

## Interview with SEP Detroit mayoral candidate D'Artagnan Collier

# How I became a socialist

Nancy Hanover  
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D'Artagnan Collier, the Socialist Equality Party's candidate for mayor of Detroit, has deep roots in the city's working class population and its struggles. Collier, 41, a city worker and lifelong resident of Detroit, joined the socialist movement in 1984.

His maternal grandfather, James Andrew Davis, migrated to the Motor City from Meridian, Mississippi after World War II, one of tens of thousands of African-American workers who left the poverty and racial oppression of the Deep South in search of a better life in Detroit's many auto factories. Davis worked at Chrysler for 33 years, the majority of those years at the auto company's massive Dodge Main complex on the city's east side. He died at the age of 79 from neuropathy—a degeneration of the central nervous system caused by long-term exposure to lead.

D'Artagnan's father—Malcolm J. Collier—was a materials handler at Chrysler's Detroit Trim factory. He had grown up in the Jeffries Housing Projects, but his job at an auto plant enabled him to buy a house on the city's northeast side, marry Diana Gail Davis, and start a family.

D'Artagnan, the first of three boys, was born in July 1968. Many in the family were avid readers and his parents decided to name their child D'Artagnan, after one of the heroic characters in Alexandre Dumas' *The Three Musketeers* (1844). In fact, all three boys would have French or Spanish names.

His parents separated while he was very young, and his mother, a life-long caregiver at nursing homes and hospitals, raised the family on her own. He also spent time with his grandfather—who lived down the street—and recalls the older man leaving for work at his auto plant job before dawn every day.

Auto workers, many of whom like his father and grandfather had grown up in poverty, won a relatively decent standard of living through mass struggles, such as the 67-day General Motors strike in 1970. By the late 1970s, the American ruling elite responded to the growing economic challenge of its global competitors by initiating an offensive against the working class aimed at stripping workers of the gains of generations of struggle. The Chrysler bailout of 1979-80—and the wage cuts, factory closures and mass layoffs that accompanied it—was the opening shot in this assault, which continued with the wave of union-busting in the 1980s and 1990s.

Since 1970, three-quarters of Detroit's manufacturing jobs have been destroyed, wiping out employment for 250,000 workers. The city, which once boasted the highest median income and home ownership rate of any major urban area in America, is now the poorest in the nation, with a Depression-level jobless rate of 25 percent and more than one in three of its residents living below the official poverty line. The Obama administration's forced bankruptcies of General Motors and Chrysler will deepen this social crisis and set the stage for an assault on every section of the working class.

The bitter experiences of the late 1970s and early 1980s, including the abandonment of any defense of the working class by the United Auto Workers and other unions, and the anti-working class policies carried out

by the Democratic Party in Detroit and nationally, were the critical events that shaped D'Artagnan Collier's life and political views.

In 1984, at the age of 16, he joined the Young Socialists, the youth movement of the Workers League, the predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party, and for the last 25 years has played a leading role in the struggle to build a revolutionary leadership in the working class.

Below we post an interview with Collier about the experiences that led him to join the socialist movement.

In the course of our campaign, many people have asked—How did I become a socialist? What drove me to conclude that the only way forward for the working class was socialism?

Most of my coworkers and friends voted for Barack Obama. They're deeply affected by the crisis of capitalism, by the soaring foreclosures and unemployment, declining wages, the cuts to the school system, and the destruction of Detroit.

In explaining why I think it is necessary to break completely with the Democratic Party, to build the Socialist Equality Party as the new mass party of the working class, I point to the nature of the political situation in the US today, to the right-wing policies of the Obama administration, its support for the banks and its attack on the working class.

It is also important, however, to look at this question historically. My decision to become a socialist was bound up with social experiences that affected millions of workers in the US and internationally.

