

Detroit Democratic politicians promote racial politics over emergency manager

Larry Porter, Bryan Dyne
25 March 2013

With growing opposition developing in the working class to the installation of an unelected Emergency Financial Manager (EFM) over Detroit, a section of the Democratic Party and the trade unions are promoting racial politics to block a unified struggle of the working class. They are seeking to tie African-American workers in the city to a corrupt layer of black politicians and millionaire entrepreneurs, under the banner of “self-rule” and “self-determination.”

On March 25, Kevyn Orr—who was appointed by Michigan’s Republican Governor Rick Snyder—will take over as EFM, armed with sweeping powers to tear up labor agreements, dismantle essential social services and sell off public assets.

At a meeting on Saturday, March 23, billed as a rally against the EFM, representatives of Al Sharpton’s National Action Network (NAN) and Jesse Jackson’s Rainbow/Push Coalition joined Detroit’s City Council and a section of the trade union bureaucracy to declare that the takeover of the city was “racist,” even though Orr himself is African-American.

Local NAN leader Charles Williams II declared, “This is a racist antidemocratic challenge to the Voting Rights Act [of 1965].” Others echoed this theme, comparing the present situation in Detroit to the apartheid-like segregation in the South during the 1950s and 60s. Williams described Orr—not as a tool of the financial and corporate elite—but as an “Uncle Tom” and “House Negro” presumably in the service of racist whites in the state capital of Lansing.

In fact, Orr, a lifelong operative for the Democratic Party with the closest ties to the Obama administration, has long been a high-paid shill for the financial and corporate elite. The Washington, DC bankruptcy attorney served as a lead attorney for Chrysler during Obama’s forced restructuring of the Detroit car

company, overseeing the closure of more than 700 car dealerships, the destruction of tens of thousands of jobs and a savage attack on auto workers’ living standards.

Ignoring this, JoAnn Watson, a city councilwoman and ranking member of the NAACP, declared, “Fifty years ago freedom and justice were born in the City of Detroit and we will not go back. We who know what we know about Alabama and Mississippi will not go back. The Emergency Manager is not the answer... We have to protect the right to run our city.”

Comparisons to Alabama and Mississippi fall flat. Detroit is not Jim Crow Mississippi or Alabama of the 1950s. It is a city that has been run by the black Democratic Party establishment since 1972. In the aftermath of the riots of the 1960s, the American ruling class handed over political power in Detroit and many other urban centers to black Democrats, seeking to exploit illusions among black workers and youth in supposed “black empowerment.” On the basis of Affirmative Action programs and minority set-asides, a corrupt layer of black businessmen and politicians has enriched itself, while overseeing the impoverishment of the working class, black and white.

In January, Mayor Dave Bing, a black Democrat, boasted that he cut the workforce 25 percent. The Detroit City Council, also made up of African-American politicians, said they put on the hat of the EFM when they cut the budget \$50 million in the last year. “So they were pretty draconian in terms of the number of layoffs, in terms of deferring pension accrual, those kinds of things,” stated City Council President Charles Pugh.

The spewing of racial politics is aimed at preventing a unified struggle of the working class throughout the surrounding metropolitan area who have been hit by mass layoffs, foreclosures and devastating cuts to

public education and other social services. Since 2000, Michigan has lost 367,000 manufacturing jobs. By 2010, the state's per capita income fell to 39th—a drop of 21 places over the decade. A new generation of auto workers is facing backbreaking conditions and poverty wages. These conditions face workers of all races and there is a growing sense of the need for a united struggle to fight back.

Watson, Williams, along with the multimillionaires Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton, do not speak for the working class—black or white. Their major concern is that the appointment of an emergency manager will prevent them from benefiting from the selloff of public assets. They also sense that the installation of a financial dictator in Detroit will provoke an explosion of social opposition. If they had their way, they would rather provoke racial conflict than see a movement of the working class that threatened their wealth and power.

The chief union representative at the meeting was Al Garrett, the president of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Council 25. Another representative of the corrupt black establishment in Detroit, he recently demanded that workers at the Detroit Water and Sewage Department accept a six-year contract stripping them of basic rights, while locking in the continued collection of dues money for the union bureaucracy despite the passage of the state's so-called Right to Work law. Workers overwhelmingly voted down his proposal by a margin of 301 to 36.

Garrett declared, “We have to direct our attention to those folks in DC, to [Obama's Attorney General] Eric Holder. We need federal intervention.” Williams said Al Sharpton was holding a press conference in Detroit this week to announce a lawsuit against the EFM.

The idea that Holder and the Obama administration will defend democratic rights is absurd. Holder's portfolio has included the cover-up and protection of torturers in the Bush administration, the political repression of antiwar opponents on trumped-up “terrorism” charges, and providing the pseudo-legal justifications for Obama's assertion that he has the right to kill anyone, including US citizens, without the slightest pretense of due process.

Moreover, the Obama administration has repeatedly carried out federal interventions in Detroit. In 2009, he

oversaw—with the assistance of Orr—the destruction of auto workers' jobs and conditions, creating vast profits for the auto companies. He has also used Detroit as a test case of his reactionary “school reform” agenda, and scapegoating and victimizing teachers, closing public schools and expanding for-profit charters.

In both cases, the Obama administration worked with the trade unions, which is why Garrett, the United Auto Workers and the rest of the union bureaucracy prefer Democrats rather than Republican-appointed emergency managers. Nevertheless, they are quite ready to enter into a “consensual agreement” with Orr to destroy workers' jobs and living standards, as long as their institutional interests are protected.

The only way for the working class to successfully oppose the attack on Detroit is a complete rejection of the trade unions, racial politics and the Democratic Party. New organizations of struggle, rank-and-file neighborhood and workplace committees must be built on the basis of the fight for the greatest unity of the working class—of all races and nationalities—and a common fight to defend the social right to a secure and decent job, health care, housing and public education. This will require building a political movement against both big-business parties and the capitalist system they defend.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact