the press that it wasn’t meant to be intimidating, just to get the marchers’ attention. The police told the demonstrators that they were “illegally assembled” and had to disperse.

The march leaders insisted that they were just walking peacefully on a public sidewalk and had every right to continue to do so. I don't know that members of the National Lawyers Guild were there, but they were at most, if not all of the events of the weekend and they may have helped the walkers make their point. The police pulled back and protesters marched onto the campus of St. Louis University.

Dormitory residents reportedly welcomed the marchers, who took up a position at the center of the campus. Someone then declared a sit-in. It was an ill-considered and unplanned decision. It was a rainy night, they had no supplies, and there was no plan for keeping people engaged. Within an hour, 80 percent of the marchers had left. At 6:30, however, about 20 hardy souls remained.

At 8:00 a.m., text messages went out to anyone who had texted "handsup" to Ferguson October. Ministers were going to meet at the Wellspring Church in downtown Ferguson at 10:00 to prepare for civil disobedience.

Roughly 300 people joined West and dozens of ministers and marched through the rain from the church to police headquarters. They occupied the ground between the police and fire department buildings, and called on police officers to put down their radios and leave their cars and repent and join the protesters. They sang, prayed, and chanted for about an hour before Ferguson police and state police marched out of the fire house and formed a line facing the protesters.

West and other ministers, who were prepared for arrest, knelt or stood in the front line facing the police. The rain poured down. A tornado warning went into effect. The minutes passed and nothing happened. Tensions eased. It was nearing noon. People were telling each other that the police were not going to arrest anyone. Protest leaders with megaphones called people back to the street and began forming them up to march back to the church. That's when the police moved. They grabbed West and several others. People nearby shouted at the people lining up to leave to come back and the crowd surged back towards the police.

I was too far back in the crowd to see what happened with the front line facing the police. The police would later say that West and others tried to push their way through the police line and that was why they were arrested. Some of those arrested said that wasn't true. Michael McBride, one of the first arrested with West, wrote on his blog that they were kneeling down when the police grabbed them. He was charged with third degree assault on a police officer and resisting arrest.

Two other ministers, in interviews with their hometown newspapers, said that they hadn't moved when the police suddenly seized hold of them without ever telling them to disperse or warning them that they were about to be arrested. Ultimately, the police arrested 42 demonstrators.

While the Ferguson police were busy arresting demonstrators at the police headquarters, a smaller group of protesters staged an unannounced action at the Emerson headquarters in Ferguson and blocked the entrance to the company campus. As expected, private security prevented them from entering the campus, but demonstrators shut down the entrance to prevent anyone else from entering, too. Every minute they were there cost the company money, and the protest that focused police attention on the police headquarters gained the Emerson protesters some extra time before police arrived to arrest them, too. Six protesters were arrested at Emerson's gate.

At about 2:30, another text message went out: Youth gathering at Soldiers' Memorial to speak to speak out at 3:30. About 80 people, mostly college-age adults, gathered there under the moniker of "Young Activists United." A leader with a bullhorn led them in a few chants to warm up, then yelled, "Ready to take a walk? Let's go!"

It was the situation that Chief Dotson had described as his biggest worry: people marching through the streets with the police not knowing where they were going. The group marched three blocks to St. Louis city hall while police and TV cameras were still heading to the Soldiers' Memorial. At city hall, the protesters agreed to drop their signs and file one at a time through metal detectors. The slow entry into the rotunda at the center of city hall gave the police time to arrive. The news crews were slower.

Once inside the rotunda, protesters pulled banners out from under their shirts and jackets and made a lot of noise. The shrilling of their whistles and the clatter of their rattles was so loud that at least one news broadcast reported that it disrupted work throughout the building.

One activist, who tried to go up the stairs to hang one end of a banner from the banister, was pulled away by two cops, but then city officials appeared to rethink their response. The mayor's chief of staff offered to meet with one representative from the protesters and the police let other demonstrators climb the stairs to hang hold their banners.

While attention was focused on St. Louis city hall, another group of protesters infiltrated Plaza Frontenac, a luxury mall in wealthy suburbs west of the city. They gathered in the central concourse and chanted against police violence and for justice for Mike Brown and created a spectacle that disrupted shopping in the surrounding stores. They left without anyone getting arrested.

