

Rally against police brutality held in Benton Harbor, Michigan

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On Saturday, July 14, two hundred people gathered in Benton Harbor to protest police brutality in the southwest Michigan city and across the country. Last month, a 27-year-old black young man named Terrance Shurn was killed after his motorcycle crashed during a high-speed police chase. This was not the first person killed as a result of police activity and brutality in the city, whose largely African-American residents face daily harassment.

The death of Shurn was followed by two nights of riots in the city, a manifestation of the social tensions and frustrations felt by many of its residents. Authorities responded by ordering a crackdown by hundreds of police and state troopers from throughout the state equipped with armored personnel carriers, dogs and helicopters. More than a dozen people were arrested and at least three are awaiting trial on felony charges carrying up to 10-year prison sentences.

Adding to the anger of protesters on Saturday was last week's decision by Berrien County prosecutors to exonerate police of any wrongdoing in the death of Shurn. The prosecutors simply ignored the daily abuse from police faced by city residents. Wes Coza—the officer who chased Shurn to his death—was particularly known for such abuse.

At the same time, corporate leaders and Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm have offered nothing more than 250 six-week minimum wage summer jobs for Benton Harbor, a city with an official jobless rate of 25 percent. Much of the city's industrial base has been wiped out by appliance giant Whirlpool, which is headquartered in the city and has eliminated than 2,000 manufacturing jobs over the last quarter century.

The July 12 rally was organized by the Southwest Michigan Coalition Against Racism and Police Brutality, a group set up by the Black Autonomy Network of Community Organizers (Banco). The protestors gathered at Benton Harbor City Hall and then marched to the court

house, located in the adjacent city of St. Joseph. The demonstrators carried signs and chanted slogans calling for an end to racism and police violence.

A number of the protesters had driven to Benton Harbor from Chicago, Detroit and other cities across Michigan and the Midwest. The WSWWS spoke to several demonstrators about their reasons for attending the rally.

A disabled worker and long-time resident of Benton Harbor said the unrest in the city was a product of several factors, and cited frustration on the part of youth arising from a lack of employment and recreational activities. "I came here from Chicago when I was seven. That was the 1970s," he said. "Things were different then. There were a lot more jobs." He pointed to the series of plant closings around the city in the late 1970s and 1980s, naming Whirlpool, Michigan Standard Alloy and Clark Equipment in particular.

Kris, a resident of Muskegon, Michigan and student at Grand Valley State University, said he came "to support opposition to police brutality in neighborhoods across the county."

"It is a nationwide thing," he said, pointing to similar problems in his own town. "People need to recognize that this is a real problem, that it is affecting people, particularly if they are of a lower socioeconomic status." Kris said that police brutality was especially a problem for African-American people, for whom the police "are the oppressors." He also suggested that the police brutality was part of a wider problem, saying in treating people differently, "they take from the poor and give to the rich."

Ernest Allen is a long-time resident of Benton Harbor. He said, "The main issues are injustice, a corrupt system, corrupt people, double standards of justice. Police brutality has been going on for years, to the point where the police are covered by the judges and the courts. It really stymies a person's ability to defend himself in the court of law."

Ernest expressed a belief shared by many of the protesters that the entire criminal justice system works against the population of Benton Harbor. The city has one of the highest incarceration rates in Michigan. The prison system is integrated into the economic system of exploitation. Those who are convicted of crimes are denied the ability to secure regular jobs and are forced into minimum wage employment for temporary agencies like Manpower.

Ernest also said, “The employment situation is really bad here. Unemployment here is over 25 percent. They need more than the 250 jobs being offered by Governor Granholm. They need more than that, it does very little. It’s just a ploy to calm people down.” Nearly 650 city youth have applied for the positions, which are being handed out by lottery.

While many of those attending the rally were motivated by opposition to the social conditions responsible for police brutality, the perspective presented by the organizers and speakers is incapable of advancing the interests of Benton Harbor residents and working people and the poor in general. Behind the black nationalist and radical rhetoric of the clergymen, entrepreneurs and other middle class layers in Banco is a strategy of pressuring the city and state political establishment to hand out a few crumbs and make some cosmetic changes that will not alter the desperate conditions of the population as a whole.

Banco’s perspective was outlined clearly in the statement read at the rally by Lorenzo Ervin, a former member of the Black Panther party and currently the National Facilitator of Banco. The statement was formulated entirely within the framework of the politics of race. Banco called for an “end to political disenfranchisement [and] neocolonialism” and demanded the “sharing of political power in Berrien County.” It sought to direct opposition against the white population of St. Joseph, saying that the activity of county politicians “has impoverished the black community of Benton Harbor and enriched St. Joseph’s white community.”

As the WSWs pointed out in a statement distributed by supporters at the demonstration, [See “A socialist strategy to oppose police brutality and inequality” the promotion of the politics of race is designed to “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.” The statement called for a political struggle to unite black and white workers in a common struggle

against the destruction of jobs, the erosion of living standards and the attack on social programs.

Banco’s call for the “sharing of political power” has nothing to do with ending the economic and political domination of the corporate elite over the working class. Instead, it is aimed at securing privileges and influence for a layer of middle class blacks and reinforcing illusions in the Democratic Party.

The bankrupt character of such a perspective is particularly clear given the history of Benton Harbor. For decades the city has been run by black politicians and police chiefs, who have overseen a continued deterioration of the living conditions of the majority of the population. In this it is similar to many cities across the country, where black Democratic politicians were elevated to government positions in the years following the riots of the 1960s.

The promotion of racial politics was a conscious policy designed to channel the enormous discontent of masses of people along lines compatible with the status quo. Aside from enriching a small layer of the minority population, this policy has done nothing to alter the basic social problems of the urban centers. In spite of the historical lessons of the past three decades, the same perspective of racial politics is now being advanced by groups like Banco.

The social character of the interests driving the rally’s organizers was reflected in the fact that, outside of individuals around Banco and several politicians, very few local residents attended the rally. The organizers were incapable and uninterested in mobilizing broad layers of the population.

Such a mobilization would require a perspective that seeks to seriously address the enormous social problems faced by the city’s residents: the enormous unemployment and poverty, the crisis in education and health care and the repressive character of the entire political and police system. This would require a struggle to build a political party of the working class that can address the enormous social inequality which is not unique to Benton Harbor or African-Americans, but is a problem faced by all working people.



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