

# Benton Harbor, Michigan: A socialist strategy to oppose police brutality and inequality

## Statement of the WSWS and Socialist Equality Party

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*The following is the text of a leaflet being distributed July 12 by supporters of the Socialist Equality Party and World Socialist Web Site at a protest against police brutality in Benton Harbor, Michigan. Benton Harbor was the scene of rioting last month following the death in a police chase of a 28-year-old Terrance Shurn.*

The police brutality and oppression responsible for last month's killing of young Benton Harbor resident Terrance Shurn is not an isolated problem. Unprovoked arrests and searches, the murder of unarmed and innocent citizens, racial profiling and abuse: these have become standard features of life in cities across the United States.

New York City police recently killed two citizens, one a 57-year-old black woman and the other a 35-year-old immigrant from west Africa. Both were unarmed and innocent of any crimes. The Detroit police department has recently been indicted for federal civil rights violations resulting from the unjustified shootings of civilians, torture of prisoners and mass arrests of eyewitnesses. The Los Angeles Police Department is notorious for its brutality and indiscriminate use of force.

When the Berrien County prosecutor whitewashed the killing of Shurn and cleared the police of any wrongdoing he was following the pattern set by government officials throughout the country, who allow the police to carry out these crimes with impunity.

This national epidemic of abuse must have deeper social causes. Indeed it is not only the character of its policing that Benton Harbor shares with the rest of the United States. Official brutality has its roots in the enormous level of social inequality that characterizes American society.

The rioting that erupted last month was not merely a response to the actions of the Benton Township cops. These riots reflected the enormous anger and frustration felt by the population of a city that is plagued by

chronically high levels of unemployment and poverty.

The social crisis of Benton Harbor has deep historical roots. The growth of the US economy in the decades following the Second World War provided improved living standards for many workers in the area, who were employed in the production of domestic appliances for Whirlpool and of supplies for the automotive industry. But since the 1970s thousands of factory jobs have been wiped out as companies shut their operations and shifted production to lower cost areas in the US and internationally. Today the city's unemployment rate is officially 25 percent—and probably much higher—and those jobs that do exist are primarily temporary and minimum-wage.

The same process has occurred in countless industrial cities, including Gary, Indiana, where thousands of steel jobs were lost, and Detroit, where the downsizing of the auto industry has turned the Motor City into one of the poorest urban centers in America.

The stock market and profit boom of the 1990s did nothing to change this. While corporate CEOs and big stockholders enriched themselves, the social programs, jobs, wages and living conditions of the broad majority of the population were devastated.

A recent report by the IRS revealed that the income of the 400 top-earning US citizens quadrupled over the past decade. Previous studies have indicated that half of the total income in the US goes to the richest 20 percent of US households and just 3.6 percent goes to the bottom 20 percent.

The Bush administration—which came to power through a stolen election—is vigorously defending the interests of a corporate and financial oligarchy in the United States. With the complicity of the Democratic Party, taxes are being slashed for the rich, while the government attacks education, social security, Medicare and every service or

agency that assists broad layers of the population.

Meanwhile military spending is skyrocketing to fund a predatory colonial war in Iraq and defend the interests of this oligarchy abroad. Hundreds of billions of dollars have been spent on the plundering of Iraq, and the Pentagon has recently announced that it is spending \$4 billion a month to maintain the illegal occupation.

A government that speaks for such a small layer of the population and pursues an agenda that so directly conflicts with the interests of the great majority of the population must resort to methods of brute force when it comes to enforcing its social program.

The tragic death of Terrance Shurn has to be placed in this general context. Increasingly the principle role of the police is to suppress any sign of opposition and resistance within the population. Unable and unwilling to address the fundamental causes of discontent in the United States, the response of the political establishment can only be: repression, repression and more repression.

How can working people respond to this crisis?

The politics of race—promoted by a number of local politicians, clergy and businessmen—offers no way out for the working people of Benton Harbor. Individuals like Al Sharpton and the national “civil rights” leader and multi-millionaire Jesse Jackson do not speak for the masses of oppressed black workers.

At every outbreak of social discontent, they step in to corral discontent and channel it along lines that do not challenge the basic conditions of inequality rooted in the profit system. Their calls for black ownership of business, more black police officers and more black politicians have been made before and have led to a dead end. Indeed the city of Benton Harbor—like Detroit, Gary and others—has been run for decades by black politicians who have overseen the continued devastation of the city.

The promotion of the politics of race has a definite social function, which it shares with racism itself: to divide the working class and obscure the fundamental conflict in American society—that between a tiny elite that controls all the levers of political and economic power and the broad majority of the population.

Much has been done to compare “black” Benton Harbor to “white” St. Joseph across the river. But the per capita income of St. Joseph—which at \$25,000 is nearly three times greater than that in Benton Harbor—is deceptive. The figure is skewed by the fact that St. Joseph is home to a small but enormously wealthy layer, including local Congressman and heir to the Whirlpool fortune Fred Upton. The ordinary working people of St. Joseph face

essentially the same social problems of growing unemployment, stagnating living conditions and mounting attacks on their fundamental democratic rights.

That social discontent in Benton Harbor should erupt in the form of a spontaneous outpouring of anger is an expression of the fact that working people have no organizations that speak in their interests. The trade unions today essentially function as company unions, overseeing wage cuts and layoffs throughout the country. The civil rights establishment has lurched sharply to the right in lock-step with the Democratic Party, which does not even make a pretense anymore of fighting for any serious social reforms on behalf of working people.

The crumbs offered by Governor Granholm in response to the riots—a few hundred minimum-wage jobs for a few weeks in the summer—underscore the fact that the Democrats are incapable of meeting the needs of masses of working people and are nothing more than the second party of big business.

A new political party must be built, one that unites the working class in a common struggle to guarantee decent jobs, living standards, health care and education for all. Such a party must fight for a vast redistribution of society’s wealth to meet the needs of the working people and put an end to poverty, unemployment and inequality. The vast sums of resources being squandered to enrich the financial elite and fund the imperialist wars must be redirected to meet social needs.

The Socialist Equality Party urges working people to actively build our party as the new leadership that will fight for this genuinely democratic, egalitarian and socialist perspective.



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