

The political lessons of the Detroit mayoral elections

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I want to thank everyone who supported and volunteered for the Socialist Equality Party's campaign for Detroit mayor, along with the more than 1,200 people who voted for me in the primary elections on Tuesday.

This vote is very significant. Despite a virtual media blackout of our campaign, a significant layer of the Detroit working class made a conscious decision to vote for a socialist candidate.

Long before the election was held, the political and media establishment had already selected its candidate—current mayor and multi-millionaire businessman David Bing. Bing received 74 percent of the vote on Tuesday, and he will face Tom Barrow, who received 11 percent, in run-off elections in November.

More significant than the percentages going to each candidate, however, was the mass abstention by the working class. Only 17 percent of registered voters in Detroit went to the polls. This means that Bing received the vote of only a bit more than 10 percent of the electorate.

The idea that this is somehow a democratic mandate for Bing and the city establishment is a complete fraud. The vast bulk of the population is completely alienated from city politics. With varying levels of consciousness, they see that the entire Democratic Party-controlled political establishment is mired in corruption and tied to various corporate interests.

Amidst an economic crisis of unparalleled scope, the campaign of the corporate backed candidates was dominated by one basic question: cutting spending to balance the budget.

While campaigning, we spoke to thousands of workers who are being hammered by the economic

crisis, who are seeing their jobs eliminated, their homes foreclosed, their schools shut down, and their wages slashed. The establishment candidates had absolutely nothing to say on the pressing issues confronting the population of Detroit.

Bing will now press ahead with his attack on the working class in Detroit. On Wednesday morning, only hours after the election results came through, he announced plans for massive cuts in government programs and workers pay, including plans to implement a four-day workweek for city workers, while cutting 500 to 700 jobs. He aims to privatize key city services, while closing dozens of our public schools.

The economic crisis confronting the working class as a whole will only intensify. Earlier this week, General Motors announced that it will implement another 7,500 layoffs nation-wide, including many in Michigan. This comes on top of hundreds of thousands of jobs eliminated in the auto industry over the past several years.

Official unemployment is already nearly 25 percent in Detroit, while actual unemployment is much higher. Large sections of the city are already suffering through conditions approaching those of the Great Depression.

The central purpose of my campaign has been to encourage and provide political leadership to working class opposition in Detroit, throughout the country and internationally.

While the various other candidates offered a combination of right-wing proposals and empty bromides, we insisted that the root of the crisis is the capitalist system, the subordination of every aspect of economic and political life to the interests of the corporate and financial elite.

We insisted that the working class needs its own political party, independent of the Democrats and

Republicans. The Democrats have controlled Detroit for decades, overseeing the destruction of thousands of jobs and the dismantling of basic social services.

Our campaign also sought to explain to workers the real nature of the Obama administration. While millions of workers voted for Obama looking for change, the administration has in fact carried out a right-wing agenda on every issue, extending trillions of dollars to the banks while insisting that auto workers and the working class as a whole must “sacrifice.” As a result, the very people who created the crisis that is gripping Detroit and other cities are doing better than ever, with record profits and bonuses at the big banks.

We also called on workers to break with the old corrupt organizations, the so-called “trade unions.” The United Auto Workers, the Detroit Federation of Teachers, the AFSCME city workers union—all have supported the Democratic Party and collaborated in the attack on the working class. Workers need their own independent rank-and-file and neighborhood committees to prepare and organize resistance.

In the elections, the SEP put forward a socialist program in response to the crisis. We issued statements demanding an end to utility shutoffs, home foreclosures and evictions. We said that all schools must remain open and there should be a vast expansion of spending on education. We urged auto workers to occupy plants to prevent further shutdowns. We called for a multi-billion dollar public works program to rebuild our city and provide quality jobs for everyone.

The ruling class and its paid representatives continue to insist that there is “no money” for decent jobs and living conditions. This is a lie. There is plenty of money when it comes to bank bailouts and war.

A socialist solution to the economic crisis, we said, must include the nationalization of the major banks and corporations under the democratic control of the working class. At the same time, there should be a radical redistribution of wealth on a national level, including sharp tax increases on the rich and the return of all their ill-gotten gains. The resources of society must be directed at satisfying social need not private profit.

At the center of my campaign for mayor was the fight for the unity of the working class—across all racial, ethnic, and national boundaries. In our campaign literature, we resolutely rejected identity politics, which

has been used to divide workers and prevent opposition to the capitalist system. A tiny black elite that controls Detroit has benefited enormously from these policies, while the conditions facing the vast majority of workers of all races are now worse than ever.

The fight for this program does not end with the elections. It has only begun. Representatives of the ruling class in Detroit are now congratulating themselves that they successfully installed their mayor of choice. They believe that they can now carry out their assault on the working class unimpeded. But they are shortsighted. The elections only set the stage for major class battles to come.

In the months ahead, the Socialist Equality Party will campaign relentlessly to organize and lead working class resistance in Detroit and throughout the country.

For those of you who supported my campaign and voted for me, I urge you to take the next step: study our program and make the decision to join the Socialist Equality Party.

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