

Winter storm exposes social chasm in Detroit

City services at standstill one week later

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The aftermath of the snowstorm that dropped more than a foot of snow in the Detroit area January 2-3 has revealed the social chasm separating the administration of Mayor Dennis Archer and the Detroit City Council from the majority of workers and poor in the city. After the passage of more than a week, basic services for most Detroit residents remain at a virtual standstill.

The majority of the city's residential streets are still snow covered and impassable. With a population of nearly 1 million, Detroit only has 59 trucks to plow city streets. By contrast Milwaukee, Wisconsin, with two-thirds the population, operates 400 plows, clearing and salting every main and residential street.

To add to the misery of residents, in the frigid cold weather that has followed the storm close to 100 water mains have burst, turning many city streets into icy waterways. Water department officials have blamed substandard pipes purchased from France--in the 1920s and 30s--for the problem.

With more snow on the way, conditions for many elderly and poor have become desperate. The ability of firefighters and emergency medical technicians to respond to calls, with services already decimated by prior budget cuts, has been further hampered by the refusal of the city to remove snow from most residential streets. On many streets fire hydrants remain buried in snow. In a city where deadly house fires are an all too frequent occurrence, like the one that killed six children last December 27, many more families are now at risk.

Detroit public schools, which had been closed since the storm hit, were finally allowed to open last Friday. However the vast majority of the city's 180,000 students still cannot get to school. Friday's attendance was barely measurable, revealing that the decision to open the schools was motivated by political

considerations aimed at creating the illusion of a return to normal.

For many students the attempt to attend school is still a dangerous undertaking. The snow-clogged streets have halted school bus transportation, leaving many children no alternative but to traverse slippery and unshoveled sidewalks, or risk life and limb by walking in the streets.

Democratic Mayor Archer continues to defend the city's policy, begun 15 years ago under the Coleman Young administration, of not removing snow from the streets in residential neighborhoods. It was only last Wednesday, four days after the snowfall, that Mayor Archer even considered declaring a "snow emergency." Archer had initially refused, claiming that there was no problem with the major streets, declaring: "I do not accept responsibility for what the good Lord has put on us by way of snow." He called on neighborhood block clubs and volunteers to clear the streets. It should be noted that the streets were plowed and cleared of snow in the mayor's neighborhood, around the Manooghian Mansion.

Last Thursday, however, clearly more concerned about the city's "image" than the plight of its residents, Archer was compelled to take some action. Confronted by increased media criticism, and with the opening of the International Auto Show and a visit by President Clinton imminent, Archer announced that the city would seek outside assistance in an attempt to clear the streets. The city is also considering the exploitation of convict labor. Misdemeanor offenders have already been used for snow removal in some neighboring municipalities.

Meanwhile, local newspaper editorials moved to defend the mayor, shifting responsibility for the debacle onto city workers' unions, and claiming that the

only solution is the privatization of services. Yet the fact remains that the Archer administration has long been oriented toward the construction of gambling casinos and a new baseball stadium, while turning its back on the urgent need to improve city services through the hiring of additional employees and the purchasing of badly needed equipment.

Less than a month ago, Archer, echoing the sentiments of Michigan Governor John Engler, had launched into a tirade about Detroit's public schools. At the time, Archer threatened to support having parents or the state take over nonperforming schools.



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