

Fifty years since the Detroit rebellion

Part one: An uprising of the oppressed

Barry Grey
21 July 2017

PART ONE | PART TWO | PART THREE

This Sunday, July 23, will mark the 50th anniversary of the onset of the Detroit “riot” of 1967—the most massive and bloody of a wave of urban uprisings that swept across the United States in the 1960s. The government officially recorded social disturbances in 150 cities in 1967 alone. The ruling class and its state machine responded to these eruptions of anger and resistance among the most oppressed sections of the working class by mobilizing National Guard and state troopers to occupy cities such as Los Angeles, Chicago, Cleveland, Newark and Minneapolis.

In the case of Detroit, then the center of auto production in the United States and the world, the administration of Lyndon Johnson called out the army—4,700 troops from the 82nd and 101st Airborne divisions—to reinforce the mass repression meted out over five days by the Guard and state and local police.

We are posting here a three-part series originally published in July of 1987 under the title “Twenty years since the Detroit rebellion.” The articles were published in the *Bulletin*, the newspaper of the Workers League, the predecessor organization of the Socialist Equality Party in the United States.

The political and socio-economic processes examined in the series have matured and deepened over the three decades since its publication. The process of deindustrialization, the worsening of poverty and unemployment, the growth of social inequality, all well underway by 1987, have not only continued, but accelerated. The much-vaunted promises of Lyndon Johnson to eliminate poverty nationally, echoed by the corporate and political leaders who established “New Detroit” even as the smoke was still rising and troops and tanks remained on the streets of Detroit, today lie in ruins. What American capitalism—and a succession of Democratic African-American mayors and majority-black City Councils—have actually produced in the former “Motor City” is a social catastrophe, culminating in a massive wage cut for autoworkers, the biggest municipal bankruptcy in US history, and the corporate theft of workers’ pensions and health benefits.

The further impoverishment of Detroit workers outlined in the articles posted below has been magnified over the subsequent decades. To cite a few statistics:

* The official poverty rate in Detroit in 1967 was 16 percent. Today it hovers around 48 percent. The figure for whites living below the poverty line in 1967 was 12.4 percent; for blacks it was 20 percent. As of 2014, the corresponding figures were 39.7 percent and 41 percent. A Brookings Institution study published last year concluded that that the Detroit metropolitan area had the highest rate of concentrated poverty of the country’s 25 most populous urban centers.

* At the time of the Detroit uprising, the official unemployment rate was 6.2 percent. As of last spring it was 9.1 percent.

* Detroit’s population, over 1.5 million in 1967, had fallen by a third by 1987. Today it stands at 673,000.

* The decline in auto and manufacturing jobs has become a collapse.

Between 1967 and 1982, the city lost more than half of its manufacturing jobs. After 1989, auto-related employment in Michigan fell by another 70 percent. Between 1950 and 2011, the number of manufacturing jobs in Detroit proper fell from 296,000 to 27,000. In 1960, there were 35 major auto plants in and around Detroit employing over 110,000 workers. Today there are 14, employing fewer than 30,000 workers.

The political tendencies that emerged out of the convulsive events in Detroit 50 years ago have developed in parallel with the underlying socio-economic trends. As the series reposted here explains, significant sections of the ruling class responded to the wave of urban uprisings between 1963 and 1968, which reached its high point in Detroit, by carrying out a shift in their class strategy. This was signaled by the establishment of the New Detroit Committee in the midst of the rebellion, bringing together Detroit’s manufacturing, banking and retail elite, the trade union bureaucracy and African-American preachers and politicians, including “Black Power” advocates. New Detroit held its first meeting the same day that Johnson announced the establishment of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, headed by Illinois Governor Otto Kerner.

Bankrolled by the Ford Foundation, New Detroit initiated a policy of cultivating, in part through direct bribes, a privileged layer within the African-American population to serve as administrators of city governments and, in general, defenders of the capitalist system against the broad mass of workers and youth. Beginning in 1968 with the election of Carl Stokes in Cleveland, black Democrats were installed in the city halls of most major US cities, including ex-UAW organizer and former Communist Party fellow traveler Coleman Young in Detroit in 1974.

