

Fifty years since the Rochester, New York riots

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5 September 2014

This year marked the 50th anniversary of the Rochester, New York, “race riots,” which occurred over three days from July 24 to July 26, 1964. The riots, which took place during the apex of American liberalism and in the very same month as the passing of the Civil Rights Act, were among the first of the urban uprisings that swept the United States in the 1960s. In the seven years that followed, over 750 riots took place.

From the 1940s through the 1960s thousands of African Americans had moved to Rochester in search of better-paying industrial jobs and to escape the racist and poverty-stricken South, part of a massive migration of the rural population, both black and white, out of the South to the industrial cities of the North and the West. Rochester’s African American population tripled in the 1950s, from 7,845 at the beginning of the decade to 23,586 in 1960, and increased further to 32,000 by 1964.

The children of the migration generation came of age in the great industrial centers of the North in the 1950s and 1960s. Most of them never lived in the South, but like white youth of the American “baby boom,” they were politicized by the mass civil rights movement of poor blacks in the South that they followed closely on television and in newspapers. There was more. African American youth saw their hopes for a better life than their parents increasingly betrayed by an emerging social crisis brought on by the first phases of deindustrialization.

In Rochester, African Americans confronted a severe shortage of housing, much of which had been built at the turn of the 20th century to house the then-rapidly expanding immigrant population from southern and eastern Europe. Rochester had no public housing program, being the last city in the state of New York to implement one.

The housing shortage contributed to the confinement of working class African Americans to the oldest and poorest neighborhoods of the city, including the Joseph Avenue and Corn Hill districts. Many landlords in these areas illegally subdivided buildings into even smaller units in order to profit from the housing shortage, creating dangerous overcrowding and poor living conditions.

Police enforced the de facto segregation of African American workers. One retired worker who lived through the riots reported to the WSWWS that at the time blacks were restricted to an approximately 10-square-block area in the northern part of

the city. If blacks ventured past these unofficial boundaries “the police would appear and turn you right back to your side of the street.”

Finding employment also proved to be difficult. In 1964 at the time of the riots, the Rochester area unemployment rate for blacks stood at over 16 percent. Those jobs that existed tended to be low-paying.

Through most of the 20th century Rochester was known as a one-industry town essentially run by Eastman Kodak, which employed tens of thousands and generated huge profits through its domination of the photography and film industry that lasted until the 1980s. Due to its huge market share, in its heyday Kodak was able to offer relatively high wages for both its white-collar and blue-collar workers.

However, like many US corporations, Kodak sought to create racial divisions in its workforce. It did so by effectively confining the recent arrivals from the South to low-paying menial jobs.

As was the case with many of the riots in the ’60s, Rochester’s began with an incident of police repression that sparked a reaction among the working class African American population.

On the night of Friday, July 24, police arrested a 20-year-old at a street party on Joseph Avenue in the northern part of Rochester. A crowd formed to protest the arrest, and police on the scene called for backup. This came in the form of a K-9 unit using German Shepherd dogs—the same breed infamously used to maul young civil rights demonstrators in Birmingham, Alabama, a year earlier. Images of that attack, ordered by Birmingham Police Commissioner Eugene “Bull” Connor, had become a potent symbol of police abuse.

The use of the attack dogs set off an uprising that would last three days and spread throughout the city’s African American working class neighborhoods and cost over \$1 million in property damage. Four people died during the uprising when a helicopter surveying the property damage crashed.

On July 25, Governor Nelson Rockefeller called out the National Guard to enforce an 8:00 p.m. curfew. This action set a precedent for the use of military force against working class populations in urban areas that continues to this day.

By the end of the riots over 800 people were arrested. While

police officials maintained that the “disturbances” were the result of “outsiders,” only 14 of the 1,000 arrested were not from Monroe County. And despite common portrayals of the “race riots” of the 1960s being solely perpetuated by African Americans, 15 percent of those arrested in Rochester were white workers.