I was born in July 1968. This was a very turbulent time in American life, particularly for blacks. It was only a few months after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and a year after the Detroit rebellion of 1967. During that six-day upsurge in Detroit, 43 were killed and 342 injured, officially. Friends and relatives recalled to me how the city was occupied by over 13,000 federal troops and the National Guard marched through the neighborhoods, carrying loaded weapons and unafraid to shoot.

The riots in Detroit were part of a series of uprisings throughout the country—uprisings that grew out of conditions of poverty, social neglect, unemployment, and government-sanctioned racism. Even at the height of the post-war boom of American capitalism, the "American Dream" was a cruel mockery for millions of workers.

The corporate elite drew its own conclusions from the riots. They understood that to contain social unrest, it was necessary to cultivate a layer of black businessmen and politicians. The concept of "black capitalism" was promoted, famously by President Richard Nixon [1969-74], whose administration also carried out the biggest federal expansion of "affirmative action."

Racism was still a potent force, and many workers looked to the election of Detroit's first black mayor, Coleman Young in 1973, and the hiring of black police officers as a real gain.

However, I never was drawn to black nationalism and identity politics. I was attracted by a desire to understand the broader world and didn't view it through the prism of race. We were all proud of entertainers and singers like Sarah Vaughn and Jackie Wilson, and felt black contributions were

not being recognized. However, I knew that race was not the fundamental issue. The problems I faced were also faced by my white friends and their parents who lived in the same neighborhood and went to the same schools. I saw corruption among the black politicians just like the white ones.

Only later did I realize how the corporate powers would cynically utilize race to control social struggle, by putting prominent blacks in charge of the same exploitation and profit-taking once overseen by whites.

I saw this with Mayor Young—who ran the city until 1993. Despite his claims to represent black people, he cut city services, attacked striking workers with the police and served the interests of the auto corporations, no less obediently than the big business politicians who were white.

I would come to realize later that the essential division in American society was class, not race, and that we had to build a political movement that united the entire working class against every effort to divide and weaken workers, whether through race, religion or nationality. This would be a very fundamental reason why I became a socialist.

As a youngster, I loved to go through piles of National Geographic magazines in my grandparents' basement, the two daily newspapers, plus the Michigan Chronicle. I watched the news every night and was fascinated by science and the possibilities evoked by science fiction like Star Trek. In sixth grade I called myself a philosopher, and asked my mother my purpose in life. I came to the conclusion that the purpose of living was to help solve social problems.

Virtually every resident of our street was an autoworker. The growth of the auto industry, part of the post-war boom, made Detroit into the center of American capitalism, a city where workers could earn a decent wage with decent benefits.

But in 1979, when I turned 11, we heard devastating news. Chrysler Corporation announced a \$1 billion loss, threatened to file for bankruptcy and called for government help: we felt immediately that the future of my family and thousands of others were in doubt.

I, and many in my generation, witnessed dozens of Chrysler plants close over the next few years, including those where my family members worked: Dodge Main was shut in 1980 and Detroit Trim in the late 1980s. Tens of thousands of workers in Detroit lost their jobs almost overnight. My grandfather had to commute to Trenton Engine, an hour's drive each way, for an entire year to keep a job at Chrysler. My mother insisted I concentrate on my studies because no one could count on a job in the plants anymore.

This was the beginning of a massive attack on the working class. When I turned 13, the Reagan administration broke the strike of the PATCO air traffic controllers by firing all of the workers and replacing them with strike breakers.

This was followed by a series of strikes in the 1980s that were systematically isolated by the unions and ended in defeat.

I had seen for myself that the UAW was not protecting the Chrysler workers, and that the AFL-CIO had done nothing for the air traffic controllers. All around me, unions were being broken, people were losing their jobs. Right up the street from my childhood home, Cunningham Drugs workers were being locked out and their union broken.

The conditions of workers were being driven into the ground.

How could you make sense of these events?

