

The Cincinnati riots: social inequality in the Queen City

Part two of a series

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Below we post the second part in a series of articles examining the social, economic and political roots of the riots that erupted in Cincinnati, Ohio last April, following the police killing of an unarmed black teenager. The first article appeared on May 24, 2001.

According to local business officials, media spokesmen and political figures, Cincinnati, Ohio was one of the great success stories of the last decade. During this time, they say, the Queen City shed its image as a declining Midwestern “rust belt” city and became an engine of job growth and prosperity, with an increasingly important role in world trade and the “New Economy.”

A promotional brochure distributed by the Greater Cincinnati Chamber of Commerce boasts that the city is home to 10 of the country’s Fortune 500 companies—with total revenue of more than \$135 billion—including Kroger, Procter & Gamble, Federated Department Stores, Ashland, American Financial Group and Fifth Third Bancorp. In the next couple of years, the Chamber of Commerce says, businesses and investors hope to transform one of the city’s poorest neighborhoods into a “Silicon Alley, a mecca for high-tech companies,” which “could catapult the city into one of the top 15 high-tech areas in the country.”

City officials point enthusiastically to nearly \$1 billion in commercial development that is taking place on the Ohio River waterfront, including the construction of new stadiums for Cincinnati’s professional baseball and football teams. Future plans include the expansion of the convention center, the development of an Avenue of the Arts and new upscale retail and housing facilities to attract tourists and affluent young professionals to the downtown area.

Summing up this upbeat view of the city, a spokesperson involved in city planning told the *World Socialist Web Site*: “We are in good shape economically. We have housing development and commercial development on the waterfront, a new bio-tech sector launched by the University of Cincinnati’s Medical Center, and our business and financial services are doing well. The area is quite prosperous: productivity is up and the unemployment rate is lower than the state and national average.”

This rosy picture was shattered by the angry protests and rioting that erupted in April following the police killing of an unarmed black teenager. For several nights thousands of working class youth, particularly in the city’s impoverished minority neighborhoods, took to the streets and clashed with police. City authorities, taken unawares by the level of social anger and frustration, responded by declaring martial law, imposing a dawn-to-dusk curfew and arresting hundreds of citizens.

The explosion of violence in Cincinnati—the largest urban disturbance in the US since the 1992 Los Angeles riots—revealed the deep social tensions in every American city. This reality is barely perceptible to the well-paid journalists, academics and politicians who spent the last decade

celebrating the “longest sustained economic expansion in American history.” The April riots underscored the most basic fact of life in America: the enormous social gulf that has opened up between the wealthy elite and the vast majority of the population.

While the stock market boom, record corporate profits and tax breaks enriched those at the pinnacle of American society, conditions for the masses of working people in Cincinnati, and every other US city, deteriorated. More than 30 million Americans, nearly half of whom are children, live in outright poverty, while tens of millions more manage to keep their heads above water by taking on multiple jobs, working longer hours and falling deeper into debt. Public funding for basic social needs, such as education, health care, housing and transportation, has been sacrificed in order to reduce taxes for the rich and improve the “business climate.”

A closer look at Cincinnati reveals the social contradictions that dominate America.

The last decade provided a windfall for the richest Cincinnatians and the most privileged layers of the middle class. Carl Lindner, for example, who controls Chiquita Brands International, American Financial Group and the Cincinnati Reds baseball team, saw his net assets rise to over \$800 million. Top executives of the city’s Fortune 500 companies made tens of millions in salaries, bonuses and stock options. Durk I. Jager, the former chairman of the board, president and chief executive of Procter & Gamble, raked in \$32,828,276 in total compensation in 2000. The P&G executive also exercised \$3,654,700 in stock options.

So wealthy have some of Cincinnati’s elite become, that they have skewed the average income figures for the entire city of 331,000 people. In the 1990s Cincinnati was the only major urban center in Ohio to see an increase in average income, even though the bulk of the city’s working people, like their counterparts throughout the state and the country, saw take-home pay stagnate or decline. The anomaly occurred because, unlike other Ohio cities, Cincinnati includes within its municipal boundaries extremely wealthy neighborhoods, where incomes have skyrocketed in the last 10 years.