The immediate aftermath of the riot saw the formation of various reformist organizations that sought to channel the anger of African American workers into support for the Democratic Party. Political organizer Saul Alinsky, along with local African American political and church leaders, initiated FIGHT (“Freedom, Independence, God, Honor, Today”). The organization limited itself to appeals for modest reforms, such as improved public housing and more white-collar positions for African Americans in the city’s major corporations such as Kodak and Xerox. Alinsky was known for using “pressure tactics” and publicity stunts such as sit-ins at shareholder meetings to promote the “democratization of corporate America” by getting bourgeois activists elected to the seats of corporate boards.

Thanks to the efforts of such organizations, Ronald Good was elected as the first black city council member in 1966, and in 1967 Ruth Scott became the first black female city council member. Rochester would go on to elect its first black mayor in 1993, Democrat William Johnson, who won 72 percent of the vote and acted as mayor of Rochester until 2005. Rochester’s current Mayor, Democrat Lovely Warren, is an African American woman, as is the current CEO of Xerox, Ursula Burns.

The development of a black political elite in Rochester followed a pattern that emerged more or less simultaneously in cities across the US. In Detroit, Gary, Cleveland, Philadelphia, Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, and many others, African Americans took positions as mayors, city council members, police chiefs, and so on. In these positions they oversaw—and personally profited from—the factory shutdowns, social devastation, and mass unemployment brought on by the decline of American capitalism.

Despite the political and economic success of so small a section of Rochester’s African American population, throughout the summer of the 50th anniversary of the riots, their significance was presented in solely racial terms. According to Mayor Warren, the aftermath of the riots “should be remembered as a time we really turned the page and were able to deal with racism and issues surrounding it, face-to-face and where it touched us, skin-to-skin.” In a PBS documentary on the Rochester Riots titled “July ’64,” former Mayor William Johnson commented, “It still amazes me that ... I can go to meetings in this town of the power elite and I’ll be the only person of color in the room.”

The repeated references to skin color are an attempt to obscure the class issues behind both the historical and the current crisis in Rochester. Such statements also reflect the

views of an upwardly mobile layer dedicated to the defense of capitalism—only with a bigger slice of the pie cut out for upper-class African Americans like themselves. They are not concerned with the plight of the city’s working class, but rather with ensuring their own spoils as members of the “power elite,” as former Mayor William Johnson puts it.

Today social inequality in Rochester is far more pronounced than it was in 1964. According to US Census data released in June of this year, Rochester is the third-poorest major city in the United States, behind only Detroit and Cleveland, with approximately 30 percent of its residents living in poverty.

Despite the political success of the city’s black Democratic politicians, the social conditions for many black workers remain dire. In December of 2013, a report by the Rochester Area Community Foundation based on US Census data found that, compared to African Americans nationwide, the poverty rate for black Rochester residents is 8 percent higher, while the rate for Hispanic workers in Rochester is 10 percent higher than the national level.

Poverty conditions continue to plague the neighborhoods where the 1964 riots took place, with well over 50 percent of the population living in poverty. These neighborhoods are also no longer homogeneously African American, but rather are comprised of black, Hispanic, Asian and increasingly white workers from the surrounding rural counties who have moved to the city to be closer to social services. The common denominator among all of Rochester’s ethnic groups is widespread poverty conditions and a lack of work.

From 2000 to 2011 the Rochester area lost 34 percent of its manufacturing jobs. The city’s major employers in 1964, Kodak and Xerox, now employ only a fraction of the workers they once did. Kodak, which was targeted by bourgeois activists in the wake of the riots, now employs only 2,300 workers after recently emerging from bankruptcy and laying off workers at its manufacturing facilities in June. At its peak in 1982, the company employed 60,000 workers in the Rochester area.

Fifty years after the riots, the existence of even more extreme social inequality in Rochester is a demonstration of the failure of liberal reformism and the bankruptcy of the identity politics that replaced it. The path forward for workers in Rochester and around the world is the unification of the working class across cultural and ethnic lines on the basis of an internationalist socialist program.



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