

Ras Baraka succeeds Cory Booker as mayor of Newark, New Jersey

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Councilman Ras Baraka was elected mayor of Newark, New Jersey, the state's largest city, on May 13. He succeeds Cory Booker, the two-term mayor who was elevated to the US Senate last November.

In a vote that was widely seen as a referendum on Booker's record, Baraka, the son of late poet and black nationalist Amiri Baraka, won 54 percent of the vote to 46 percent for Shavar Jeffries, a former assistant state attorney general whose candidacy was largely financed by Wall Street and hedge fund backers of school privatization.

Baraka capitalized on the disgust of workers with Booker and his record. As mayor he incessantly trumpeted his supposed achievements, but the conditions of many sections of workers went from bad to worse. Unemployment in Newark remains over 13 percent and the poverty rate is one-third of the population. The city faces a budget deficit of \$93 million. The murder rate, fueled by desperation and hopelessness in impoverished neighborhoods, has reached a 24-year high.

Some Newark parents and teachers were also swayed by Baraka's denunciation of Cami Anderson, the schools superintendent appointed by Republican Governor Chris Christie to run Newark's schools. Anderson's "One Newark" program, which envisions the layoffs of one-third of the city's teachers over the next three years, has provoked widespread opposition. Baraka denounced Anderson and indicated that she would be removed if he won the mayoralty.

Although Booker carefully avoided making an endorsement in the race, voters were well aware that most of the same forces—especially charter school backers—that had supported the former mayor were now supporting Jeffries. These included Education Reform Now, an advocacy group connected to Democrats for

Education Reform, which donated \$2.1 million to the Jeffries campaign.

Jeffries was also endorsed by the *Newark Star-Ledger* and by the Essex County Democratic machine under Joe DiVincenzo. DiVincenzo was one of the prominent Democrats who endorsed Christie's reelection campaign last year.

The newly-elected mayor, however, while benefiting from popular hostility for his political rivals, is a veteran Democratic Party politician who will do nothing to improve the conditions facing the great majority of the population. Baraka, who soon after his election to the City council in 2010 became the most vocal critic of Booker, represents a rival clique inside the local Democratic Party. His mayoral campaign was backed by such figures as Sheila Oliver, a state assemblywoman who ran unsuccessfully in the Senatorial primary that Booker won last year; Richard Codey, a veteran State Senator and major figure in the Democratic Party; and Jersey City mayor Steve Fulop.

Baraka's opponents noted that through his simultaneous jobs as councilman and principal of Central High School, he was drawing combined salaries of more than \$200,000 annually.

Among Baraka's biggest supporters were the union officials grouped in the New Jersey Working Families Alliance. Officials of the Communications Workers of America, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and other major unions saw an opportunity to advance their own privileged positions through the kind of phony "progressive" campaign that was successfully waged by New York City mayor Bill de Blasio last fall.

The union executives are tested Democratic Party operatives. They have no fundamental differences with the corporate establishment or with the push for charter schools, differing only on the tempo of the attacks, and

demanding a “seat at the table” for the unions as charters are expanded and school budgets are cut.

During the campaign, Baraka signaled that his occasional militant rhetoric was not to be taken seriously. Using almost exactly the same words as de Blasio in New York, he said that he had nothing against charter schools, but only opposed closing existing public schools to make room for them. He vowed to work with Wall Street, calling for investment in other sections of the city besides downtown.

The election of Baraka brings into focus the legacy of African-American mayors in major US cities over the past forty-five years. Newark was one of the first cities to elect a black mayor, in 1970. Ken Gibson remained in office until 1986. He was succeeded by Sharpe James, who was in turn followed by Cory Booker in 2006.

Booker was hailed as part of the new breed of African-American politician, in the mold of Dave Bing in Detroit and Michael Nutter in Philadelphia. The old machine-type figures like James in Newark and Coleman Young in Detroit, who made open racial appeals, were now to be replaced by smoother operatives in the style of Barack Obama himself.

These past decades have demonstrated over and over again that whether these mayors, Senators and other officials—largely Democrats in the major urban centers—pose as enemies of the “power structure” or whether they openly embrace it, they remain wedded to the profit system. Whether black, white or biracial, as spokesmen of big business they are the mortal enemies of every section of the working class.

Popular support for or illusions in Ras Baraka should not be exaggerated. While more than \$3.5 million was spent in the course of the mayoral campaign, the voter turnout was an abysmal 29 percent. According to the *NJ.com* website, the number of votes came to some 43,000, out of more than 152,000 registered voters.



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