An American city: Benton Harbor and the social crisis in the United States

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On June 12, Terrance Shurn—a black youth from Benton Harbor, Mich.—was killed after a high-speed chase involving police officers from adjacent Benton Township. In response, hundreds of the city's minority youth took to the streets in an expression of spontaneous anger and frustration. Rioting over the course of two nights was met with a massive police crackdown.

In the weeks following the disturbance, Democratic governor Jennifer Granholm announced a token jobs program that funded 250 minimum-wage, six-week summer jobs for youth in the city plagued with chronic unemployment and poverty. Granholm also appointed an obligatory "task force," consisting of local politicians, preachers and businessmen, to investigate the causes of the riot and propose improvements. Meanwhile, the police officers involved in the fatal chase were cleared of any wrongdoing.

The reaction of the political establishment and the media was typical, following a pattern established most recently after the Cincinnati riots of 2001. The authorities and the media first react with shock and disbelief, as if such events are impossible in America, a land of supposed prosperity and popular contentment. Such a reaction only underscores the enormous gap between the daily lives of masses of working people on the one hand, and the business, political and media elites on the other.

What follows is police repression, as in the case of Benton Harbor, where scores of Michigan state troopers and police from around the state occupied the town of 12,000. Hand-wringing pronouncements by political and corporate officials come next, along with meaningless proposals for police sensitivity training or a few temporary jobs. No suggestions, however, are ever broached that address the basic causes of police brutality and social discontent, let alone propositions that would threaten corporate profits or undermine a political agenda that combines ever-greater tax breaks for the rich with further cuts in social programs and services for the working population.

In order to throw a cloud over the enormous social inequality that characterizes American society, politicians and media alike elevate race as the fundamental issue. Class questions, above all, cannot be addressed. Although the Benton Harbor riots dominated the national headlines for a day or two in June, the news media quickly dropped the issue.

The fact that these issues cannot be addressed, however, does not make them disappear. While the immediate cause of the riots in Benton Harbor lay in the daily police harassment and abuse faced by residents of every urban center, this problem itself has deeper roots: the massive unemployment and poverty, the crisis in housing and education and, above all, the enormous social inequality and class conflict that pervades every aspect of American society. Benton Harbor reflects, in a concentrated and particular form, the social crisis in the United States—a crisis, furthermore, that is being exacerbated by the right-wing and militarist agenda of the Bush administration.

The *World Socialist Web Site* sent a team to the city to speak with local residents and conduct an investigation into the broader social background of the riots that occurred two months ago.

Statistics give some indication of the social conditions in the city located in the southwestern portion of the state on Lake Michigan. The average unemployment rate in 2002 was 25 percent, up nearly 9 percent from the official figure in the 2000 census.

According to the census, 42 percent of adults over the age of 16 are not considered part of the labor force because they are no longer seeking work. This compares with a national average of 36 percent, suggesting that a disproportionate number of Benton Harbor residents have given up hope of finding a decent job. Of all households, 32.5 percent have income of less than $10,000, 62.8 percent less than $25,000 and 87.3 percent less than $50,000.

Much of the housing in the city is in shambles. More than 68 percent of housing structures were built before 1959, and nearly 29 percent before 1939. Almost 70 percent of houses have a market value of less than $50,000. Nevertheless, for 46.7 percent of households, gross rent took up more than 35 percent of total income. More than 16 percent of housing units are vacant. A trip through the city reveals boarded-up houses, many of which are quickly deteriorating.

The Benton Harbor school district, which began to decline in the 1970s, is now the third poorest in Michigan. Ninety percent of Benton Harbor school children live in poverty, and the district is in need of $30 million just to conduct basic repairs of school buildings.

In some ways the problems in the city are much worse than these numbers indicate. The actual unemployment rate is probably double the official figures. Much of the employment that does exist is minimum-wage and temporary. Manpower, the temporary job agency, is one of the largest employers in the area, placing workers in industrial and service jobs for the minimum wage. Youth unemployment is particularly high, and many residents cite this—combined with the lack of recreation for young people—as one of the main factors behind the riots.

