Mackinac business conference sets anti-working class agenda for Detroit

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The Detroit Regional Chamber last week hosted the annual Mackinac Policy Conference in northern Michigan. The three-day gathering of the state's business and political elite outlined a program of attacks on the working class, particularly in Detroit.

The conference—held at the Grand Hotel on Mackinac Island—was an exclusive affair. Registration was $1,700 per head for members of the Detroit Regional Chamber and $2,575 for non-members. Spouses were a mere $600 and $700 respectively. Rates for those staying at the Grand Hotel are between $400-$600 a night. Special events such as the Detroit Regional Chamber's Political Action Committee reception and the Detroit mayoral forum were $200 a ticket.

Among the dozens of corporate sponsors are the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Kresge Foundation and DTE Energy. The two keynote speakers were Jeb Bush, a potential Republican presidential candidate in 2016, and Michelle Rhee, founder of StudentsFirst, a lobbying organization dedicated to attacking and privatizing public education.

The list of attendees underscored the bipartisan character of the attack on workers in Detroit, throughout the state and the US. Michigan's Republican governor Rick Snyder was there as well as Democrats including Detroit Mayor David Bing and state treasurer Andy Dillon. Four Detroit mayoral candidates—Mike Duggan, Benny Napoleon, Lisa Howze and Fred Durhal—all Democrats, competed against each other for the support of big business.

In their remarks Jeb Bush and Michelle Rhee expressed their support for the reactionary school "reform" agenda promoted by the Obama administration and the promotion of so-called Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Under this scheme, all students aged five and older will be constantly tested to see whether they are "college or career ready." Those who "fail" will be slotted into non-college slots on the way to low-paying jobs. (See: " What is the Common Core US education initiative? ")

In her remarks, Rhee demanded that US education standards compete with China. "I've heard some recent rumblings from folks who say we don't like it when the federal government is telling us what to do. We don't like that. You know what you should not like? The fact that China is kicking our butts right now. Get over feeling bad about the federal government and feel bad that our kids are not competing."

Bush echoed this sentiment. "These standards, the Common Core standards, are clear and straightforward. They will allow for more innovation in the classroom, less regulation, they'll equip students to compete with their peers from across the globe."

Rhee also promoted vouchers for private schools and Michigan's Education Achievement Authority, both of which are ultimately different ways to channel public education funds into the private sector.

In April, it was revealed that top Snyder administration officials and technology corporate executives were holding secret meetings to plot how to overcome the state constitutional ban on vouchers and "expand online learning opportunities using fewer teachers." In the process of using online classes to replace teachers, the cost per pupil for education would be $5,000-$2,000 less than the state minimum and half of what the average cost per K-12 pupil is in the state. The difference would go directly to the owners of private charter schools. (See: "Snyder administration plot to privatize Michigan schools exposed")

Community colleges face a similar attack. The conference agreed that one of the goals of the participants should be to "Convene businesses and

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community colleges to better link the talent needs of employers with community college program offerings." At the college level, the only option for classes will be those tailored to direct needs of corporate America.

The conference also paid close attention to the situation in Detroit. It held a debate for the supposed four top candidates for Detroit mayor. The "debate" had the character of an audition. Every member of the audience was a member of the corporate or political establishment, either from Michigan or elsewhere. The candidates each promoted themselves as the one who would best attack the working class after the end of the tenure of the unelected emergency manager. All four candidates—Duggan, Napoleon, Howze and Durhal—pledged to carry out austerity and step up law-and-order repression.

The interests of the vast majority of the population did not warrant any mention. All agree with Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr's plan to slash the jobs and pensions of city workers, gut essential services and sell off public assets, from Belle Isle city park and the public lighting system, to the artwork of the Detroit Institute of Arts and even the animals at the Detroit Zoo.

The speakers also promoted the Detroit region "as a growing and vibrant IT and entrepreneurial hub." This is in line with the gentrification plans unfolding in the city, which will only benefit billionaires like Quicken Loans CEO Dan Gilbert.

Coming out of the Mackinac Policy Conference, the ruling elite has codified the direction it wants to take in regards to Detroit, Michigan and nationally. Continuing and ever-growing austerity for the working class is the main agenda.

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