

Detroit Democratic mayor resigns, faces jail

Shannon Jones**6 September 2008**

Democratic Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick pleaded guilty Thursday to two counts of obstruction of justice and no contest to one count of felonious assault, ending a months-long political standoff. As part of a plea bargain, the mayor agreed to resign within two weeks and pay up to \$1 million in restitution. He also faces four months in jail, five years probation and will be barred from elective office for five years.

Pressure on Kilpatrick to accept a plea bargain intensified this week when Michigan Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm began removal hearings. Kilpatrick had earlier rejected any plea bargain that involved jail time.

In a speech to supporters following his guilty plea, Kilpatrick appeared unbowed. He admitted “bad judgment” but promised a “comeback.” He attacked Granholm for convening a removal hearing and touted his services to big business—tax-free enterprise zones, concessions from city workers, job cuts, incentives to wealthy developers.

The scandal involving the Detroit mayor has dominated the news in Detroit for months, the poorest large city in the United States. Detroit currently suffers one of the highest home foreclosure rates in the country following wave after wave of job cuts and plant shutdowns by the major auto companies.

Kilpatrick and his former chief of staff Christine Beatty were charged with lying under oath to cover up an extramarital affair during a civil lawsuit against the mayor and city of Detroit brought by three former cops. The officers alleged that the mayor and Beatty fired them as part of an effort to cover up their relationship. The resulting out-of-court settlement obligated the city of Detroit, which has been struggling to stay out of bankruptcy, to pay the policemen and their attorneys \$8.4 million.

The affair between Kilpatrick and Beatty became public when the *Detroit Free Press* published text messages from a city-owned pager that indicated a romance between the mayor and his top aide. Based on this

information, which contradicted their testimony in the lawsuit, local prosecutors brought criminal charges against the pair.

Later, the Detroit City Council, which cannot legally remove a sitting mayor, voted 7-1 to ask the governor to use her authority to convene a misconduct hearing. Kilpatrick responded by denouncing council members, implying the campaign to oust him was racially motivated.

As the mayor clung to office, courts and prosecutors ratcheted up pressure, alleging bail violations and filing assault charges related to a shoving incident involving the mayor and police detectives.

The end for Kilpatrick came as the crisis in the Detroit Democratic Party threatened to impact the 2008 presidential campaign. Obama representatives asked Kilpatrick, a Democratic super-delegate, not to attend the Denver nominating convention last month because of the possible embarrassment it might cause the party. Kilpatrick did not appear on a platform with Obama at the Labor Day rally in Detroit. A public statement from the Obama campaign followed soon thereafter calling on the mayor to step down.

Polls show Obama with only a small lead in Michigan over Republican presidential candidate John McCain. The Democrats consider victory in Michigan vital to their chances in the November presidential elections.

The resignation of the mayor does not resolve the crisis in the city’s political establishment. Due to the incestuous character of Detroit politics, which rests on a thin stratum of more privileged middle class African Americans, Kilpatrick’s fall threatens many others. His mother, for example, Michigan Democratic Congresswoman Carolyn Cheeks Kilpatrick, leader of the Congressional Black Caucus, narrowly survived a primary election challenge.

Kilpatrick’s resignation presages a wholesale cleaning out of city hall, which is staffed by some 160 of his appointees. The first to go has been Detroit Police Chief Ella Bully-Cummings, implicated in the mayor’s attempts at cover-up. Bully-Cummings announced her immediate

retirement within hours of the mayor's resignation. The mayor's general counsel, Sharon McPhail, also announced her intention to quit. In an extraordinary statement, McPhail issued a warning to her staff not to destroy public documents.

Another Kilpatrick appointee, Anthony Adams, head of the water and sewage department, is also expected to soon exit. Several members of the city's law department are also under investigation for obstructing the investigation of Kilpatrick.

Meanwhile, the Federal Bureau of Investigation is looking into allegations that members of the Detroit City Council took bribes in relation to the awarding of a sludge-hauling contract. Federal officials say they have electronic evidence linking council member Monica Conyers, wife of Michigan Democratic Congressman John Conyers, to a payment in connection with the contract deal.

Detroit City Council President Kenneth Cockrell Jr., a Kilpatrick opponent, will take over as interim mayor, with his bitter rival Conyers set to take his place as head of the council. The Detroit corporate establishment is already vetting possible long-term replacements for Kilpatrick, including Dave Bing, multimillionaire owner of a Detroit auto parts manufacturing company.

The Kilpatrick administration is the embodiment of the alienation of the black Democratic Party establishment in Detroit from the needs and concerns of hard-pressed and struggling African-American workers in the city. Following the ghetto uprisings of the 1960s, the corporate elite in many major US cities handed over power to black and minority mayors, mostly Democrats, promoting the illusion that this would alleviate police brutality and poverty.

As part of this trend Coleman Young, who had been a UAW organizer in the 1930s, took office in 1973 as Detroit's first African-American mayor. However, the experience of the next 35 years demonstrated the bankruptcy of the conception that replacing white politicians with black would improve the lives of minority workers in urban areas.

Over the next two decades mass layoffs and plant shutdowns in the auto industry devastated Detroit and other manufacturing centers in the Midwest. The Young administration responded by slashing jobs and social services, while building up the powers of the police. At the same time Young promoted a layer of black businessmen and politicians who enriched themselves at the expense of the city's population.

In 1993 former Michigan Supreme Court justice Dennis

Archer succeeded Young. Unlike Young, Archer had no connection to the labor or civil rights movement. He continued the policy of job and service cuts while promoting casino gambling, which preys on the poorest sections of the working class, as the solution to the city's problems.

First elected in 2001, Kilpatrick became the youngest mayor of Detroit at age 31. His administration won the support of the city's corporate establishment for its "business-friendly" policies, including the establishment of tax-free enterprise zones. Kilpatrick's efforts to "revive" Detroit included more cuts in social services, the sell-off of city assets, the privatization of services, and the hosting of sporting extravaganzas, including the 2006 Super Bowl.

Kilpatrick enjoyed national prominence in the Democratic Party. He spoke at the 2000 and 2004 Democratic conventions and was elected vice president of the National Conference of Democratic Mayors. However, his lavish lifestyle in a city ravaged by unemployment and poverty drew unfavorable notice. He charged more than \$200,000 in entertainment expenses to the city and used public funds to lease a luxury vehicle for family use. Rumors of a wild party involving exotic dancers at the mayoral mansion further tarnished his image. The subsequent murder of one of these dancers, Tamara Greene, in an apparent contract killing, led to a lawsuit by members of her family, who say city officials obstructed the investigation into her death.

Detroit business leaders long tolerated the "excesses" of Kilpatrick and his cronies because of their valuable services. They only reluctantly turned against Kilpatrick when the mounting scandals made it impossible for his administration to govern effectively.

In the final analysis, the crisis of the Democratic Party in Detroit reflects its inability, as a party of big business, to advance a progressive solution to the horrific social decay of the city, which is one of the sharpest expressions of the decline of American capitalism as a whole. The replacement of Kilpatrick by another hand-picked representative of the corporate establishment will not alter this state of affairs.



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