Part of the reason why the official unemployment figure is much lower is that it is not necessary to have a steady job to be considered employed by the government. One resident told the WSWS that "the temp jobs that are available don't last, perhaps only for a week or two." Many of these workers will be considered officially employed. Even those who have steady jobs have trouble getting by. "You can barely raise a family on two incomes plus other help," this resident said. [*See* "Class, race and the social problems in Benton Harbor: interviews with city residents."]

Benton Harbor has the lowest average manufacturing wage in the state of Michigan, including the Upper Peninsula, where wages are notoriously depressed.

The WSWS spoke to one worker who explained some of the difficulties faced by residents. "If you make $200," he noted, "maybe $60 or $70 has to go to child support, and then I still have to take care of my own kids. If you get a job at the temp service, they take out a dollar for every hour you work. If you make $6 an hour, you only keep $5. The housing is too high. It costs $350 a month or more. How are you going to pay for that when

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there aren't any jobs and you can't work?"

Hand in hand with the enormous social inequality of cities like Benton Harbor has been an escalation of police repression. It is through the police that the class character of the state is clearly exposed. As one Benton Harbor resident put it, the role of the police is "to keep poor people in their place." This often takes the form of racial profiling, as the minority youth that populate the inner cities are singled out for particular abuse, with indiscriminate arrests and harassment.

The police repression is closely integrated into this economic exploitation. A person who is incarcerated—the county jail located just across the bridge in St. Joseph currently holds some 500 people, most of whom are from Benton Harbor—will generally be refused employment for any but temporary labor, helping to keep the cost of labor low. Jail time is routinely handed out for such offenses as late payment of child support, which can result in 45 days imprisonment for the first offense, 90 days for the second, 180 for the third, and so on. This is a common practice. Nationally, blacks account for nearly 50 percent of the prison population, while making up only 12 percent of the population as a whole.

Conditions have gotten worse over the past three years. When asked about how things have changed over the past decade, a resident noted, "At first it seemed like they were making some progress. Then things stood still."

This is a nationwide phenomenon. The so-called economic boom of the 1990s—which saw an enormous growth in social inequality—was hardly a golden age. Nevertheless, conditions for many workers have declined substantially since the bursting of the stock market bubble in 2000. This is particularly true of black workers employed in manufacturing. In 1999-2000, national unemployment for blacks over 20 years of age was 7 percent, not far from the national unemployment rate of about 5 percent. Since March 2001, 15 percent of manufacturing jobs held by blacks have been cut, pushing overall black unemployment up to 10.5 percent. Meanwhile, the overall US jobless rate has soared to over 6 percent, with the real figure much higher.

The job crisis is also having a disproportionate effect on youth employment. The unemployment rate for youth aged 16 to 19 is 19.3 percent. The employment rate for teenagers has fallen 9 percent since 2000, to about 36 percent. As retail stores and manufacturers cut back, young people are often the first to go. These developments have been undoubtedly reflected in the recent history of Benton Harbor.

In contrast to the conditions of Benton Harbor, a section of the population in adjacent St. Joseph is quite affluent and had enriched itself on the basis of the stock market bubble. St. Joseph—a town of 9,000—is mostly white, while Benton Harbor, across the river, is overwhelmingly black.

Executives and managers employed at the Whirlpool world headquarters located in Benton Township reside in St. Joseph. David Whitman, the current CEO of Whirlpool, received $8.5 million in total compensation last year, including stock option grants. St. Joseph, located on the shores of Lake Michigan, is a prime getaway for the Chicago elite. The lakeshore is peppered with yacht clubs and expensive homes—including that of Republican congressman Fred Upton, grandson of one of the founders of Whirlpool.

