

Fifty years since the Detroit rebellion

Part three: Liberal promises and capitalist reality in “New Detroit”

Barry Grey
24 July 2017

PART ONE | PART TWO | PART THREE

This is the third and final part of “Twenty years since the Detroit rebellion,” originally published in 1987. Part one was published on July 21, part two on July 22.

By Thursday, July 27, 1967, the worst of the rioting in the streets of Detroit was over. The revolt of the most oppressed and poverty-stricken sections of the working class had been put down by the occupation force of army troops, National Guardsmen, state and city police.

Parts of the city’s black ghettos were still smoking and entire blocks of houses were in rubble. A thousand families were sleeping on the sidewalk, burnt out of their homes. Thousands of Detroiters remained penned up in jails and makeshift detention centers, under inhuman conditions. Forty-three Detroiters lay dead and 1,189 injured, most of them blacks.

The 9 p.m. to 6 a.m. curfew was to remain in effect until the following Tuesday, the day that the federal troops would be withdrawn from the city streets. But even before the troops were removed, the ruling class, shaken and frightened by the spread of urban rebellion, began a conscious effort to revamp its political machinery for duping the masses with democratic illusions and, when necessary, stamping out their resistance by force.

On July 27 in Washington, President Lyndon Johnson announced the formation of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, headed by Illinois Governor Otto Kerner. On the same day, in Detroit’s City-County Building, Governor George Romney and Mayor Jerome Cavanagh headed up an extraordinary meeting of 39 people, including virtually every top corporate executive in the city.

Also present were United Auto Workers (UAW) President Walter Reuther; Jack Wood, Detroit & Wayne County Building Trades Council secretary-treasurer; state and local Republican and Democratic officials; and black city officials, churchmen and administrators, including Arthur Johnson, Detroit Public Schools deputy superintendent; and Damon Keith, Michigan Civil Rights co-chairman.

There was even a black nationalist radical, a young man by the name of Norvel Harrington.

The list of corporate chiefs at the meeting reads like a “who’s who” in the ruling circles of Detroit: General Motors President James M. Roche; Henry Ford II; Chrysler Chairman Lynn Townsend; department store magnate Joseph Hudson Jr.; Detroit Edison Chairman Walker Cisler; financier and industrialist Max Fisher; Ralph McElvenny, president of Michigan Consolidated Gas; William Day, president of Michigan Bell Telephone; and department store owner Stanley Winkelman.

New Detroit Committee

This meeting established itself as the New Detroit Committee (NDC), later to become New Detroit Incorporated. Billed as the “new urban

coalition,” a meeting of minds of the rich and powerful, the representatives of labor and the black community, it was a high-powered and at the same time desperate maneuver by the capitalist rulers.

The rebellion had proven that they could not continue to defend their property and profits without making changes in the political apparatus. The red-neck police chiefs of the past and virtually all-white political establishment had to be changed. They had to find black middle-class elements whom they could trust to defend their interests. Some of the spoils of exploitation had to be shared with “responsible” blacks, who would help keep down the working class masses.

The police force could no longer maintain law and order as an open and virtually all-white occupation force in the ghettos. More blacks had to be integrated into the force and trained to serve as uniformed gunmen for the ruling class.

At the same time, the corporate rulers had to acknowledge the existence of racism, demonstrate their “concern,” and actually make some improvement in the conditions of life in the ghettos.

Henry Ford II bankrolled the New Detroit Committee with a \$2 million grant, for starters, from the Ford Foundation. From the beginning, the more far-sighted of New Detroit’s corporate elite saw the need to enlist the services of radical-sounding advocates of black power and community control, in addition to their tried and true agents in the trade union bureaucracy and the traditional middle-class black leaders.

Men like Henry Ford II, for example, quickly took the measure of most of the black radicals and decided they could serve as a political buffer inside the ghettos in return for prestige and a healthy grant from New Detroit’s coffers. Ford was willing to put up with some harmless rhetoric. In a recent article in the *Detroit News* recalling the early days of the New Detroit Committee, Stanley Winkelman wrote:

“At one of the first meetings, the dynamics were fascinating. One young radical named Harrison, stood up, pointed his finger at Henry Ford II and asked, ‘Why do we need fat cats like you here, when you are the cause of the problem?’ At this point, then-UAW President Walter Reuther interceded and said, ‘Young man, Mr. Ford is here to help, and you’d be smart to listen.’”

That the capitalist establishment in Detroit was setting out to install a new political apparatus is shown in another recollection by Winkelman. In the fall of 1967, the NDC decided to offer a grant of \$100,000 to the Federation for Self-Determination. This organization was headed by Rev. Albert Cleage, a black nationalist advocate of “black control of the black community.” NDC members from organizations such as the NAACP felt threatened by this turn of events, and a dispute broke out on the committee.

Winkelman recalled, “Unfortunately, the white business leadership had concluded in 1967 that new leadership was needed in the black community. But the real problem as I saw it was failure to support the leaders already in place.”