The Kerner Commission report, issued in March of 1968, put forth the ideological framework for this political operation. It presented the root cause of the urban uprisings as white racism and defined the basic division in American society as race, rather than social class. This liberal effort to mask the basic class division in society and thereby divert attention from the capitalist system itself was taken up and expanded, particularly by the Democratic Party, in the form of identity politics, focusing on issues of race, gender and sexual orientation rather than class, and promoting programs such as affirmative action designed to provide special privileges for a thin layer of blacks and other minorities.

Since the early 1970s, the Democratic Party has made identity politics the axis of its politics, providing it with a supposedly “left” gloss even as it progressively repudiated the limited social reform policies of the New Deal and Great Society and turned ever more sharply to the right. On this basis, it has cultivated a base within privileged sections of the upper-middle class, whose desire for a bigger share of the income and wealth of the top 10 percent finds expression in the politics of race and gender.

In fact, the growth of social inequality has been more extreme within the black population than in the US population as a whole. While the social position of the mass of black workers has sharply declined over the past 50 years, the black middle class, measured by the number of families

earning at least \$100,000 a year, has grown fivefold. Since E. Franklin Frazier published *The Black Bourgeoisie* in 1960, the number of African-American millionaires has grown 1,400 times.

Virtually the entire milieu of middle class pseudo-left organizations, which have evolved sharply to the right since the anti-war protest days of the 1960s, have followed in the wake of the Democrats, employing identity politics to cover their pro-war and pro-imperialist orientation. Their obsession with race and gender has grown even as the economic chasm between the financial elite and the broad mass of working people has reached unprecedented levels, exposing the basic class lines of the social crisis. They are barely able to disguise their visceral hostility to any signs of a growth of class consciousness and desire among working people to unite across race, gender and national lines.

This process found a certain culmination in the Obama administration, whose reactionary war and austerity policies paved the way for Donald Trump, the embodiment of the decay and criminality of American capitalism and its ruling financial oligarchy.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that liberal academics and pseudo-left groups are seeking, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the social uprising in Detroit, to present that event almost entirely from a racial standpoint. Such an approach is shallow and false from an intellectual and historical standpoint. And it coincides with a fundamentally reactionary political agenda of concealing the basic class issues that underlay the urban uprisings of the 1960s and contributing thereby to the channeling of mounting opposition in the working class today into the dead end of the Democratic Party.

The Detroit rebellion was an explosive expression of a crisis of the capitalist system in America and internationally that was already undermining the postwar boom and the system of economic and geopolitical relations, dominated by the United States, that made possible a temporary restabilization of world imperialism in the aftermath of World War II. Internationally, it occurred the same year as the Greek military coup, one year before the May-June general strike in France, and just a few years before the collapse of the Bretton Woods monetary system in 1971.

In the US, it was part of a convulsive decade that saw the assassination of a president and other national political figures, the emergence of mass protests against the War in Vietnam, and a growth of militant labor struggles against attacks on jobs and wages. The convergence of these points of crisis signified the breakdown of the New Deal liberal consensus under the weight of the mounting internal and international contradictions of US capitalism.

As the articles reposted here argue, while racial oppression was a substantial factor in the events of July 1967 in Detroit, what occurred was not a “race riot.” It was an elemental uprising of the most oppressed sections of the working class against the entire economic and political system.

* * *

Thursday, July 23 marked the twentieth anniversary of the onset of the most massive urban explosion in US history—the Detroit riot of July 1967. For six days, the city of Detroit was turned into an armed camp, with, at its peak, 4,700 federal troops, 8,000 National Guardsmen, 360 state police and 4,400 Detroit police deployed as an occupation force against the most oppressed sections of the working class and youth of the city.

Tanks and armored vehicles rumbled down residential streets and, almost at random, saturated apartment houses with machine gun fire. National Guardsmen and police fired shotguns into houses in response to sniper rumors. Afterwards, local and federal commissions admitted that the vast majority of such sniper reports were false. For the most part, the Guardsmen and the police were responding to the crack of weapons being indiscriminately fired by other police and Guardsmen.

City parks and playgrounds were taken over by the troops and used as

encampments and staging grounds. They were filled with tents, where the Guardsmen and army troops bivouacked before going out to man street barricades or search for alleged snipers.

A total of 7,231 were arrested in the course of the 92 hours of rioting, looting, fires, evening-to-dawn curfew and military occupation. The overwhelming majority, 6,407, were black. Most were swept up in mass roundups in the black ghettos on the city’s north central, northwest and east sides.