This extreme social inequality contributes to the anger and frustration of those living in Benton Harbor. During the riots in the late 1960s, one of the bridges between Benton Harbor and St. Joseph was raised to prevent Benton Harbor residents from crossing over to reach the wealthy areas of St. Joseph.

Nevertheless, the perception promoted in the media that the entire population of St. Joseph is extremely well off is inaccurate. Many residents work as subcontractors for Whirlpool or have low-paying jobs servicing the wealthy. According to the 2000 census, 30 percent of households in St. Joseph have incomes below $25,000 and nearly half below $35,000. These are less than the corresponding percentages for Benton Harbor. However, more striking than the division between the two cities is the contrast between the 5 percent of households in St. Joseph with incomes over $150,000 and the great majority of working class people in both cities.

The conditions that have been created in Benton Harbor are not accidental, but are bound up with the historical development of American capitalism over the past half-century. During the last decades of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th, Benton Harbor experienced rapid industrial growth. Located between Chicago and Detroit, the city became dependent on the automotive industry. It was also during this period that Whirlpool grew to become the country's leading manufacturer of dishwashers. Whirlpool's headquarters were established in Benton Township during the 1950s, and since that time the company has exerted a dominating influence over the county's economic and political development.

During and following World War II, the United States experienced a period of relative economic prosperity and growth based on the expansion of manufacturing. The growth of the automotive and other industries in the Midwest attracted working people to the urban centers. Manufacturers in Benton Harbor actively recruited poor blacks and whites from Southern states to fill the labor shortage created by the war.

Benton Harbor had been part of the wave of industrial unionism and militancy that erupted across the country following World War II. This included a victorious strike at the local Remington Rand plant in 1947 that the county sheriff called an "insurrection." The unions in the area, led in many cases by Communist Party members and socialist-minded workers, united black and white workers in a common struggle. The industrial growth and concessions wrested from employers helped to provide stable employment for a substantial section of the working class.

The escalation of the Vietnam War during the 1960s, however, undermined domestic spending and increased social tensions. In many cases, young people were denied opportunities for steady employment and growing living standards that their parents enjoyed. The ongoing social inequality, combined with racism and police brutality, sparked a series of riots in cities across the country, including Chicago, Detroit, Newark and Los Angeles. Riots occurred in Benton Harbor in August of 1966 and again in 1967.

The crisis in the late 1960s was a prelude to deepening economic decline, especially in manufacturing, in the United States. Following World War II, the American government had promoted the economic recovery of Europe and Asia, which formed the basis for the expansion of the world economy as a whole under the hegemony of the United States and the American dollar. But this very growth created its own problems. As European and Asian industry developed, it posed an ever-greater competitive threat to American business. These contradictions reached a peak during the 1970s and 1980s.

American companies began "rationalizing" production by closing shops and shifting operations in search of cheaper sources of labor. This involved a massive attack on the traditional areas of working class strength and militancy. The automotive, steel and other industries began abandoning cities like Detroit, Flint, Pontiac, Gary, Pittsburgh and Chicago, where the working class struggles of earlier years had secured major concessions from big business.

The development of new technologies in transportation and communications allowed companies to globalize production, moving plants abroad where labor was much cheaper. Between 1967 and 1987, Chicago lost 60 percent (over 500,000) of its manufacturing jobs; Detroit lost 51 percent (108,000). These cities fell victim to the crisis of American industry, and what took its place—low-paying and scattered service employment—could not meet the needs of the urban population.

Benton Harbor was by no means immune to these developments. In

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1975, Voice of Music, which made stereos and radios, went out of business, leaving some 1,500 out of work. This was followed by a series of closings over the next several years: Superior Steel Castings, Benton Harbor Malleable, Paramount Die Castings, Clark Equipment, Auto Specialties. Whirlpool moved much of its manufacturing to Southern states and began to globalize its operations. From a peak of 2,400 in the 1960s, Whirlpool cut its Benton Harbor manufacturing workforce down to 300, a figure that remains the same today. In total, in the decade from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, a Benton Harbor-St. Joseph workforce of about 40,000 lost 8,000 jobs.