Average income in Cincinnati rose by 8 percent over the last 15 years, to \$39,582. In the city’s poorest neighborhood, Over-the-Rhine, where last April’s rioting began, the average income is just \$8,600. A picture of how well Cincinnati’s upper echelons did can be seen by looking at the nearby Village of Indian Hill, an upscale suburb just northeast of the city, where the average income rose 60.5 percent since 1986, to \$194,594.

The Indian Hill school district has the lowest rate of poverty—0.6 percent—of Ohio’s 621 school districts. By contrast, the poverty rate among Cincinnati’s students is 100 times higher, with 59 percent of school children qualifying for free lunches, the fifth highest percentage in the state.

Over the last decade Cincinnati has lost 33,000 residents, or 9.1 percent of its population, the seventh highest decline in the US, while the surrounding suburbs of Hamilton County saw a 7.9 percent growth. As those who could afford to leave, racial segregation in the area worsened. Cincinnati is now the eighth most segregated area in the country. Poverty, homelessness and incidents of police brutality are particularly chronic for African Americans, who make up 43 percent of Cincinnati's population.

Outside of the most affluent areas, however, the suburbs surrounding the city have not escaped the social crisis. Child poverty is high in the working class suburbs of Lockland, Mt. Healthy and Norwood, a mostly white suburb, where one of every three students is poor. This is part of a national trend: although the child poverty rate in suburban areas is still lower than in rural or urban areas, over the past two decades the rate has risen faster in suburban areas.

According to a recent study by the Metropolitan Research Corporation, entitled "Cincinnati Metropatterns," social inequality in the Cincinnati area is among the worst in the nation. Researchers, who compared local government tax revenues from the region's richest 5 percent of the population with tax revenues contributed by the poorest 5 percent, found a ratio of 32-to-1, the second greatest gap in the US, topped only by the Tampa Bay, Florida region. The national ratio is 11-to-1.

A drive around Cincinnati gives one a sense of the gross inequities reflected in these numbers. Within minutes one can travel from an impoverished neighborhood like Over-the-Rhine, where unemployed youth fill the streets in front of abandoned buildings and storefronts, to areas with meticulously manicured lawns and gardens, country clubs and million-dollar homes.

The decimation of manufacturing jobs

The social polarization is bound up with the destruction of higher-paying manufacturing jobs and their replacement with low-wage service sector jobs, as well as temporary and part-time employment, a trend seen throughout the US during the 1990s. According to George Zeller, a senior researcher with the Council for Economic Opportunities in Greater Cleveland, the county where Cincinnati is located, Hamilton County, was the only one in Ohio that saw losses in manufacturing jobs in every quarter between 1991 and 2001. During this period nearly 28,000 manufacturing jobs were wiped out in the county, while the number of non-manufacturing jobs, which pay 40 percent less, increased sharply.

"What we are seeing is downward mobility," Zeller told the *World Socialist Web Site*. "We're losing manufacturing jobs that pay an average of \$56,222 a year and gaining \$33,000 jobs. The devastating decline in manufacturing jobs has continued throughout the so-called boom. There was no boom for Cincinnati's blue collar workers."

The transformation to a low-wage economy was symbolized by the fate of General Motors' assembly plant, located in Norwood. The factory had long been a source of employment for workers migrating from the depressed coal mining regions of Kentucky and West Virginia. It had a history of wildcat strikes and was known as one of the most militant plants in the state. In the late 1980s GM shut the plant, eliminating 4,700 jobs. The site where the plant once stood is now a shopping mall, employing scores of low-paid retail workers. Norwood now has the lowest average income in Hamilton County, just \$28,738.

Other major employers, such as Ford Motor Co., also shut plants and carried out mass layoffs in Cincinnati and nearby industrial areas, including Dayton. Between 1981 and the present, employment at General Electric's massive Evendale aircraft engine facility fell from 14,000 to 8,400, and 50 percent of the area's machine tool industry was shut down.

The job-slashing has not been limited to blue collar workers. Thousands of sales, research and administrative employees have also been downsized. Last March Procter & Gamble announced 1,900 job cuts in Cincinnati, in addition to 1,050 it announced in June 1999. The layoffs, which were centered at P&G's downtown headquarters, were part of

25,000 job cuts the company carried out worldwide to boost profits and stockholders' returns.

