

# Detroit mayor rides in luxury as city decays

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A series of public scandals involving Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick have erupted over the last several weeks. The exploits of the 34-year-old mayor, which have been daily news in Detroit and were recently featured on the front-page of the *Wall Street Journal*, give a glimpse of the corruption and arrogance of the political elite that runs one of America's poorest cities.

Last month Kilpatrick, citing a \$230 million deficit, announced the elimination of 900 public employee jobs and demanded city workers take a 10 percent pay cut and other reduced benefits. The mayor said 24-hour bus service would be ended, city-owned vehicles sold, and plans developed to privatize the city's public lighting department. Saying his predecessors had failed to "make tough decisions" and citing the supposedly bloated city payroll, Kilpatrick said the financial predicament was so dire it "requires sacrifice and solutions from everyone."

Behind the scenes, however, there wasn't any belt-tightening going on in the mayor's office. Several weeks before the budget-cutting announcements the city used taxpayers' money to lease a \$57,000 luxury sport utility vehicle, complete with a moon roof, leather interior and heated seats, for the mayor's wife and three small sons. In order to circumvent public oversight city officials paid \$24,995 a year for the Lincoln Navigator, five dollars below the amount that would require approval by the City Council.

For nearly a month the mayor and his aides denied the vehicle had been obtained for the personal use of his family, claiming it had been leased for undercover police work. Under pressure the mayor's office released several documents related to the lease, but the names and addresses of the city employees involved in the transactions were blacked out.

When a local Detroit news reporter confronted Kilpatrick about the vehicle during a mayors' conference in Washington, DC, one of his bodyguards

slammed the reporter against a wall in full view of television cameras.

Politicians feathering their own nests is hardly new. These revelations provoked particular anger from working people in the Motor City, however, where one in three households is too poor to own a car. If the mayor's family was being outfitted with a \$57,000 SUV, why were they being told there was no money for essential services, like the barely functioning public bus system?

The mayor's actions caused alarm in the media and from several city officials, who complained that Kilpatrick's lavish tastes or, more accurately, his lack of discretion in covering them up, had undermined the mayor's ability to push through his austerity plan.

With daily headlines about the "Navigate" scandal and warnings that he faced losing support from corporate Detroit for his upcoming re-election bid, Kilpatrick held a press conference January 22 where he acknowledged the vehicle had been obtained for his family.

The leasing of the luxury SUV was only the latest example of the mayor's unrestrained appetite for the high life while city crumbles around him. On January 21 the *Detroit Free Press* ran a front-page article headlined, "Detroit's mayor too wild for DC cops," which reported that Washington, DC police supervisors said their VIP security team stopped offering after-hours protection for Kilpatrick in 2002 because his "reported nonstop club hopping when he was in town" could have resulted in injury or public embarrassment for their officers.

The mayor's cronies have also come under criticism. Several members of Kilpatrick's Executive Protection Unit were disciplined for milking the city for tens of thousands of dollars in overtime payments. Mike Martin, the bodyguard who assaulted the reporter in Washington, DC, was suspended from the police force

four times in 2003, once for shooting at a man during a fight outside of a Detroit nightclub.

An unsavory picture emerges from all this of political hustlers for whom the attainment of electoral was solely as a vehicle for self-aggrandizement: people who are unabashedly “in it for the money.” Kirkpatrick is the local expression in Detroit of a broader social process, the criminalization of the American ruling elite, from city hall to the corporate boardroom to the White House.

The only difference between the petty corruption of the Kilpatrick administration and its public policy is the scale of the thievery that is going on. One proposal the mayor is reportedly considering to pay off the big lenders that hold the city’s debt is to simply hand over the public lighting department to the private utility company Detroit Edison, if a buyer cannot be found.

The Detroit city government has long been controlled by the Democratic Party. Their record exposes the lie that the working class can rely upon this big business party to defend its interests. On the contrary, the Democrats defend corporate interests just as tenaciously as the Republicans, and the black Democratic Party mayors in the major cities play a particularly critical role.

In the aftermath of the ghetto uprisings of the 1960s, the corporate and political establishment in many US cities handed over power to a series of black mayors, nearly all elected as Democrats, who exploited illusions among minority workers and youth that their election constituted “black empowerment” and would alleviate the conditions facing black workers. Coleman Young in Detroit was one of the most prominent representatives of this trend.

Young, in 20 years in office, and his successors Dennis Archer and now Kilpatrick, followed the dictates of the Big Three auto companies and other big corporations and banks. More than three decades later, Detroit remains economically devastated, a synonym for urban decay and poverty. At the same time, however, Young & Co. cultivated a layer of black politicians and businessmen who enriched themselves at the expense of the city’s population. The gap between this black elite and the impoverished black workers in Detroit is as deep as the class antagonisms and social inequality that pervade America as a whole.

Kilpatrick came to prominence long after the black

Democrats abandoned any pretense of liberal reformism. The son of US Congresswoman Carolyn Cheeks Kilpatrick and Bernard Kilpatrick, the chief of staff of former Wayne County Executive (and Democratic Party machine boss) Ed McNamara, Kilpatrick has been hailed by the media as a part of a “second generation of black leaders.”

These black Democratic politicians, who include US Representatives Jesse Jackson Jr. (D-Ill.) and Harold Ford Jr. (D-Tenn), reject the policies associated with the civil rights era and have embraced the reactionary politics of “personal responsibility” and the capitalist market. Summing up their outlook recently, Cincinnati Councilwoman Alicia Reese told the *Detroit News* the civil rights movement had been fought “to open the doors to the marketplace.” The struggle today, she said, was about establishing “a new generation of entrepreneurs. We’re talking about venture capital.”

Kilpatrick epitomizes this grasping and reactionary social layer. In his State of the City address demanding sacrifices from Detroit workers, he quoted approvingly from the prescriptions of the Mackinaw Center, a right-wing think tank in Michigan that promotes unrestrained free-market policies as the solution to every social problem caused by the profit system.

The recent revelations about his administration constitute one more refutation of the claim that the Democratic Party speaks in the interest of the working class and expose, in particular, the bankruptcy of racial politics. Black workers cannot defend their interests by electing black capitalist politicians, whether Democrats or Republicans, but must join forces with white, Hispanic and immigrant workers in a common struggle against capitalism.



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