In the late 1990s, Whirlpool was pulling in record profits even as it slashed its workforce, while globalizing production in search of cheaper labor. None of this came back to the residents of Benton Harbor, known locally as the "Whirlpool ghetto."

Downsizing has devastated the entire region of southwest Michigan.In the mid-1990s, the region saw the shutdown of General Motors' Kalamazoo Stamping Plant, leaving 3,500 people jobless, as well as five paper plants, with the loss of 1,500 more. Thousands also lost their jobs as the result of corporate mergers affecting the banking and pharmaceutical industries.

The trade unions were incapable of resisting these trends. The AFL-CIO bureaucracy—having purged all socialists and integrated itself into the structure of corporate management—did nothing to stem the loss of jobs in the 1970s and 1980s. Based as it was on a nationalist perspective, the union bureaucracy was powerless in the face of the globalization of production. Those strikes that did erupt throughout the country during the 1980s were systematically isolated and betrayed by the union leadership. Today, the trade unions play no significant role in Benton Harbor.

No one within the political establishment offers any serious solution to these problems. Local, state and national politicians of both stripes are united in the conception that the only way to improve conditions is by offering tax cuts to businesses. This free-market solution to social problems—inaugurated by Reagan in the 1980s (in the form of "Enterprise Zones"), promoted by the Clinton administration (in the form of "Empowerment Zones") and developed at a state level by Republican governor John Engler (in the form of "Renaissance Zones")—has done nothing to help the population of devastated cities. To the extent that these policies have attracted any business to urban centers, it has not been on the basis of helping the population, but of pushing it out through gentrification.

This is indeed what is taking place in Benton Harbor, where such policies have been pursued since the 1980s. Local politicians are currently backing "redevelopment," especially around the Whirlpool headquarters on the north side of the city, seeking to attract middle-class layers. The market-rate housing and office space that is being constructed will do nothing to help the plight of Benton Harbor residents.

The race politics promoted by the Democratic Party, the civil rights establishment and local politicians has proven itself to be completely bankrupt. The black city political establishment is widely hated by residents, having presided over decades of deteriorating conditions. Those in office today are many of the very same people who came to power during the 1970s and 1980s, based on the slogan that the immense social problems of American society could be solved by placing a few blacks in government positions or hiring more black police officers.

In the days after the June riots, multimillionaire Jesse Jackson and Democratic presidential candidate Al Sharpton came to Benton Harbor. Neither had any serious proposals to address the crisis, doing nothing more than to promote the Democratic Party and racial politics.

A local organization—the Black Autonomous Network of Community Organizations (Banco)—is made up of black preachers, businessmen and other hoping to pressure Whirlpool and other businesses, as well as state and local authorities, to invest in black-owned businesses. Banco organized a rally two weeks after the riots to protest police brutality, but the organization was unable to attract widespread support. There is an instinctive hostility among ordinary working people to demands for more demands for "black control of the community." As one resident told the WSWS, "These are class questions. I work with all sorts of people: black, white, Jews and Mexican. This is not a racial thing."

In its interviews with local residents, the WSWS found that there is a deeply felt class sentiment within broad sections of the population, which stems from a long experience with exploitation and the local black political establishment. With no progressive political channel for voicing deep discontent, frustration and desperation in the face of apparently insurmountable obstacles to a secure and meaningful life, the social tensions in Benton Harbor were expressed in a spontaneous outbreak of anger and violence.

The economic and political processes of the last two decades, which have greatly enriched the ruling elite at the expense of the working, have led to a shift to the right by all of the traditional organizations that kept the working class tied to the profit system—the Democratic Party, the civil rights establishment and the trade unions.

A new political movement must be built by working people that will address the enormous social problems in cities throughout the US. The necessary resources for employment, housing, education and recreation must be attained by putting an end to social inequality and the system that subordinates the needs of all working people to the dictates of private profit.

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