Those arrested were subjected to the most brutal and inhuman treatment. Thousands were crammed into jail cells in the sweltering July heat, lacking basic sanitary facilities, deprived of the right to a lawyer or even to call their relatives. Hundreds were locked up in underground garages. Some were kept for two days on city buses. Others were shipped to Belle Isle on the Detroit River and crammed into bathhouses.

The cases of jailed workers and youth beaten by the police and subjected to racial insults were legion. Virtually all of those jailed during the riot were subsequently released and the charges against them dropped.

Before it was over, 43 were dead and 1,189 injured. There were 682 fires, which gutted entire city blocks. A total of 412 buildings were destroyed and 1,700 stores looted. Dollar losses from arson and looting were later set at \$50 million (\$367 million in 2017 dollars).

More than 1,000 families lost their homes, and one month after the riot there were still 388 families homeless or displaced. During the week of the Detroit conflagration, civil unrest broke out as well in cities across the state, such as Kalamazoo, Pontiac, Flint, Grand Rapids, Muskegon, Saginaw and Mt. Clemens, and in nearby Toledo, Ohio.

Nationwide wave of unrest

Although the social explosion in Detroit was the biggest, it was by no means an exceptional occurrence. Between 1963 and 1968, riots erupted in most of the large cities in the United States. While in the South, for the most part, they were bound up directly with the struggle against the apartheid legal structure of Jim Crow, in the North they were elemental uprisings of the most oppressed sections of the working class.

The riots occurred in black ghetto sections of the Northern cities, but they were not “race riots.” They were not characterized by violence between whites and blacks, as had largely been the case in the Detroit riot of 1943. They were explosions directed against the most brutal levels of capitalist exploitation and poverty, as well as the pervasive racial discrimination which reinforced these conditions among black and other minority sections of the working class.

Most of the riots started in the poorest sections of the cities—areas with the worst housing, the highest unemployment, the worst sanitary conditions. In most cases, they were provoked by police actions. The police—the paid, uniformed gunmen of capitalist law and order—treated the black ghetto communities as occupied territories and earned the class hatred of their victims by practicing blatant racism and brutality.

The hatred of the oppressed was directed against the police and the system of exploitation which they defended, rather than against white people as such.

In 1963, the same year that national attention focused on the civil rights battle between the black workers and youth and white supremacist officials in Birmingham, Alabama, short-lived riots broke out in the Northern metropolises of Chicago and Philadelphia.

In 1964, riots broke out in Cleveland; New York City; Rochester, New York; Jersey City, Elizabeth and Patterson, New Jersey; and again in Chicago and Philadelphia. In Rochester the National Guard was called out to put down the rebellion.

In 1965, the first of the major social explosions occurred in the Watts ghetto of Los Angeles. The National Guard was called in and, together with the police, they went on a rampage that resulted in 34 deaths and hundreds injured. Almost 4,000 were arrested and damage was set at \$35 million.

The following year the government recorded 43 “disorders.” The most serious were in Chicago and Cleveland, and in both cases the National Guard was brought in to put down the rioting and looting.

The wave of unrest reached its high point in the summer of 1967. There were, according to the government, 59 riots. In June, there were overlapping explosions in Tampa, Cincinnati and Atlanta.

Then in mid-July five days of rioting broke out in Newark. It was put down by the brutal intervention of the National Guard and state police. Twenty-three people were killed and property damage was estimated at \$10 million.

On the day that the wave of rebellions hit Detroit, Sunday, July 23, the Sunday *Detroit News* carried stories about US Marines seeking combat with North Vietnamese troops around Khe Sanh, and the spillover of rioting from Minneapolis, where the National Guard was already on duty, to St. Paul.

Height of the postwar boom

The uprising of one ghetto after another across the United States took place at the height of the postwar boom and American capitalism’s unchallenged supremacy economically, politically and militarily.

President Johnson had declared the “War on Poverty.” He was going to prove that American capitalism could wipe out unemployment, poor housing, malnutrition and racial discrimination.

The dominant policy and ideology of the ruling class was liberal reformism, the continuation and expansion of the New Deal policies of the 1930s. Johnson’s administration in many ways exemplified this policy more clearly than any previous one. It consisted of containing the class struggle at home by means of minimal social reforms, combined with the most brutal use of military force and political repression to maintain the super-exploitation of the victims of American imperialism overseas.