Next, a group of activists descended on the Wal-Mart store in Ferguson to demonstrate solidarity with John Crawford's family. Wal-Mart long has been the number one gun seller in the United States, but Crawford, a Black man, was executed by cops who saw him carrying a toy gun in a Wal-Mart store in Ohio, after a white man called the police and falsely claimed a Black man was pointing a gun at people. Police arrived at the Ferguson store soon after protesters and blocked the entrance to keep people from entering the store.

At the same time, another group of activists took the protests "to the politicians" at a fundraiser in Webster Groves, MO, for the Democratic candidate for county executive. Senator Claire McCaskill was the featured speaker. The call went out by text a little after 6:00 p.m. to help them shut it down.

At 7:30, protesters headed for the Wal-Mart in Maplewood, MO. So many made it into the store and raised such a ruckus with their chanting that police and store management cleared the store and shut it down.

At 9:00, one group of protesters hit a Wal-Mart in Bridgeton, MO, and another group, inside the football stadium where the St. Louis Rams played the San Francisco 49ers, unfurled protest banners to get the attention of a nationwide audience watching Monday Night Football.

With graphics similar to the maps used after weather-related disasters to show where tornadoes had touched down, nightly newscasts led off with stories about "protests erupting all over the St. Louis area."

The organizers of Ferguson October showed impressive flexibility coupled with strategic and tactical planning throughout the four days of protests. When another cop killed another Black man, they acted quickly to bring that incident, and the young man's family, into the protests to underscore that the movement is not about just one man, but is about systemic oppression and state violence against young Black men.

They moved the protests out of the neighborhoods where men are killed and spread them throughout the city and county to force people to confront the issue. They took the protests beyond the police to the economic and political foundations of police repression.

They also led St. Louis activists out of the cul-de-sac of political theater which they had inhabited. For decades, civil disobedience to the St. Louis Left meant performing for the media. They'd make arrangements with the police: We want seven people arrested at the east entrance of the federal building on Monday at 11. Ok, we'll send a van for them. Will they stand and walk to the van when we tell them they're under arrest or will we have to carry them? Oh, they'll walk. At the appointed time, they would wait for the media and then start the show.

Ferguson October reminded St. Louis activists, and maybe others, that while civil disobedience can be designed to attract media attention, it can also inflict economic damage on those who support injustice. In doing all of that, organizers smartly coordinated protests to draw attention to some actions in order to give other actions a greater chance of success.

Organizers self-consciously promoted this growing movement against the police violence against African Americans as the Millennials' civil rights movement, and Ferguson October as the Millennials' Freedom Summer. As the largest generation in America, projected to account for 40 percent of the workforce by 2020, the Millennial generation may end up being just as influential as the Baby Boom generation was, and may face just as much inter-generational resistance.

If this was a beginning, it was a good one. The experiences in St. Louis no doubt inspired hundreds if not thousands of activists, who will take the lessons they learned here back to their own towns. As they move forward, they will face new challenges and new lessons. The police will not always be as restrained as they were for Ferguson October. People will have to develop new tactics and there will be more opportunities to learn from the experiences of older generations of activists.

One key to Ferguson October was the strong alliance between new labor activists, the fast food workers, and civil rights and anti-repression activists, between the SEIU and OBS, in large part because they represented two aspects of the same population. Many fast food workers are young Black men. As they move forward, they will likely come face to face with contradictions in the institutions that supported them.

The SEIU, for example, is a major financial backer of fast food worker organizing, but it also is the main financial backer for Rep. Jeff Roorda's campaign for the Missouri Senate. Roorda, business manager for the police officers' union, has been in the forefront of efforts to justify police violence by smearing the Black men killed by cops. Will the new civil rights movement change the way unions and the SEIU operate? Will unions restrain the new civil rights movement? Or will the two end up parting ways?

**John Reed**, October 17, 2014

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**P.S.**

\* "Ferguson October: A Participant's Report":  
<http://www.solidarity-us.org/site/node/4273>

\* The author of this report was a participant in the "Ferguson October" events of October 10-13, 2014.