

Census reveals staggering decline of Detroit

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The city of Detroit lost 25 percent of its population between 2001 and 2010, according to newly released census data. In all, 237,500 left the city, a rate of one person every 22 minutes. It is the largest ten-year decline for any large city in US history, and second in percentage terms only to the decline experienced by New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. Detroit's population, 713,777, is at its lowest point since World War I.

The demographic collapse is a direct consequence of the destruction of manufacturing in the city and its suburbs, especially the auto industry, and the drastic scaling back of elemental social services, such as education, health care, public transportation, and sanitation. This decades-long process has been intensified under the Obama administration with its forced reorganization of General Motors and Chrysler, and under the city administration of Mayor Dave Bing, which wants to cut off city services to the poorest neighborhoods.

Though extreme, Detroit is not alone. Census data show that Chicago, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, and Cincinnati now have their lowest population counts since the 1910 census, and Milwaukee and Toledo have declined to levels not seen since the 1940 count. These cities were once among the most important manufacturing centers in the world, their names synonymous with the industrial might of the US.

It is expected that once all the data is released Detroit will have fallen to the rank of America's 18th largest city, after cities such as Fort Worth, Texas and Charlotte, North Carolina. Its population has fallen by almost two thirds since the 1940s, when 2 million people lived in the nation's fourth largest city.

The "Motor City" was not the only urban area in Michigan to suffer a dramatic decline. The ten-year period saw the populations of Flint, Saginaw, and Pontiac—also formerly thriving auto industry towns—drop by 18 percent,

17 percent, and 12 percent, respectively. About half of Michigan's counties saw their populations decline, among them many impoverished rural counties in the north.

As a whole, Michigan was the only state in the union that lost people during the decade. The state's .6 percent decline, bringing the population down to 9,883,640 people, was driven by the loss of a staggering 860,000 jobs over the same period.

As a result, Michigan will lose a seat in Congress, and Detroit and other cities and counties that suffered population declines will lose federal and state funding for schools, human services, and infrastructure, which in turn will only accelerate the destruction of the city.

A significant decline in Detroit's population was expected, but the census took experts by surprise. Michigan state demographer Ken Darga said the count was "significantly lower" than the Census Bureau estimate, and Detroit-area demographer Kurt Metzger called the figure "just incredible."

Metzger believes that residents departing Detroit were those who had the financial means to do so, thus leaving behind a population more dominated than ever by extreme poverty. Detroit is indeed largely comprised of those who are simply unable to move out—low-income workers, single parent households with small children, the elderly, and the physically handicapped, who, by one estimate, make up a quarter of the population.

Some who moved out relocated to Detroit suburbs. But the largest suburban county, Oakland, itself saw population growth of just one percent, lower than that which would have been expected from an average birthrate. Macomb County grew by six percent, under the national average of seven percent. Wayne County, which includes Detroit and some suburbs, including Dearborn, the home city of Ford, saw a 12 percent decline.

Many African American residents in Detroit and other Michigan cities probably left for the South. Michigan for the first time ever saw a decline in its African American

population, from 1,408,522 to 1,383,756. This is an astonishing historical reversal: first as a destination on the “underground railroad” from slavery, and then as a primary destination of the Great Black Migration in the 20th century.

Detroit politicians, including Bing, have disputed the number and will appeal for a reassessment. In the last census, it was estimated that several tens of thousands of Detroiters were not counted because they lived in abandoned buildings or were hiding themselves from creditors, auto insurers, and the police. The count was eventually adjusted upwards.

Whatever the undercount—Bing suggested that there might really be 40,000 more Detroiters—it will not obscure what can only be described as a collapse of epic proportions, completely exposing Bing’s talk of “reinventing” Detroit. Indeed, the difficulty in counting people in Detroit is itself a manifestation of the city’s harrowing poverty.

To rebuild Detroit would require the commitment of billions of dollars for infrastructure, housing, school, and health care, resources readily available in the bank accounts and stock portfolios of America’s 400 or so billionaires who together monopolize trillions in wealth.

The census data is already being seized upon to do just the opposite. Bing will use the census data to step up his plans to “right-size” Detroit, cutting off entire neighborhoods from the few remaining city services and driving people from their homes.

A bill recently signed into law by Governor Rick Snyder will allow elected officials who enter into a “consent agreement” to assume the authority of unelected Emergency Financial Managers (EFM). The law will allow these managers dictatorial powers to impose cuts, tear up workers’ contracts, and even abolish laws. The financial manager of Detroit’s public schools, Robert Bobb, will likely be the first recipient of this authority.

The dramatic collapse of Detroit’s population, incomparable in urban history outside of war and plague, is the end result of the destruction of manufacturing. Between 2000 and 2009, Wayne County lost over half of all its industrial jobs, according to a report issued last year entitled, “Fiscal Condition of the City of Detroit.” The city lost 50,000 jobs in all over the same period.

But the destruction of industry and jobs were not the result of the blind workings of the market. Beginning in the 1970s, when Detroit’s population was still 1.5 million—more than double its current level—America’s

corporate elite adopted a policy of shutting down industrial production and shifting resources into financial speculation. Detroit’s decline is inversely proportional to the unfathomable personal enrichment of this layer.

Detroit was targeted with peculiar vengeance because its workers had played such a dramatic role in the class struggles of the 20th century. The autoworkers in Detroit, Flint, and other industrial cities fought pitched battles to establish industrial unionism in the 1930s, which had the effect of elevating the standard of living for workers across the country.

The workers of Detroit were left to face the ruling class onslaught alone. The United Auto Workers (UAW), which is headquartered in Detroit, conspired with the Big Three to single out for closure factories with the most militant workers, many of which were located in Detroit. Since the 1980s, it has worked hand-in-glove with the auto bosses to impose pay and benefit cuts, culminating in the bankruptcy of GM and Chrysler. The UAW is now little more than an arm of management, with financial interests diametrically opposed to those of the workers it nominally represents.

The same can be said of the black Democrats who run Detroit. When Coleman Young was elected the first African American big city mayor in 1973, it was argued that black politicians could better represent the city’s people. In fact Young, Dennis Archer and those who have followed in the mayor’s office have only represented and enforced the interests of the financial aristocracy. The end-result of this is the multi-millionaire Bing, who shamelessly insists that the city’s desperate population be made to foot the bill for an economic crisis for which it bears no responsibility.

For a century, the US working class looked to its future in Detroit. During the upswing of American capitalism, this meant mass production, industrial unionism, and improved living standards. Now it sees in Detroit what America’s financial elite has in store: extreme poverty, destruction of basic services, and depopulation.



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