American capitalism’s domination of the world market, combined with its rape of the semi-colonial peoples of Latin America, Asia and Africa, provided the wherewithal to pay for the policies of relative full employment, social reform and rising living standards that held back the class struggle at home.

In 1965, Johnson had sent the Marines into the Dominican Republic to clear out a left-bourgeois regime not sufficiently pliant to the demands of Wall Street and crush a popular movement in support of the government.

By 1967, he had committed over 400,000 American troops to the war in Vietnam and the saturation bombing and wholesale destruction of Vietnamese villages was well underway. It was the policy of “guns” abroad and “butter” at home, and its chief protagonists were liberal warriors against communism such as Johnson, Hubert Humphrey and Robert Kennedy.

In the mid-1960s, America was still the industrial workshop of the world. It produced, for example, close to 60 percent of the world’s automobiles.

To get some idea of the further decay of social conditions in American cities since then, one need only note that the unemployment rate in Detroit at the time of the riot, considered intolerably high by government officials, was 6.2 percent overall, and 11 percent for blacks. Today, it is 11.4 percent overall and 21 percent for blacks. Whereas in 1967, 8.5 percent of Detroit’s citizens were dependent on some form of public assistance, the

figure today is 34 percent.

The major factor in this economic and social decay has been the rapid decline in the auto industry and consequent disappearance of large sections of industry in the Detroit area. Between 1969 and 1986, the number of Detroit residents holding jobs fell by half, from 650,000 to 326,000. The number of manufacturing jobs in Detroit dropped from 624,000 in 1966 to 492,000 in 1984, a fall of 21 percent. And it has declined further since.

Twenty years ago, unskilled workers could still walk into an auto plant and get a decent-paying job. After the riot, Ford, for example, set up a job recruitment office in the ghetto and hired 4,600 people. Recently, the employment planner for Ford, interviewed by the *Detroit Free Press* for a feature supplement on the twentieth anniversary of the riot, said, “We really have no entry-level jobs available in southeastern Michigan.”

Historical contradictions

At the height of its power in the mid-to-late 1960s, American capitalism was already beginning to succumb to its insoluble historical contradictions. Under the unrelenting pressure of the working class at home, in the massive civil rights struggles, the urban rebellions, the continuing struggles of the labor movement in defense of past gains, and the rising tide of revolution abroad, most powerfully expressed in the Vietnamese revolution, American imperialism was beginning to crack.

Massive expenditures for the war in Vietnam plus social programs to contain the class struggle at home were undermining the dollar and therefore the world monetary system based on dollar-gold convertibility set up at the end of World War II.

The very fact that the riots occurred proved that American capitalism, even at the apex of its power and wealth, had been unable to solve basic issues of unemployment, poverty and racial inequality.

The 20 years since have demonstrated even more clearly the incapacity of American capitalism to carry out the reformist promises it made in the wake of the urban rebellions.

World revolution

The riots exposed the historical weakness of American imperialism. Coming as they did in the midst of the massive military buildup in Vietnam, they served as a powerful blow to US imperialism and enormously strengthened the heroic struggle of the Vietnamese workers and peasants.

The American ruling class was confronted with the dilemma of having to fight a war on two fronts—against the Vietnamese masses and the American working class—or finance a major improvement in the living standards of the poorest sections of American workers. It proved unable to do either and, in the end, suffered a debacle in Vietnam of historic dimensions.

It is noteworthy, for example, that the late-night party in an unlicensed after-hours joint that became the conflagration point for the Detroit riot was a welcome home party for two soldiers from Vietnam.

Moreover, Johnson and his point man during the riot, Cyrus Vance, were reluctant to commit the army to put down the rebellion, and when they finally did so, on the third day, they deployed the troops on the east side, away from the scene of the greatest violence, in north central Detroit.

General Throckmorton ordered his troops to keep their weapons

unloaded and, in fact, only one of the 43 fatalities was the victim of army firepower. The federal government knew that it could not rely on the army, consisting of many Vietnam veterans, to indiscriminately shoot down workers and youth in Detroit. It left that job to the police and the National Guardsmen.

The Vietnamese, for their part, were conscious of the political and military significance of the ghetto uprisings for their struggle. Their decision to launch the Tet offensive in January 1968 in the major cities of South Vietnam, which demonstrated the utter failure of the US intervention, took into account the growing crisis of the Johnson administration revealed in the urban upheavals. Within weeks of the Tet offensive, Johnson announced his decision not to seek reelection in 1968.

