

Former Washington mayor Marion Barry mourned in US ruling class circles

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The outpouring of praise in official circles for former Washington, D.C., mayor Marion Barry, following his death last Sunday, is predictable but also revealing. Barry, 78 years old, served a total of four terms as the highest elected official in the US capital, from 1979 to 1991 and again from 1995 to 1999.

The mayor achieved a certain notoriety when he was arrested on drug charges in 1990. He also served on the D.C. City Council before and between his mayoral terms, and again for the last decade up to the time of his death. Barry, whose drug habits were widely known by the late 1980s, was caught on video smoking crack cocaine and eventually served six months in federal prison.

The drug charges, while Washington and the rest of the country faced a crack epidemic that fed off the despair and hopelessness of the poorest sections of the population, were predictable fodder for right-wing moralists and demagogues. As far as dominant sections of the ruling class and its political establishment were concerned, however, this lapse on Barry's part did not erase his political usefulness.

This was reflected in the carefully worded tribute that came from the White House after Barry's death. President Barack Obama issued a statement that said, in part, "Through a storied, at times tumultuous life and career [Barry] earned the love and respect of countless Washingtonians."

The *Washington Post*, one of the leading voices of the ruling elite, declared that Barry was "a natural leader...one of the most gifted politicians this city has ever seen." The editorial went on to define Barry's role even more explicitly: "a sizable part of the city's African-American residents admired his style and his assertiveness against the DC establishment."

Barry of course became part of that establishment. His role, both as mayor and city councilman, was precisely to keep some of the most oppressed sections of workers tied

to capitalist politics by pretending he was their advocate. This was accomplished through the kind of race-based demagoguery that has been regularly used to foster divisions in the working class.

For Barry, the issue was always the need for more "black political power." While the extent of the popular enthusiasm for his demagoguery was undoubtedly overstated, Barry benefited from both media support and the lack of any working-class alternative. He built up his own political machine in the capital, and his main purpose was always to serve as a safety valve and to obscure the class issues facing all sections of working people. As liberal journalist David Halberstam wrote some years ago, Barry was "largely free of causes, save his own."

Marion Barry was born in 1936 in the tiny town of Itta Bena, Mississippi. His father died when he was four, and his widowed mother moved to Memphis, Tennessee, where she remarried. He came of age in the years when the mass civil rights movement was beginning to germinate. Barry became active at Fisk University in Nashville, and in 1960 he became the first president of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).

These were the peak years of the civil rights struggle. Barry did not play a particularly significant role. He soon set his sights on a career in bourgeois politics. He moved to Washington, D.C., in 1965, and by 1971 he had secured a seat on the local school board.

This was the time before the capital had acquired limited home rule. The capital, with a current population of more than 600,000, a bit less than Vermont but more than Wyoming, has no voting representation in the House and no representation in the Senate, although for the past 50 years D.C. residents have had votes in the elections for the presidency.

The future mayor was among the campaigners for home rule, and legislation passed in 1973 allowed for the election of a mayor and city council with limited powers.

Barry was elected to the council in 1974 and ran successfully for the mayoralty four years later. Washington had by this time become a majority African-American city. Barry effectively exploited the hostility in Congress and the thinly veiled racism of large sections of the Republican Party to build up support for his own brand of capitalist politics.

Barry's political rise in the 1970s was part of a political shift in the strategy of the ruling class. The mass civil rights movement, with its potential to challenge capitalist property relations, was shut down, and many of its erstwhile spokesmen were easily transformed into the African-American representatives of the profit system. Men like Barry rose to prominence in bourgeois politics after and because of the decline of the civil rights movement.

The tributes to the late mayor are based in part on the claim that he presided over big improvements in the lives of the poor. A visit to the many neighborhoods of Washington that have not been gentrified in the past 15 years shows in fact that having a black mayor of the US capital, as in the case of Detroit, Cleveland, Los Angeles and other major cities, made no fundamental difference to the vast majority of the working class.

African-American workers have in fact suffered disproportionately from the continuing economic crisis, following decades of deindustrialization and the destruction of decent-paying jobs. In Washington, the effects of deindustrialization were less severe only because of the high percentage of government employment, but these opportunities remained limited, and mass unemployment and poverty continue and even worsened in areas such as the Eighth Ward, represented by Barry on the City Council for the last decade of his life.

If Barry was eventually targeted and removed from his post as mayor, it was only because he was becoming a liability for the economic and political establishment. Between his first administration beginning in 1979 and his third nearly a decade later he began to outlive his usefulness. His flagrant drug use and other indiscretions were becoming serious distractions as far as the ruling elite was concerned.

Barry nevertheless won a fourth term as mayor beginning in 1995. But the gentrification of the capital city, comparable in some ways to developments in New York City, Baltimore, and elsewhere, made Barry's style of racial politics less and less effective. Growing numbers of African-American workers and youth also saw through

the insistent attempts to frame the issues of inequality in racial terms. Barry did not run for reelection as mayor in 1999, and later became the councilman for the Eighth Ward, where he rested on a smaller electoral base and took an increasingly reactionary stance, including demagogic attacks on Asian-Americans and opposition to same-sex marriage.

Barry's career raises once again the crucial issues bound up with the history of the civil rights movement. The mass movement that developed in the American South was in some respects a continuation of the rise of the industrial unions in the 1930s and 1940s, and the growing militancy of the working class as a whole. But it never challenged capitalist property relations.

Following the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, urban unrest was channeled into the Democratic Party, with the election of black mayors, alongside the broader affirmative action programs that were used to cultivate a small middle class layer while attacks escalated against the working class.

Barry was a somewhat cruder version of the African-American mayors who took office in many cities with large black populations. Coleman Young in Detroit (followed by Dennis Archer and others) and similar figures in Atlanta, Cleveland, Newark and elsewhere all presided over intractable and growing poverty, homelessness and other social ills.

The death of Marion Barry coincides with the growing disgust with both capitalist parties and the reactionary policies of the Obama administration in particular. Race-based appeals designed to disorient and divide the working class are increasingly bankrupt as living standards and social conditions deteriorate for all workers, white, black, Hispanic and immigrant. The task remains that of forging a new and revolutionary leadership, one that unites workers of every color and ethnicity against the capitalist system.



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