I met the Young Socialists 1984, when I was 16. The YS was the youth movement of the Workers League, the predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party. I was intrigued by their explanation of current events within a historical perspective and a coherent philosophy. I was particularly attracted to their call at that time for a Labor Party—a party of the working class and their understanding of the nature of the profit system.

Upon joining the Young Socialists in the summer of 1984, I threw myself into supporting the election campaign of Ed Winn, a Trotskyist member of the Workers League and a New York City transit worker.

Ed Winn had a long a principled record of struggle within the labor movement for socialism. He was a very impressive intellectual figure, while clearly a genuine worker. He used his campaign to oppose the growing threat of imperialist war, denouncing Reagan's invasion of Grenada, the growing provocations against Nicaragua, the deployment of US Marines to Beirut, Lebanon and a massive military buildup. He was an internationalist.

I learned that to be a socialist was to be an internationalist and defend the class interests of workers all across the world, and that the division of workers along national lines served the same purpose as the division of workers along racial lines.

In Detroit, tens of thousands of workers kept losing their jobs as more plants closed—Lynch Road Assembly, Huber Foundry, McGraw Glass, on and on—smaller shops went nonunion and a major recession eliminated jobs left and right.

The UAW was refusing to defend their members and instead attempting to divert workers' anger into a vicious campaign aimed at the Japanese. A young Chinese-American, Vincent Chin, was murdered by a Chrysler supervisor who was ranting about foreigners taking American jobs, and the UAW was sponsoring the bashing of Toyotas in company parking lots.

As socialists, we fought for workers to unite together internationally, both in defense of jobs and in opposition to all forms of imperialist war. The Workers League election campaign pointed to the significance of the struggle of Leon Trotsky and educated those of us who were coming into struggle in the history of the socialist movement.

At this time, the Young Socialists were playing a leading role in the fight for the release of then 26-year-old Gary Tyler, a black youth from Louisiana, who had been framed up for murder.

During a protest at his high school against desegregation, Gary and his black classmates were targeted by a racist mob. After a white youth was shot, he was framed for murder and faced the death penalty. The Young Socialists pointed out that this attack was an attack on the democratic rights of the whole working class.

We mobilized support for Gary throughout the working class and internationally, gaining the signatures of hundreds of thousands of workers and youth. The governor of Louisiana who refused to pardon Gary or review these petitions was Democrat Edwin Edwards. During this period, Jesse Jackson, who also refused to raise the Tyler case, paid Edwards a respectful visit. Moreover, again, the leaderships of the major unions failed to take action on Gary's case.

The treatment of Gary Tyler reinforced for me the need for the political independence of the working class, from both the Democratic and Republican parties, including the Black Congressional Caucus and other self-serving black politicians who clearly favored their careers at the expense of the working class, black or white.

During my senior year at Osborn High School, I organized students against the cuts in education by the Reagan administration. The school's funding for extracurricular activities as well as books and supplies was affected. While distributing a leaflet calling on young people to turn to the working class as the only force capable of stopping the attacks on education, I was suspended from school for three days. Despite the fact that I was an honor roll student with an unblemished record, the authorities attempted to intimidate other young people by disciplining me.

Today I am running for mayor to bring the perspective of socialism to a new generation.

I am still deeply troubled by the prevalence of poverty and the dismal prospects of a decent future—in fact, conditions today are far more urgent than when I joined the fight for socialism.

Over the past twenty-five years the working class has repeatedly demonstrated its willingness to fight. Over this same period all the old organizations—such as the UAW, the other unions and the civil rights establishment—have abandoned the working class.

A new generation is coming into struggle and the question of revolutionary leadership is more crucial than ever. We say to young people: study politics and learn the scientific philosophy of Marxism. Read the Historical and International Perspectives of the Socialist Equality Party.

Young people today will find in the Socialist Equality Party the policies and program necessary for the working class to resolve this historical crisis, to end imperialist war and create a world based on the highest achievements of mankind and the principle of social equality.



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