

D'Artagnan Collier speaks at United Way Detroit mayoral forum

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On Wednesday, D'Artagnan Collier, Socialist Equality Party candidate for mayor of Detroit, participated in a forum held by charity coalition United Way in downtown Detroit. About 100 people attended, and the event was streamed live on video via the Internet. Collier was one of eleven candidates present at the forum, and though comments were necessarily brief—limited to two minutes per question—he was able to put forth a socialist program and sharply differentiate his politics from his Democratic Party opponents.

In opening remarks, Collier stated he was “the only candidate who speaks for the working class,” which is made up of, “workers, young people, retirees and the unemployed whose voices are ignored by the political system.” Collier explained that, “behind the backs of working people, the Wall Street bankers and their unelected hatchet man Kevyn Orr are conspiring to destroy pensions and city services, and to sell off public assets.”

Collier rejected the claim there “is no money,” and referred to the massive profits of the banks and auto companies and “hundreds of millions found to subsidize Mike Ilitch’s new hockey arena.” In opposition to their plan to “loot the city,” the SEP candidate called for “hundreds of billions to hire the unemployed and rebuild the city’s neighborhoods and social infrastructure... The banks and basic industry must be put under workers’ control so the economy can be run for human need, not private profit.”

Collier concluded by connecting Detroit’s problems to the world situation, pointing out that, “Obama’s Wall Street bailout, attacks on auto workers and teachers, and his wars and massive spying operation on the American people shows that the Democrats are just as much for the rich as the Republicans.” He also warned that, “workers can place no faith in the UAW

or any other unions, which represent the corporate and political elite, not workers.”

The other candidates used their opening remarks to boast of their experience working in establishment politics, corporations, and non-profit organizations. All of them put forth plans for Detroit based on a combination of demolishing blighted buildings, encouraging entrepreneurship, and expanding police powers. All of their remarks were characterized by an over-arching parochialism. They presented Detroit’s problems as though these were local issues, isolated from the global economic crisis. Their supposed solutions were based on individuals “taking responsibility for their actions” and they sought to conceal the class divisions in society by through a thinly veiled racial appeal, pitting African Americans in Detroit against workers living in the suburbs.

Former State Representative Lisa Howze opened by saying Detroit had two major problems: security and finances. “Security is *the* basic task of government,” she declared. She then said, “we can fix the city’s finances, but guess what? If you’ve got finance problems at home, that’s a problem.” In line with the venture capitalists like Quicken Loans CEO Dan Gilbert who are making a fortune through the financing of gentrification projects, she said, “we need to expose young people to more entrepreneurship.”

Krystal Crittendon, the former corporate counsel—or chief legal officer—for the city government, boasted that she has “worked with every city department.” This is a none-too-impressive credential, given the blatant corruption of the city government, which has long served the big corporations and banks. She called for the demolition of empty homes, libraries and schools, without suggesting for moment that new ones should replace them. “Homes need to come down,” she said,

adding that she would “make the powers that be take responsibility” for the process.

Jean Vorkamp, who runs Front Porch Detroit—a non-profit funded by corporations including energy giant DTE, the MGM casinos and Michigan National Bank—emphasized that “Detroit needs to be run by community background people,” to develop “teambuilding” skills in the youth, who would then “finance themselves, through entrepreneurship, especially by women.” She vowed, if elected, to “teach the Emergency Manager about compassion,” and to “use litigation and nonviolence if he refuses to work with transparency.”

Mike Duggan—the former Detroit City prosecutor and former Detroit Medical Center CEO who oversaw mass layoffs—claimed, “the schools and government can’t do everything. We’ve got to get the community and parents involved.” He suggested that “[college] fraternities and sororities” could play a role in revitalizing Detroit.

Other candidates at the forum included: Michigan state representative Fred Durhal, who boasted of being on the house Corrections Committee; Herman Griffin, an attorney and former youth pastor who bragged of being trained by the same “community organizer” mentors as Barack Obama; Sigmunt Szczepkowski, who advocated a ramp-up of the war on drugs in Detroit neighborhoods; John Telford, the former Detroit Public Schools superintendent thrown-out by Emergency Manager Roy Roberts, who advanced a plan to bottle and sell Detroit’s water; Mark Murphy, who advocated for “vertical farming”; and Angelo Brown, who claimed inspiration from Jesse Jackson and implored the city government not to be “too proud” to ask for help from corporations.

Notably absent from the forum was Wayne County Sheriff Benny Napoleon, who is the presumptive front-runner. Also absent was Tom Barrow, who successfully sued to have Duggan removed from the ballot on a technicality, forcing him to run a write-in campaign.

Candidates were able to respond to eight vetted questions from audience members selected by United Way.

The first questioner, lawyer Tiffany Ellis, referred to “brain drain”, and asked, “What can you do as mayor to keep young people in the city as they grow into young professionals?” Howze replied that, “a culture of

entrepreneurship needs to be created.” Crittendon and Szczepkowski both advocated for increased police presence to make professionals feel safe.

D’Artagnan Collier said that “the public school system needs to be expanded, and not through education-for-profit schemes like charter schools. There should be free college and technical training for all. I am against gentrification, and I’m for equal funding for all neighborhoods, not just certain sections of the city.”

The mediator interjected to ask Collier: “What, in your mind, is wrong with gentrification?” Collier explained that the city was driving out low-income workers and seniors in order to build upscale housing and entertainment districts that would provide even more profits for the rich. “Dan Gilbert has bought over 19 buildings in Detroit, and areas of the city are becoming playgrounds for the wealthy.” Collier proposed a public works program in order to revitalize the city to meet the needs of the majority—for decent neighborhoods, affordable housing and high quality schools.

Collier compared Detroit’s social inequality to the conditions described in Dickens’ *Tale of Two Cities*. Representative Durhal, a spokesman for the corrupt black business and political establishment in the city, displayed his racist conception of gentrification, saying, “Detroit is 82 percent black... it’ll be difficult to have gentrification anywhere.”



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