

# Mass abstention in Detroit mayoral election

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8 May 2009

Only one in seven eligible voters participated in a special mayoral election in Detroit, Michigan, Wednesday in a sign of widespread alienation with the Democratic political machine that has run the US city for decades. David Bing, a former basketball star and a wealthy businessman, defeated Kenneth Cockrel, Jr., by a 52-48 percent margin. Less than 100,000 of the eligible 600,000 voters went to the ballot box.

Cockrel, the former city council president, took over as interim mayor last September after Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick was forced to resign as part of a plea bargain deal on obstruction of justice charges. Kilpatrick's six years in office were distinguished by felony charges, rampant corruption and nepotism, multiple documented cases of assault, along with allegations of murder. The once rising star in the Democratic Party oversaw the continued decimation of jobs and social services in America's poorest big city.

Bing will serve out the rest of Kilpatrick's second term, which ends on December 31, 2009. Another general election, the final round of which is scheduled for November 2009, will determine who will serve as mayor for the next four years.

Bing and Cockrel represent rival factions of the black business establishment. There were no fundamental differences between the two candidates. Both ran on the basis of providing ever more incentives to big business, more cuts in city services and law and order repression. Neither offered any answer to the staggering social problems confronting the working class in Detroit. At 22 percent, the city has the highest unemployment rate in the nation, along with one of the highest percentages of home foreclosures.

In recent weeks several more blows have been delivered to city residents: the Detroit Public Schools announced the closing of 50 schools over the next two years; Chrysler declared bankruptcy and the Obama administration threatened to deliver General Motors to the same fate; and auto supply giant American Axle announced the closing of its largest plant. Neither candidate had anything to say about these attacks, which will devastate the lives of thousands of

city residents. Bing's election platform—a "Vision for Detroit"—mentions the words "unemployment" and "foreclosure" exactly once, and "crime" 20 times.

With no serious differences between them, Bing, who has no experience in office, presented himself as someone with cleaner hands than Cockrel, who has spent 11 years on the City Council. Bing was endorsed by the city's newspapers—*Detroit Free Press*, *Detroit News* and *Michigan Chronicle*—along with its major business organizations. He also received the backing of Detroit NAACP leader Wendell Anthony and a last minute endorsement from Rev. Jesse Jackson.

Cockrel won the backing of longtime US Congressman John Conyers, along with the United Auto Workers and the Metro Detroit AFL-CIO. Given the popular hatred of these organizations, which have been complicit in the attack on the jobs of auto workers and public service workers, their endorsements did little to persuade anyone to vote for Cockrel.

Bing is expected to press for even deeper cutbacks than proposed by Cockrel, who had previously announced plans to lay off hundreds of city workers and impose a 10 percent wage cut on those remaining.

As the Associated Press reported, "One of Bing's first tasks will be digging into Cockrel's proposed city budget and likely making extensive layoffs his predecessor was hesitant to do. 'That potential does exist,' Bing said of giving pink slips to more than the 334 city workers proposed by Cockrel."

Consolidating city operations "is the first thing you look at," Bing told the Associated Press Wednesday morning. "We can't afford to have all these departments operating the way they are."

Bing has taken up the theme, often repeated in the editorials of the city's two major dailies, that city employees must give up their supposedly undue pay and perks. "This whole entitlement mentality is something we have to change," he said of city workers, "and I'm the one to bring that change when I become mayor."

The mayor-elect immediately announced he was putting together a team of current and former corporate executives

to shape his policies. He named former Deputy Mayor Fremman Hendrix, magazine publisher Denise Ilitch (daughter of Mike Ilitch, founder of Little Caesar's pizza and owner of Detroit's professional baseball and hockey franchises) and retired Ford Motor Co. executive Joseph Walsh to lead his transition team.

Emmett Moten, a longtime developer and Bing adviser, said, "City government is run the same way as business. It's not different. He has to get a handle on the city's fiscal responsibility to the community. That's not only the budget but also respect on Wall Street and Lansing."

Bing is symbolic of the layer of black entrepreneurs cultivated by the corporate elite and Democratic Party through affirmative action and minority set aside programs. Such policies, which date back to Nixon's program of "black capitalism," were put into place after the social upheavals of the 1960s in order to create a privileged layer with a stake in the capitalist system.

In the aftermath of the wave of violent eruptions across America's urban centers—including the massive 1967 Detroit riot—several black mayors were put into office—in order to bolster illusions that the problems facing minority workers and youth, including unemployment, racial discrimination and police abuse, could be addressed by elevating African Americans into positions of economic and political power.

In 1972 Coleman Young became the city's first black mayor. In the two decades he served as mayor, he defended the interests of the corporate elite just as loyally as his white predecessors. As black workers and youth were impoverished—with two-thirds of the city's manufacturing jobs wiped out—a thin layer of black businessmen and well-connected politicians enriched themselves.

Shortly after retiring from basketball Bing began a career in the steelmaking business in 1980 with the help of Bill Davidson, the late owner of the Detroit Pistons, and was awarded National Minority Small Business Person of the Year by Ronald Reagan. He parlayed the business—the Bing Group—into a major steel and auto parts supplier for the Big Three automakers, employing over 1,100 workers with an estimated \$1 billion in sales.

During the campaign it was revealed that the auto parts plant he operates had been cited for over 150 safety violations. A worker died during an accident in one of Bing's steel plants in 2000, but no details or records have been made public. Two more serious injuries were reported in separate incidents, according to the *Detroit Free Press*.

The company was fined \$173,600 in 2007, after the Michigan occupational safety division found 50 safety violations at Bing's plant, mostly for repeat offenses. The

organization usually issues less than four fines of that size per year, according to the *Free Press*.

In his proposals to create jobs in the city, Bing promises to "eliminate red tape" and "encourage business development," i.e., to attract investment by gutting health and safety regulations, cutting corporate taxes and offering up the city's impoverished workers as a cheap labor workforce.

The decades-long social decay in Detroit is an indictment of the Democratic Party and the profit system it defends. The tragic collapse of the Motor City is perhaps the sharpest expression of the decline of American capitalism, and the deliberate policy of deindustrialization that has been pursued by the financial elite as it has increasingly turned to speculation.

Since 1950, the city's population has been reduced by half, from 1.8 million to 900,000. Whole neighborhoods are abandoned, with foreclosed houses boarded up, populated by squatters and stripped of plumbing and electrical wire. Once boasting the highest per capita income in America, it is now the poorest big city in America, with one third of its children living below the poverty level and a per capita income less than a third of that in the rest of the US.

This social disaster—and the unresponsiveness of the entire political system—is generating deep anger that will inevitably lead to revival of the rich traditions of class struggle that the city has long been identified with.

Detroit workers need their own voice, their own program, and their own party in order to advance their interests. This is why Socialist Equality Party candidate D'Artagnan Collier is running for mayor in the August 2009 primaries. We encourage our readers to support him and contribute to his campaign.

*The author also recommends:*

Support D'Artagnan Collier, Socialist Equality Party candidate for Detroit mayor  
17 April 2009



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