

Class, race and the social problems in Benton Harbor: interviews with city residents

A WSWWS reporting team
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Two nights of rioting broke out in Benton Harbor, Mich., last June following the death of a young black man as a result of high-speed police chase. The disturbance was met with a mass police crackdown by local and state authorities. [See *accompanying article*, “An American city: Benton Harbor and the social crisis in the United States.”]

A reporting team from the *World Socialist Web Site* recently traveled to the area and spoke with number of Benton Harbor residents.

James is a young worker at a local parts plant. He spoke out angrily against the police harassment and repression. “Whatever they want to do they can do. If we do speak out, who is going to hear us? How are we going to fight the police? A bunch of us get in a car and are just driving and we get pulled over.”

James also commented on the social crisis in the city. “It’s been like this for years and years,” he said. “Everyone said things are going to change, but I don’t see anything happening. There are no jobs. There’s nothing for the kids to do. Just look at Main Street. Everything is closed up. There used to be a movie theater there, but it’s gone. If some guys decide to go to Benton Township, it’s just because there’s nothing to do here. Then they get harassed by the police. They don’t want us over there. They want to keep the poor in their place.”

We spoke to James about how race has been promoted by the media as the main issue behind the riots in June. “You hear about how we are all racist,” he said, “We’re not racist. That’s the way it is presented in the media. No one is prejudiced. We are all black people here, but there are also whites. I work with all sorts of people: black, white, Jews and Mexican. These are class questions.” One of James’s friends interjected at this point, “There are two races: the poor race and the rich race. If we fight each other, they don’t have to worry about us.”

Kay, a city resident for almost 50 years, spoke about the

social conditions in the city. “As long as there is so much unemployment and no recreation for children, there are going to be problems. When I moved here, things were much different. It was integrated, new homes were being built and there were plenty of jobs. Superior Steel was here, and Elrico and Whirlpool. When they were here, things were better. I left briefly and came back in 1962. By then houses were being torn down and people were being moved into projects, out of the flats and into the city. The migrant farm workers also lived in the flats. They were moved out. Everything changed after urban renewal. That’s a funny name for tearing a city down. After the 1967 riots, things got worse and worse.

“I get \$572 a month and I spend \$325 of it on rent. The rest goes for food and medicine. I get \$10 in food stamps. That is an insult, especially when you have to pay \$1.30 each way for Dial-A-Ride to get to the store. I worry about the kids and there not being jobs in the city.”

Her oldest daughter added, “You have to know someone to get a factory job. Even then, it is not guaranteed. There is a 90-day probationary period and many times they fire you before 90 days. Most of the other jobs are with Manpower, Kelly and other temporary agencies. I have a few friends who have had money taken out of their pay to pay the agencies.

“There are things to do with your children, you just have to find them and they cost money. There are baseball teams, basketball teams and cheerleading. I have three children. I pay \$50 for both of my kids to play sports and \$100 for the uniforms. The band is free through the school, but I have to buy the instrument.

“Rents are too high. A three-bedroom apartment is \$450 a month. We now have a land contract [rent-to-buy agreement]. Any bank will give you a loan for a car, but not for a home. City commissioners are buying up the homes—for as little as \$50 at auction—and renting them out, but they are not fixing them up, so they are not worth

living in.

“When you get a criminal record you can’t get steady work, so almost every black person in Benton Harbor can’t get work. Because being in any trouble just multiplies your chances of not being hired.”

Neecey has lived in Benton Harbor for more than 25 years and is originally from Fort Wayne, Ind. “The riots were caused by problems that have been going on in Benton Harbor for a long time that no one has been paying attention to.” She also spoke out against police harassment: “They pull people over just because they can do that. They’re supposed to ‘protect and serve’ people.” Regarding the social conditions, she said, “There’s not enough jobs and education, nothing for the youth to do. No recreation.” The lack of education and recreation opportunities for youth is a frequent complaint of Benton Harbor residents. We spoke to Neecey across the street from an abandoned field that was once home to Benton Harbor Junior High School.

Asked whether things had changed over the past several decades, she said, “At first it seemed like they were making some progress. Then things stood still. Now you can barely raise a family on two incomes plus other help. The temp jobs that are available don’t last, perhaps only for a week or two.” Asked about her response to the claims that the 1990s were a booming time for Benton Harbor, she said, “Things weren’t booming for Benton Harbor, not for the poor.”

Asked what she thought of the war in Iraq, she said. “They need to take care of the United States first, before he [Bush] starts talking about going to Iraq to take their stuff.”

Laymond has been a cook at Kentucky Fried Chicken for two years. “There ain’t no jobs,” he said. “That’s why people are out on the streets. If there were any good jobs, they wouldn’t have to sell drugs. The jobs there are, are all minimum wage. If we had better jobs, maybe we could live better. They’ve got a lot of stuff over there [St. Joseph], so why not over here? We feel like we ain’t got nothing to live for any way. That’s why there’s a lot of violence.”

Laymond was a friend of Terrance Shurn, the young man who died in the police chase in June. “Terrance was a good guy. All he did was ride around. He wasn’t the sort of guy who would get in trouble. Why should the police officer pursue him when the other police stopped?” he asked, referring to the fact that the police officer who chased Shurn to his death picked up the chase after another cop decided not to pursue a high-speed chase. “I

think it has to do with racism. Why don’t they chase people in St. Joe’s? Terrance had one kid. [The police] could have got him another day. They knew who he was and had his license. Why did they have to chase him down? It was just like the previous chase [which resulted in the death of an 11-year-old child]. That guy had a petty warrant. Why did they have to chase him down?”

Colleen is a social worker for a local emergency shelter. She described the problem of homelessness in the city. “Homelessness, according to the government, includes only those living on the street. We consider as homeless also those who are precariously housed: those who have had their utilities disconnected and are bouncing from house to house, those that are in a situation where there is domestic violence or overcrowding. Of the 12,000 residents of Benton Harbor, maybe 2,000 are homeless based on these criteria.”

Colleen also spoke about the problems in the educational system. She noted that “in the 1970s, when schools across the country were being integrated, Benton Harbor and St. Joseph would have been the logical place to desegregate in Berrien County. Because the Upton family [the owners of Whirlpool] were in St. Joseph, it didn’t happen. They desegregated a rural area where the people were poor farmers and they knew there would be no opposition.

“Mercy Hospital in Benton Harbor was closed and is currently being used for office space. All of the other hospitals in the county closed as well. The only one left now is in St. Joseph. There is no bus service or taxi service. There is public transportation that is state-owned. It is called Dial-A-Ride. It is a van that holds 10-12 people, and very few people are able to use it. When the county commissioner was here after the riots, he said that Benton Harbor didn’t have a transportation problem. I guess because he has a car and he doesn’t have a problem, then nobody else does either.”



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