The same month that the riots broke out in Cincinnati, the state of Ohio officially entered an economic recession, with back-to-back declines in output in the last quarter of 2000 and the first quarter of 2001. In April 2001 the number of new applicants for unemployment insurance rose by 68 percent from a year before. Job cuts and income loss are a particular threat to many minority workers and youth, who were among the last to be hired during the boom.

Titus Bell, a 30-year-old cement mason who lives in Over-the-Rhine, described the conditions facing young workers and the unemployed in the neighborhood. "The youth around here don't have a good education or jobs. There is employment, but people need good jobs, not \$6- or \$7-an-hour jobs. They've also taken away the youth programs, so what do the kids have to do? We don't need more police or more jails.

"A lot of young men come from families where the mother is on welfare, or struggle with two jobs. If you are 16 all you think about is hustling to make it. Downtown, where they are spending \$1 billion to develop the waterfront—that's a whole other world. That money isn't coming here."

Although low-paying jobs have been available over the past decade, Cincinnati's poor have fallen deeper into poverty. In 2000, there were 25,488 people who were homeless for at least one night in Cincinnati, an increase of 5,000 from 1993, according to a new study by the Greater Cincinnati Coalition for the Homeless. On any given night, the coalition says, there are between 1,300 and 1,500 people either on the streets, in homeless shelters or living doubled-up in someone else's home.

"Forty percent of our homeless men work," said Susan Knight, an administrative coordinator for the homeless coalition. "That's largely temp labor, which has absolutely exploded in the last five years. When I first saw a temp labor check I was ready to call legal aid because they were paying \$3.50 an hour. Then somebody explained to me that the companies take out transportation costs, hard-hat rental fees and other things—it's like a company store. In the meantime, these guys are not making enough for housing—much less health care or anything else—and they end up on the streets."

One other statistic shows the consequences of the growth of poverty in the Cincinnati area over the last decade. According to a study by the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, after a four-year decline in the mid-90s, infant mortality in the Tri-State area (southwestern Ohio, northern Kentucky and southeastern Indiana) rose by 12 percent in 1998, the last year figures were available. The rate of 8.4 deaths per 1,000 live births, up from 7.5, reflected higher rates of poverty and malnutrition, and the lack of prenatal care.

What happened in Cincinnati during the 1990s was part of a national process. During the decade there was a sharp increase in the number of children living in working poor families, where at least one parent worked 26 or more weeks and the family remained below the federal poverty level. The number nationally increased from 4.3 million in 1989 to 5.6 million in 1997—a jump of nearly one third—despite the fact that the stock market hit an all-time high and the unemployment rate hit a 25-year low. While officials boasted that the child poverty rate, around 19 percent, had fallen to the lowest level since 1980, the rate remained considerably higher than that which prevailed in the late 1960s and the decade of the 1970s.

The gutting of welfare by the Clinton administration worsened this situation, and at the same time provided an ample pool of poor and desperate workers for low-wage service sector jobs. As a result of welfare "reform," the number of children in Hamilton County who receive welfare has been cut in half. In October 2000, the first group of welfare recipients exhausted their three-year lifetime limit for collecting benefits. According to David Maume, director of the University of Cincinnati's

Kunz Center for the Study of Work and Family, their fate is virtually unknown.

Maume told the WSWs, “As people ‘hit the wall’ with their time limit, we just don’t know what is going to happen. The state is optimistic that if people are faced with sink or swim, they will swim. But reports are showing that they will probably sink.

“Unemployment rates among welfare leavers are high, and recidivism rates are high too. If you ask, do people get work? Yes, 70 percent get work within a year’s period, but 20 percent return to welfare within a year, more in some areas. What about supporting work? We have health care, child care and transportation subsidies for a year—which is all that Ohio offers—but that is not enough. You are in a low-income job and you haven’t got a promotion where you get better benefits. We had no qualms about imposing time limits between 1995-2000 when the economy was on an upturn, but we may come to regret these time limits over the next five years if the economy does not rebound quickly.”

This summer the Hamilton County Department of Human Services (DHS) is cutting \$25 million from programs that provide welfare recipients with training programs to get jobs or advance from entry level jobs, as well as transportation subsidies, counseling for children and help for mental illness, child development and domestic violence problems.



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