

Former Detroit mayor warns that city is “one incident” from a social explosion

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Over the last several months, southeast Michigan has become a focal point for the resurgence of class conflict in the United States, with struggles by autoworkers, schoolteachers and students in Detroit, and working class residents in Flint who are opposing the poisoning of their water.

With social tensions in the area and throughout the US reaching a boiling point, there is a growing sense of foreboding within corporate and political circles that it is only a matter of time before, in the words of one billionaire, the “pitchforks come out.”

This was the tenor of the remarks made last week by former Detroit Mayor David Bing as he spoke before a gathering of the city’s business, media and political elite sponsored by the Detroit Regional Chamber. Pointing to chronically high rates of unemployment in the city’s impoverished neighborhoods, even as Detroit is supposed to be experiencing a post-bankruptcy “resurgence,” Bing said there was an “undercurrent of frustration and anger that could lead to a negative outcome—a repeat of 1967.”

The mayor’s reference was to the ghetto rebellion that erupted in Detroit nearly a half-century ago—the largest of the urban upheavals across the United States in the 1960s. The mayor added that the city was “maybe one incident away” from a “Ferguson, a Baltimore or a Chicago,” where police killings sparked mass protests.

Bing expressed concern that the political establishment lacked any significant figures with enough credibility to contain a similar explosion by a deeply hostile population today. After the 1967 riots, he said, there were black political, business and labor leaders, including former Mayor Coleman Young and United Auto Workers leaders like Buddy Battle and Horace Sheffield Jr., who, he said, “gave generations of

African Americans a broader view of their future opportunities.”

Today, he later told reporters, “if something crazy happens I don’t know who we have from a leadership standpoint that we can call upon to control some of that activity.”

Bing’s allusion to the political isolation of the ruling class is telling. The Democrats are despised. Their allies in the trade unions are hated, increasingly incapable of containing and suppressing the anger of the workers that they claim to represent. Indeed, the UAW was only able to push through new labor agreements last fall by resorting to lies, intimidation and rigging the ballot at Ford. The wave of sickouts by educators earlier this year was an incipient rebellion against the Detroit Federation of Teachers, which has long collaborated with the bitterest enemies of public education.

The leading figures in the city’s Democratic Party establishment pointed to by Bing, including Coleman Young, belong to a very different era. They emerged out of the mass labor and civil rights struggles of the 1940s, ’50s and ’60s and were politically trained in the school of Stalinist and social democratic politics. Whatever credibility they had in that period depended on the ability of the Democratic Party, and American capitalism, to deliver social reforms as a defensive reaction to social upheavals.

In fact, the 1973-1992 tenure of Young, the city’s first black mayor, corresponded with the sharp shift to the right by the Democrats, as the American ruling class abandoned class compromise and adopted a policy of class war and social counterrevolution to make the working class pay for the historical decline in the world position of US capitalism. During this period, the Democrats used Affirmative Action programs and

identity politics to build up a base of support among upper middle class blacks and other minorities for this war against the working class.

Bing is one of the personal beneficiaries of this policy, as the former professional basketball player became a multi-millionaire from the minority set-aside contracts his steel and auto parts company got from Ford, GM and Chrysler. By the 1990s, he boasted during last week's remarks, the Bing Group, along with several cable companies and car dealerships in Detroit, were among the top 10 of *Black Enterprise* magazine's list of 100 largest minority-owned companies in the US.

After warning of the danger of social upheaval, the former mayor did not propose any measures to alleviate the crushing social misery and inequality that he referred to. He did not propose a public works program to hire the jobless and rebuild the city's crumbling housing stock and schools.

Instead, he said, "We must identify, hire and promote qualified African Americans as well as appoint them to corporate boards. African-American economic empowerment and neighborhood development must be an essential part of Detroit's resurgence." As if more black CEOs will do anything to address the seething discontent in the working class!

The ex-mayor complained that the chief beneficiaries of the state takeover and bankruptcy restructuring of Detroit—a process that he was intimately involved in—were "basically two families," led by the billionaires Dan Gilbert and Mike Ilitch.

"Black contractors and developers find themselves on the outside looking in," he bitterly protested, adding that downtown projects like Paradise Valley available to minority businesses were "miniscule," with "five or six Black developers vying for a piece of the action" over one city block.

Bing also complained that state-appointed emergency managers overseeing the Detroit Public Schools as well as other Michigan cities, including Detroit and Flint, had cut local politicians out of the decision-making process. He called for the "revamping and improvement of Detroit's educational system" along with the elimination of its "deficit" and for "local schools to be controlled by local communities."

The real significance of the calls for "local control" from sections of the Democratic Party and the trade

unions is made clear by Bing's remarks. It means allowing the corrupt Democratic Party political establishment to control the school district's multi-million dollar budget so they can hand the contracts to their politically connected friends and collect the kickbacks.

In fact, the removal of the school district's emergency manager and the supposed restoration of local control is part of the restructuring plan now being debated in the Michigan legislature. An elected school board, however, would be under the thumb of a Financial Review Commission, which will have dictatorial powers to veto all contracts and economic decisions. At the same time, local Democrats, education businesses and the unions will be brought on board so they can share in the spoils from the privatization of public education.

During his tenure as mayor—from March 2009 to December 2013—Bing loyally served the major corporations and big banks, slashing vital social services, closing scores of public schools and secretly collaborating with Governor Snyder to install an emergency manager—after first pitching himself for the position—to throw the city into bankruptcy.

As a condition for supporting the new emergency manager, Bing secured an agreement that the city's public lighting system would be handed to DTE Energy, a company on whose corporate board he long served.

Bing has every right to fear a social explosion in Detroit. But he is warning about a coming deluge that the ruling class, drunk with wealth, power and self-satisfaction, has no means to prevent.



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