

The US Social Forum in Detroit

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Thousands of people will convene in Detroit Tuesday for the US Social Forum, which advertises itself as “a space to come up with the peoples’ solutions to the economic and ecological crisis.” The organizing body writes, “We must declare what we want our world to look like and we must start planning the path to get there.”

The US Social Forum is officially sponsored by the pro-capitalist AFL-CIO, organizations in and around the Democratic Party—one of America’s two major big business parties—and funded in part by foundations and NGOs that have a stake in the existing social order.

What these forces want “our world to look like” is something *not very different* than it does at present. Nervous about a mounting popular radicalization, the unions and sections of the various social protest movements seek to channel the energy and activism of the mostly youthful participants in one way or another behind the Obama administration and the Democrats.

But only an internationalist socialist program and movement, adhered to by millions, can lead the way out of the present historic and systemic crisis.

No doubt many of those coming to Detroit for the US Social Forum—and vast numbers who are not—agree that the world needs dramatic and immediate changing. In the face of growing economic misery, industrial and ecological disaster, ongoing neo-colonial wars, how could that not be so? The capitalist system is manifestly failing, and threatening the world’s population in the process.

To change the world, however, it is first essential to understand it, and the role played by the determinant social and political forces.

For those arriving in Detroit, it might be useful, first of all, to take a tour of the city.

On streets in many working class neighborhoods you will find only a handful of inhabited houses. Others have burned down or been boarded up. Many shops and small businesses were abandoned years ago. Factories have been razed, or their ruins simply crumble where they stand. Trees grow from the roofs of deserted downtown skyscrapers. Conditions in parts of the city bring to mind images of war-ravaged central and eastern Europe in 1945.

Who is responsible for the devastation? The line-up of culprits is instructive.

First and foremost, **the US corporate-financial elite**, in particular the Big Three auto companies and their co-conspirators, the big banks and Wall Street speculators. They earned billions out of the labor of auto workers over the course of decades, but when competitors arose in Asia and Europe, sought out ever cheaper labor on a global scale, closing down plant after plant. This turned the city—whose workers had won the highest per capita income in the US in the 1950s—into a center of mass unemployment and poverty.

Wall Street considers industry and manufacturing nothing but a losing proposition, having concentrated its time and effort on parasitic financial operations for decades. In 1980, 6 percent of profits in the US were generated by the finance industry; in 2008, the figure was 40 percent. The severe decline of Detroit takes its place as part of this general pattern.

Total employment in the city declined by 440,000 between 1970 and 2009, and by 50,000 between 2000 and 2009. Some 53 percent of auto and parts plants jobs in Detroit disappeared between 2000 and 2009. By 2008, there were only 30,000 residents who worked in manufacturing.

This process of de-industrialization and mass social immiseration has been presided over by **the Democratic Party**. Officials in one corrupt city administration after another have lined their own pockets, and served the interests of the auto giants and big business, even as the population descended into greater and greater social wretchedness.

One of the Democrats’ principal means of deceiving the people of Detroit has been the use of race. Since January 1974, the city has had a succession of African-American mayors. The argument, still advanced by nationalists and demagogues of every variety, that such figures would keep the interests of the black working class majority closer to heart has proved profoundly untrue. Bitter experience has shown that *class* trumps every other social category.

Conditions in Detroit have deteriorated sharply, as they have for the working population across the country under big business politicians of every color and ethnicity. Barack

Obama is now the chief political representative of American imperialism, the most implacable enemy of the global working class and oppressed.

The trade unions in the US, **the AFL-CIO and the UAW** in particular, have played a central and criminal role in the collapse of Detroit and the conditions of American working people as a whole. Having consolidated its anti-communist program and alliance with the Democratic Party in the post-World War II period, the UAW tied the fate of auto workers to the destinies of the auto giants. That strategy has proven utterly disastrous.

The UAW has disintegrated, losing 77 percent of its membership since 1979, as the result of its own nationalist outlook (“Buy American”) and right-wing policies. In the name of global “competitiveness,” the union has accepted and helped implement an avalanche of concessions and plant closures, many of them in the Detroit-Flint area. Newly hired auto workers have had their wages cut in half. Meanwhile, the revenue of the UAW, which now owns part of the auto industry, and the fat salaries of its officials have hardly been affected. The UAW had assets of \$1.13 billion in 2009. The unions are among the greatest enemies of social progress, much less revolutionary change, in existence.

In its advertisements for the Social Forum, the UAW claims that the various organizations meeting in Detroit share the union’s concern with “workers’ rights, economic fairness and social justice.” This is an obscene joke. In fact, the UAW has long been dedicated to a different trio of principles: “union officials’ income, corporate profitability and social reaction.”

Despite the desire for change felt by many participants at the US Social Forum, political outfits that revolve around the Democratic Party, various nationalist-separatist movements, and their allies/sponsors in the unions—all of them provided a “left” covering thanks to groups such as the International Socialist Organization—will play the dominant and baleful role at the event in Detroit.

When all their rhetoric is exhausted, one message will stand out: opposition to poverty, unemployment and racism must be restricted to the Democratic Party and its immediate environs. All these forces accept as their premise that the Obama administration is “progressive,” and should be “defended” against the Republican right.

The section on “What We Believe” on the US Social Forum website sets out a false perspective. It argues that “there is a strategic need to unite the struggles of oppressed communities and peoples within the United States (particularly Black, Latino, Asian/ Pacific-Islander and Indigenous communities) to the struggles of oppressed nations in the Third World.”

The “oppressed community” in the United States is the

working class, black, white, Latino, and every other color or ethnicity, and its struggle needs to be joined with struggle of *the global working class*, including the emerging and youthful Chinese working class.

American capitalism oppresses many layers of the population, and every instance of oppression should be opposed. Bourgeois democracy is always a fraud, and that should be exposed. However, this kind of “Third Worldism” has been long since discredited by events. The experiences of the 1960s and 1970s have to be studied. All those radical tendencies that emphasized racial and national identity ended up playing a foul, divisive role, assisting the American ruling elite, and functioning, in one way or another, as an adjunct of the Democratic Party.

The US Social Forum, like the World Social Forum out of which it emerged, is designed by its leaders to act as a large-scale safety valve, attempting to direct popular anger, and especially the anger of the youth, toward one of the faces of capitalism, “neo-liberalism,” “free market laissez-faire economic policies,” and so forth, and away from *the profit system and class exploitation themselves*.

The World Social Forum and its various incarnations have had the backing of bourgeois governments, such as Brazil’s, the office of France’s President Jacques Chirac, as well as the Ford Foundation and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. These are not people interested in rocking the boat, but in making sure the waters remain calm enough to keep the vessel afloat.

The turn by those who want to fight the existing system has to be toward the socialist program and the great challenge of assembling and educating a revolutionary movement with deep roots in the global working class. This is not a project to be undertaken lightly, but outside of that perspective there is no way to address the social disaster and danger of world war produced by the present system.

We encourage participants at the US Social Forum this week to visit the tables of the World Socialist Web Site and our publishing house, Mehring Books, and to consider the program of the Socialist Equality Party.

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wsws.org/contact