

Southwest Detroit residents speak to D'Artagnan Collier campaign

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Supporters of D'Artagnan Collier, Socialist Equality Party candidate for mayor of Detroit, campaigned Saturday in southwest Detroit in the area known as Mexicantown.

Collier will be speaking at a public meeting at the Holy Redeemer Church in Mexicantown on Wednesday, July 1 at 7pm. The volunteers were in southwest Detroit to build for the meeting, as well as to talk to residents about the problems facing the community.

Living conditions in southwest Detroit have been in steady decline in particular since the launching of an offensive against the working class in the 1980s. The 1987 closure of General Motors' Fleetwood Body plant, which once employed 6,000 workers, was a major milestone in the decline of the area. This devastating blow could not have been accomplished without the complicity of the United Auto Workers union and the Democratic Party.

One in three workers in Mexicantown already lives below the national poverty threshold. The current official unemployment rate in Detroit is 22 percent, and climbing, although this excludes the underemployed and the "discouraged." As several residents told our reporters, many people in the area work only a couple of days per week with a net income that makes maintaining any sort of decent living standard impossible.

Although dilapidated, Mexicantown is one of the relatively few areas of inner city Detroit that does not have the feel of a ghost town. Located in the pocket between Michigan Ave/Highway 12 and I-75, Mexicantown is one of the most ethnically diverse neighborhoods in Detroit, with significant populations of Mexican, Italian and Polish immigrants. While other parts of Detroit have continued to experience mass

emigration over the last decade, Mexicantown has experienced marginal population growth.

The sense of community that has managed to survive despite these trying conditions helps account for the social resistance that has spontaneously manifested itself in recent years. The community has come out in large numbers, for example, to oppose the shutdown of the public education system in Detroit, a program being organized by the Democrats, who hold virtually every office in local government.

In May 2009, hundreds of students took to the streets of southwest Detroit to protest the proposals made by Robert Bobb, Emergency Financial Director for the Detroit public school system (at an annual salary of \$260,000), which include the permanent closing of 29 Detroit public schools and the firing of some 33 principals. (See: "Detroit Public Schools financial manager dismisses pleas at public meeting").

On June 4, concerned workers in southwest Detroit spoke out at a public hearing against Bobb's decision to fire Rebecca Luna, the principal of nearby Western International High School. Parents and students insisted that Luna had acted as a dedicated principal known for working closely with troubled students. Their pleas were ignored.

Our correspondent tailed one team of volunteers as they made their way through the streets of Mexicantown talking to workers.

Upon receiving the flyer for D'Artagnan Collier, Lou Davis told us, "Anything would be better than what we have in there now. I could put my dog in office and it would be better than David Bing. As soon as he came into office, he just put all the same people into the same positions. Of course nothing is going to change if you keep all the same corrupt people around you.

"At one time they were talking about building a

public transportation system that could take people from here to Rochester to work in the factories. Look at these streets. Can you picture them with rails running down the middle? You know why that got quashed, don't you? We are in the automobile capitol of the world."

Don McMurdie told our correspondents he had lost his trucking company in the late 1990s. "I lost my trucks and my house. I had to live on the streets for two and a half years as a homeless veteran. I have a place now, but it was rough for a while.

"I get \$985 a month from the VA [US Department of Veteran's Affairs]," McMurdie explained. "It is barely enough to live on. I refinanced my house so I could help my sister pay her mortgage. She had medical problems, and I had to help her because she didn't have money to pay her medical bills and her mortgage. It ends up we both lost our houses. I had my house for fifty years.

"I read an article," said McMurdie "that said if you took all the money they gave to Wall Street to bail out the banks and divided it up it would be \$300,000 for every person in the country."

When asked if they had been affected by the current economic crisis, the response was virtually universal: "There are no jobs," said McMurdie and Davis, along with fellow residents Margarita Márquez, María de Cambio, Miriam Aguilar, Salvaro Brillones and José Sánchez.

Márquez used to work in an auto parts factory, but is currently unemployed. "I have been out of work for 7 months," said Márquez. "There is no help from anywhere. There used to be programs to help people if they were out of work, but everything is being cut."

"I know a lot of people who are out of a job," said Aguilar. "But even more people are working less. They are working less hours and making less money."

Sánchez and Brillones reiterated this point. "I only get picked one or two days a week [for temporary jobs]," said Brillones. "It is a robbery, they pay \$7 an hour."

"There is no work anywhere," said Sánchez. "We will do anything. We used to pick tomatoes, or work on the cow farms, but now we can't get anything. And they rob us. We don't make enough money to live."

Most workers did not need to be told that the Democrats, Republicans and so-called trade unions do

not represent the interests of the working class. "Shoot," said Davis, when Collier supporters argued that the Democrats and Obama represent the interests of big business, "I know that. I have been in this city my whole life. I am an old-school thug. Now we got Kwame Kilpatrick and Monica Conyers in office. These people are crooks. And David Bing keeps all the same people around him."

The attack against the working class in Detroit has been accelerated by the Obama Administration as a representative of Wall Street. The financial aristocracy's solution to the current economic crisis, a crisis precipitated by their own reckless actions, entails nothing short of a fundamental restructuring of class relations throughout the US. More factories will be closed, more schools will be shut down. If Wall Street and Obama have their way, conditions in southwest Detroit will be reduced to those of the Great Depression.

While these conversations with workers demonstrate the anger and frustration that is seething beneath the surface of southwest Detroit, only an independent political party of the working class can channel this spontaneous resistance into organized struggle.

Workers and students must actively oppose the shutdown of the public education system and the shutdown of the automobile industry in Detroit by occupying factories and schools. This is the perspective that the SEP and D'Artagnan Collier are trying to bring to the city of Detroit and the international working class as a whole.



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