

Newark, New Jersey's “progressive” mayor Ras Baraka wins big business praise

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When Ras Baraka was first elected mayor of Newark, New Jersey's largest city, in the spring of 2014, the victory of the son of the late black nationalist poet and activist Amiri Baraka was claimed in some quarters to be a serious blow against the city's political and business establishment.

The WSWs, on the contrary, warned that the newly-elected Baraka, a vocal critic of outgoing mayor Cory Booker, was himself “a veteran Democratic Party politician who will do nothing to improve the conditions facing the great majority of the population.” (See, “Ras Baraka succeeds Cory Booker as mayor of Newark, New Jersey”)

Baraka won a closely contested election with 54 percent of the vote. Much of the Democratic Party machine opposed him. Booker had been the darling of the hedge funds and Wall Street. The WSWs explained that the election was a matter of rival cliques inside the Democratic Party.

Pointing to the 29 percent voter turnout as evidence of the disgust already felt by most workers for the big business political set-up, the WSWs added that Baraka, the fourth consecutive African-American mayor of this majority-African-American city, was “wedded to the profit system.”

It did not take long for this assessment to be confirmed. The latest and most graphic illustration of Baraka's role comes in a recent front-page feature article in the *New York Times*, the leading newspaper of the US ruling class.

“Defying expectations, Mayor Ras Baraka is praised in all corners of Newark,” the Aug. 31 headline proclaims. The article quotes the chief executive of the Panasonic Corporation of North America: “I didn't think anybody could top Cory Booker, but if anybody can, it's Mayor Baraka.”

Closing ranks behind Baraka, Joseph DiVincenzo, Jr., the Democratic Party boss of Essex County who led the opposition to his candidacy in last year's nonpartisan election, held a news conference a few months ago to confess his mistake.

Why is Baraka now acclaimed by the “movers and shakers”? According to the *Times*, he “is showering attention on black and Latino neighborhoods” but “also winning praise from largely white leaders of the city's businesses and institutions downtown.”

“Newark is still stubbornly two cities,” the *Times* admits. But Baraka “has so far managed to do what his predecessors could not: make both Newarks feel as if he is their mayor.”

The ruling elite has reason to be pleased. As the *Times* reports, Baraka's administration is backing Triangle Park, a downtown project that will bring upscale retail, residential and office space to the area. He is also assisting in the construction of a 22-story residential building that was originally proposed almost two decades ago. This “will be the city's first new market-rate housing in five decades”—but “market rate” means far beyond the range of affordable housing for the working class.

A Starbucks is on the way, as well as a Whole Foods store—another establishment whose prices are higher than many workers can afford.

On the other hand, what is Baraka's record as far as the “other Newark” is concerned? The “showering of attention” turns out to be mainly hot air. “The mayor had the walls painted and brighter light bulbs installed at City Hall,” we are told. Movie nights have been held in a downtown park.

In a slightly more ambitious category, some abandoned community centers have been reopened and some cultural and sports programs have been brought

to neighborhoods. But there has been no serious improvement in the job situation, especially as far as securing good-paying full time jobs with benefits.

It is precisely because the ruling elite well knows that no fundamental improvements for impoverished workers are in the offing, that it is making preparations for repression, and Baraka is making himself useful on this score as well.

The Baraka administration has designated two “model neighborhoods.” These, among the poorest sections of Newark, have been “flood[ed] with police and code enforcement officers to address problems like poor lighting and abandoned structures that can foster crime.” Baraka has also “set up street teams of residents to help defuse tensions...”

The newly-established Civilian Complaint Review Board will be no more effective in stopping police violence than in New York or other major cities. The language of “community policing” is being used, here as elsewhere, in order to more effectively impose and defend conditions of permanent unemployment and poverty.

The mayor showed his hand at an “Occupy the City” rally that took place in early August. The event was described in an official press release as an attempt to “unite residents from the entire City against despair, violence, and crime, and to promote love, hope, and empowerment.”

Baraka, addressing the crowd in downtown Newark, echoed language employed by President Obama on more than one occasion. “The mayor has a responsibility, yes,” he said. “The police have a responsibility, yes. But so do our fathers, so do our mothers, so do our brothers. The question is, are you living up to your responsibility?”

Baraka’s arrogant words hold individual workers responsible for their conditions of life, while absolving the profit system and the super-rich whose obscene wealth has been squeezed from the working class.

Only two weeks after Baraka’s “Occupy” stunt, modeled on the protests that briefly flared four years ago around the country and the world, five murders took place in Newark in a 36-hour-time period. This was a tragic and graphic illustration of the gulf between the real social decay and misery on the one hand and Baraka’s reactionary platitudes on the other. With 59 homicides so far this year, the city of 275,000 has one

of the highest murder rates in the country.

Newark’s unemployment rate remains 10.2 percent, not including at least an equal number who have given up looking for work or are forced to work part-time. A new Shop Rite supermarket scheduled to open in late September, for instance, though hailed as a rare economic bright spot, will provide only 85 full-time jobs, with another 200 or so only part-time.

The *Times*’s admiring portrait of Baraka reveals in part the mechanics of capitalist rule. It is not genuine improvements in jobs and living standards that captured the newspaper’s attention. There are no such improvements.

Baraka, like his counterpart Bill de Blasio in New York City, presides over continuing inequality and deepening social crisis. What the *Times* is boosting is the hope that Baraka will be able to keep the lid on growing discontent by making the working class majority of Newark “feel as if he is their mayor.”

For more than 40 years the ruling elite has used some form of racial politics, arguing that the poor in cities like Newark can prosper under black mayors. Now, as racial appeals find less support, the ruling elite prescribes a small dose of “populist” rhetoric and cosmetic changes, as with both Baraka in New Jersey and de Blasio in New York. Above all, the latest maneuvers in Newark should be taken as a sign of the deepening crisis of the capitalist system.



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