

# Humiliated in primary, Detroit mayor faces defeat

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Detroit's incumbent mayor, Kwame Kilpatrick, suffered a major political setback last week, finishing second in the city's August 2 primary election, 11 percentage points behind challenger Freman Hendrix. It was the first time since 1947 that a sitting mayor failed to win a primary vote.

Hendrix, a chief aide to former mayor Dennis Archer, led the field of mostly Democratic Party candidates in the non-partisan primary, receiving 44.28 percent of the vote. Kilpatrick took 33.71 percent, while City Councilwoman Sharon McPhail had 11.74 percent and state Sen. Hansen Clarke collected 8.95 percent. Hendrix and Kilpatrick will face each other in a November 8 run-off election.

Hendrix was able to capitalize on the popular disgust with the Kilpatrick administration, in particular its open display of indifference towards city residents in what remains one of the poorest cities in America. Shortly after Kilpatrick announced the layoff of hundreds of city workers, the imposition of wage cuts and the reduction of bus transportation and other services to trim the city's budget deficit, reports emerged about the city leasing a \$50,000 luxury SUV for the mayor's family and his extravagant use of a city-issued credit card.

In his victory speech last Tuesday, Hendrix hit on this theme, saying, "The folks who have been partying at taxpayers' expense for the last four years are not going to give up the credit cards without a fight."

While Hendrix benefited from the popular anger against the Kilpatrick administration, last week's vote also demonstrated the widespread alienation felt by workers in the city toward the Democratic Party establishment, which has controlled the mayor's office in Detroit since 1962. During this period, the Democrats have overseen the enormous deterioration of

social conditions and services in the city. The widespread feeling that none of these politicians would do anything to improve the lives of ordinary workers was reflected in the low turnout for the primary—with only 21 percent of eligible voters participating.

The determining factor in Hendrix's electoral success, however, was the flood of money that flowed into his campaign from corporate Detroit and other affluent contributors. In the last year, Hendrix reportedly raised \$1.6 million in campaign contributions, nearly three times more than Kilpatrick.

To a great extent, Kilpatrick, who until recently had been hailed as a rising star in the Democratic Party and national politics, has become a public embarrassment and his personal corruption a hindrance to the efforts by big business to impose the city's financial crisis on the backs of the working class. With the continued loss of revenue due to the downsizing of manufacturing in Detroit and Michigan, the city has accumulated a \$350 million deficit and is expected to record a shortfall of at least \$200 million in each of the next two years. While Kilpatrick's budget-cutting and privatization of city services won him the praise of corporate Detroit and Wall Street, the most influential circles now consider him spent goods, with little or no credibility to demand sacrifice from Detroit's already-besieged residents.

Hendrix received the endorsement of both daily newspapers, including the *Detroit News*, which complained that Kilpatrick had "waited too long to begin restructuring Detroit government, including the downsizing of the work force." It added, "We believe Hendrix presents the disciplined approach needed to bring Detroit back from the brink of financial ruin. He offers a plan to restructure Detroit to serve a shrinking population, and to halt the 30-year decline by making the city a better place to live and do business."

Hendrix is well known for his pro-business policies. He was chief aide to Mayor Archer from 1994 to 2001, during a period when Archer was providing massive tax concessions and subsidies to the Big Three automakers and other corporations under the Clinton administration's federal Empowerment Zones program. While city services were slashed, the mayor handed over \$85 million in public funds to subsidize the building of two new sports stadiums, including one for the Ford-owned Detroit Lions football team, as well as millions more for gambling casinos run by MGM Grand and others.

Hendrix became head of the Detroit School Board after its 1999 takeover by the state was orchestrated by former Republican governor John Engler. The takeover, which was followed by a new wave of school closings and teacher layoffs, was also supported by Kilpatrick, then the Democratic leader of the Michigan House of Representatives.

Like Archer, Hendrix also enjoys close relations with the trade union bureaucracy in Detroit, a factor considered important for a mayor who will face the task of pushing through a new series of budget cuts and layoffs. Announcing his union's decision to endorse Hendrix, the president of Teamsters Local 214, which represents Detroit sanitation workers, said Hendrix has already expressed interest in collaborating with the union leaders to impose wage and other concessions on his members.

In a public appearance announcing his union's endorsement of Hendrix, Local 214 President Joe Valenti said, "Our members understand there's a fiscal crisis in the city of Detroit and we have made it clear we're willing to negotiate concessions that will meet the city's needs and provide the greatest possible protection of Teamster jobs." He added, "The current city administration has ignored our efforts to negotiate. Freman Hendrix has committed to negotiate with us and to let us present concession packages that will meet the city's financial needs, protect city services and Teamster jobs."

Whether Hendrix or Kilpatrick is elected in November, workers in Detroit, like those in big cities across America, will face continuing attacks on their jobs and livelihoods.

Detroit continues to be hard hit by the decline in manufacturing and the downsizing of the auto industry.

According to a recent report by the children's advocacy group Kids Count, Detroit children are suffering under poverty levels worse than those in rural Mississippi. Sixty percent have parents who do not have full-time, year-round employment; 35 percent live in poverty and, despite Detroit's longtime reputation as the Motor City, 20 percent of Detroit kids live in homes without a vehicle.

The city is losing its population at the rate of about 1,000 residents a month. Once the fourth-largest city in America—with 1.85 million people in 1950—there are now fewer than 900,000 Detroiters, the lowest level since 1917, on the eve of the explosive growth of the auto industry. A *Detroit News* poll conducted early last month found that 46 percent of respondents said they would move out of the city immediately if they could.



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