

The Detroit election

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In primary elections for Detroit mayor on Tuesday, two right-wing candidates, Mike Duggan and Benny Napoleon, advanced to a runoff that will be held in November. The most significant feature of the vote was the extremely low voter turnout.

Detroit is in the midst of a financial crisis that has been the focus of national and international attention. An unelected “emergency manager” has thrown the city into bankruptcy in the teeth of popular opposition, in order to rip up contracts and impose brutal cuts in city workers’ pensions and health benefits, privatize and slash social services, and sell off public assets, including the world famous art collection at the Detroit Institute of Arts—all for the purpose of protecting the investments of the banks and speculators who hold city bonds.

Yet a mere 18 percent of registered voters went to the polls. This mass abstention is an expression of the alienation of the working class from the entire political system. The vast majority of Detroiters believe that their votes count for nothing and that, whoever is elected, they will have no say in the policies of the government. In this belief, they are absolutely right.

This sentiment is shared by working people across the country. The threadbare trappings of democracy can no longer conceal the iron rule of a corporate-financial oligarchy. The pretense that there are significant differences between the two major parties is increasingly absurd, despite the demagogic efforts of President Obama and the Democratic Party to posture as defenders of the “middle class.” Particularly since the Wall Street crash of 2008, government at all levels—national, state and local, whether headed by Republicans or Democrats—has revealed itself to be the instrument of the richest one percent.

Unlimited funds have been made available to bail out and further enrich the financial and corporate criminals who are responsible for the deepest economic crisis since the Great Depression. At the same time, mass layoffs, wage-cutting and the destruction of education, health care, pensions and social services are justified with the lie that

“there is no money.”

In attacking the working class, the two parties march in lockstep. In Detroit, the bankruptcy and attack on city workers and social services is being carried out with the support of the Democratic mayor and the Republican governor.

Obama personifies the antagonism between the entire political setup and the basic needs of the vast majority of the population. He won the election in 2008 by presenting himself as a progressive alternative to the hated administration of George W. Bush and its policies of war, social reaction and attacks on democratic rights. No sooner was he in office when he then began to repudiate his campaign promises.

Obama has intensified the right-wing policies of Bush: continuing the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and launching new ones in Libya and Syria, deepening the attacks on democratic rights, and escalating the assault on the living standards of the working class. His rejection of any federal aid to Detroit signifies his administration’s support for the bankruptcy of Detroit to be used as a model for slashing the pensions of workers all over the country.

Obama’s reelection—against a multi-millionaire who made his fortune as a Wall Street asset-stripper—reflected the collapse of the popular illusions that helped propel him to power four years earlier. Voter turnout in 2012 fell by 10 million people from 2008. Obama’s own vote fell sharply, making him the first president in more than 60 years to be reelected with fewer votes in his second term than in his first.

Only 57.5 percent of the voting-age population participated in the 2012 elections, the lowest turnout in any presidential election since 2000. This was a continuation of a long-term decline in voter participation in the US. Turnout in midterm elections has fallen by nearly ten percentage points since the early 1970s.

Every two or four years, the American people are given a choice between the representatives of two right-wing parties, both financed and controlled by Wall Street and

integrated into the military/intelligence apparatus. The elections are dominated by corporate cash and manipulated by the corporate-controlled media.

In the Detroit mayoral election, the essential fraud of the entire process is transparent. No matter which of the winners of Tuesday's primary is elected in November—corporate millionaire Duggan or former police chief and current county sheriff Napoleon—the new mayor will exercise no power so long as Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr, who wields dictatorial powers in behalf of the banks, remains at his post.

The trade unions signaled their support for the bankruptcy and the assault on Detroit workers by backing Napoleon—the cop-turned law-and-order politician—in the primary vote. That workers have no confidence in these organizations was reflected in the fact that Duggan far outpolled the former police chief, despite the fact that he ran as a write-in candidate, having been excluded from the ballot on a technicality.

Any illusions among Detroiters that Duggan represents a genuine alternative to the status quo will be quickly and rudely shattered should he be elected in November. Nevertheless, there was an element of a protest vote in his emergence as the top vote-getter. Workers in Detroit, whose living standards have steadily declined during 40 years in which the city was administered by a corrupt and affluent layer of African American politicians, are fed up.

Workers have nothing in common with this political establishment—consisting of union officials, representatives of the official civil rights organizations, ministers, academics, businessmen—which administers Detroit and other cities in behalf of the US ruling elite as a whole. Social polarization among African Americans is even more extreme than in the population as a whole, the result of the elevation of a narrow layer on the basis of racial politics and programs such as affirmative action, alongside a devastating decline in the living standards of the broad masses of African American workers.

In 2011, the wealthiest 10 percent of African American households controlled 67 percent of the wealth of all African American households, compared to 59 percent just three years prior.

Working people in Detroit, and all over the country, are looking for alternatives. They will not find them in any section of the political establishment or its two big business parties.

The alienation of working people from the political establishment is part of a process that leads inevitably to great social upheavals. To this point, the political

radicalization of the working class has taken a largely passive form. That will change.

The Socialist Equality Party and its mayoral candidate, D'Artagnan Collier, alone spoke for the working class and fought for its interests in the election campaign. Only the SEP opposed the bankruptcy and urged workers to reject any and all demands for cuts or concessions.

Collier's campaign was focused on developing an independent movement of workers in the Detroit area to throw out the emergency manager, replace the City Council with a Workers Council, and implement socialist policies—including public ownership of the corporations and banks—to guarantee every worker a decent-paying job, health care, a pension, quality public education and decent housing.

He called for workers in their workplaces, schools and neighborhoods to establish new, democratic organizations of working class struggle—workers' action committees—independent of the unions and the Democratic Party, to organize demonstrations and strikes and build up a movement for a general strike of workers in the Detroit area.

The SEP campaign aroused great interest and warm support from workers and young people, including firefighters who initiated protests against the cuts, and tenants who are fighting against plans to evict them to make way for real estate speculators.

Following Tuesday's election, the SEP intends to intensify its fight to mobilize workers in Detroit and nationally and build a new leadership in the working class. Just as the ruling class is seeking to make Detroit a model for the assault on working people throughout the US, the working class must launch the Battle of Detroit as the model and inspiration for working class struggles nationally and internationally.



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