Ruling class response

The riots shook the American ruling class and prompted a response that was essentially three-pronged:

First, the massive and bloody mobilization of the forces of state repression to put down the revolts, and secret planning for military repression and police state rule to meet even greater threats to capitalist rule in the future.

Second, a deliberate effort to install loyal and trustworthy servants from the black middle class in political and administrative posts, especially at the local level, in order to provide the illusion of “progress,” while more effectively carrying out the exploitation of the working class.

This involved as well the recruitment of blacks on a large scale into urban police forces. It also involved the utilization of so-called black power militants and their allies in the camp of Stalinism and revisionism to encourage separatism and illusions in reformist solutions. In some cases, the corporate powers—that be in riot-torn cities handed over large sums of money to the most ferocious-sounding black separatists to insure their collaboration in restoring law and order.

Third, the call for massive federal funding to provide jobs, housing, public and higher education and other social reforms to improve the lot of the poorest sections of the working class.

This strategy was summed up in the Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, known as the Kerner Report after its chairman, Illinois Governor Otto Kerner. The commission was announced by Johnson on Thursday, July 27, 1967, in the midst of the Detroit riot.

It issued its report on March 1, 1968, five months ahead of schedule, in an attempt to forestall a new wave of rebellions during the approaching summer months. As it turned out, the assassination of Martin Luther King in April 1968 touched off a wave of riots, although none were on the scale of Detroit, Newark or Watts.

The report concluded: “Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal.” It rejected charges that the riots were the result of planned subversion by communists or black militants and blamed them on poverty and white racism.

It stated that the alternatives were a vast program of political and social reforms, paid for by the federal government and financed by increased taxes, or massive state repression on a permanent basis: “To pursue our present course will involve the continuing polarization of the American community and, ultimately, the destruction of basic democratic values.”

At the same time, it defended state repression to put down social revolt: “The community cannot—it will not—tolerate coercion and mob rule.”

In its recommendations, the commission proposed the creation by the federal government of 2 million jobs over the following three years, 550,000 in 1968 alone. It called for extensive job training programs. In education, it called for sweeping measures to end de facto segregation in

the schools, large-scale federal aid to public education and increased aid to poor and minority youth wishing to attend college.

The commission called for an increase in welfare payments and eligibility, national standards and 90 percent federal funding. In housing, it called for a crash program of federally-financed construction and renovation, beginning with 600,000 units the first year.

Most of these reformist proposals were never carried out, and of those that were partially implemented, virtually all have been dismantled over the past decade. The improvements in the economic and social conditions of black workers in the early 1970s have now been reversed and conditions are worse than ever. This time, however, the decline in living standards among minority workers is part of a general fall in the living standards of the working class as a whole.

Within months of the riots, and in the case of Detroit, in the very midst of the explosion, the second aspect of the capitalist response was initiated. The industrial and financial rulers of America began to cultivate and place in office black politicians and administrators. Beginning with the likes of Gibson in Newark and Coleman Young in Detroit, the administration of city after city was turned over to black Democrats—Hatcher in Gary, Young in Atlanta, Bradley in Los Angeles, Washington in Chicago, Goode in Philadelphia.

In essence, the ruling class agreed to share a portion of its spoils with a thin social layer of middle class blacks, who have eagerly enriched themselves at the expense of the working class, black and white.

In every case, they have presided over an unprecedented decline in industry and jobs and a growth of homelessness, poverty and hunger, while they and their cronies have benefited from the consumer boom financed by the ballooning debt of American capitalism.

As for the buildup of the state—the police, army, courts, etc.—it was recently revealed that the martial law plan drawn up by Lt. Col. Oliver North in 1984 was patterned after a secret plan drawn up in 1970 by the head of the California State National Guard under then-Governor Ronald Reagan. That 1970 scheme called for the roundup of “at least 21 million American Negroes” and their incarceration in “assembly centers or relocation camps” in order to forestall an “uprising by black militants.”

For all the liberal rhetoric in the wake of the Detroit riot, the chief post-riot action taken by Congress was to pass a \$100 million appropriation for police departments to buy tanks, armored cars and bulletproof vests.

To be continued



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)