\$100,000 grants

In the end, the NDC accepted Winkelman's compromise plan to offer \$100,000 grants to both Cleage's group and the Detroit Council of Organizations, which was run by the old-line black leader Rev. Roy Allen Sr.

New Detroit called for "the expenditures of vast sums of money" to "see to it that every man has the opportunity to live the kind of life each of us would ask for ourselves, that his children can grow up in the kind of world each of us asks for our own children, that education, housing, job opportunity and respect for individual dignity be of the highest order an abundant society can provide."

The millionaires and billionaires who controlled New Detroit declared that the cause of the riot was institutionalized racism. In its progress report issued nine months after the 1967 riot, New Detroit wrote: "What is perhaps urgently needed in obtaining individual commitment is a new definition of racism and its implications in white America. ... It is the inability to put on, if only for a few moments, a black skin and look at the world with new eyes. It is the inability to understand that each of us, in ways great and small, has benefited because the Negro has suffered."

What had shaken the ruling class was the realization that the urban rebellions were not race riots. They were uprisings of the most oppressed sections of the working class against the capitalist system. Winkelman's recollections underscore this vital point:

"It was at that moment that I realized that this was not a race riot in the usual sense, since looting was being done by blacks and whites together. The disenchanted people involved were not anti-white so much as anti-society..."

All the more reason to insist that the root cause of the explosion was racism, the better to leave in the shade the underlying source of poverty, unemployment, crime and racism—the profit system itself.

In its 1968 progress report, New Detroit obliquely asserted its absolute defense of capitalism in the midst of its liberal gushings on the evils of racism and the need for social reforms. It cited approvingly the call of the Kerner Commission, whose report was published in March 1968, for a national commitment "compatible with the historical ideals of American society."

While they were beating their breasts in public and beginning to dole out lucrative grants to various community "leaders," the men who ran New Detroit were working feverishly to revamp the police and National Guard and prepare for the next riot. This time it would be different!

And it was. In April 1968, within hours of the shooting of Martin Luther King Jr., the police department ordered complete mobilization. State troopers and the National Guard arrived shortly afterward. A curfew was imposed for six days.

Oakland County Sheriff John Nichols was the deputy superintendent of the Detroit police in 1967, and police commissioner from 1970 to 1973. He was narrowly defeated by Coleman Young in the 1973 mayoral election.

Recently, he told the *Detroit News*, "We put together a riot plan that served as a model for much of the country. At the time of the Martin Luther King incident, the new plan got its first shakeout under field conditions... We moved with great rapidity. We had regular rehearsals of the plan."

He went on to say that after the riot, the police increased their arms. Before, only one car in each precinct—a cruiser called the Big Four—was equipped with shotguns and tear gas. After the riot, all cars carried shotguns and sergeants' cars packed tear gas canisters.

Police spy network

At the same time, the police built up its network of spies and informers within the black communities. Said Nichols, "Surveillance increased and the number of black officers on surveillance units increased. I think the department went out of its way to become involved in community organizations."

Interestingly, Arthur Johnson, a charter member of New Detroit and, at the time, deputy superintendent of public education (now head of the Detroit NAACP), was listed in New Detroit's 1973 progress report as head of the "Public Safety" committee.

In 1969, Richard Austin, a black, ran for mayor against Roman Gribbs and was narrowly defeated. He was later appointed Michigan secretary of state. In the meantime, Coleman Young, a state senator since 1964 and Michigan's delegate on the Democratic National Committee in 1968, was co-opted onto the New Detroit board of trustees.

Young's rise to prominence was the most remarkable example of the political shakeout engineered by Detroit's corporate elite in the aftermath of the riots. From the late 1930s until the mid-1950s, Young was closely and publicly associated with the Stalinist Communist Party. As a UAW organizer in the 1930s, field representative of the United Public Workers and organization director for the Wayne County CIO Council after the war, Young became a victim of the anticommunist witch-hunt, spearheaded in the Detroit labor movement by UAW President Reuther.

In 1951, he became executive secretary of the National Negro Labor Council, an organization that was proscribed by the AFL, CIO and UAW leadership as a Communist Party front. On October 22, 1951, the UAW International Executive Board issued a press release denouncing the founding conference of the National Negro Labor Council, calling it a "vehicle for Communist propaganda and an instrument to implement Communist strategy and policies."

In February 1952, Young and UAW Local 600 Secretary William Hood, the president of the National Negro Labor Council, were hauled before a House Un-American Activities Committee hearing in Detroit. During the 1950s, Young was blacklisted. He was elected to the state Senate in 1964 over the opposition of both the UAW and the Democratic Party machine.

As late as 1971, Young was denied a loan application by the Small Business Administration to open a barbecue restaurant and bar on the grounds that it would be "against the interests of the federal government." But Henry Ford II and his peers needed a black Democrat to take over the city administration, especially after several years of continued and overt police brutality and provocation under Police Commissioner Nichols and his infamous STRESS unit.

Young's former association with the labor movement and his reputation as a "red" had earned him a measure of support and respect among black workers, which would increase his usefulness to the corporate powers of Detroit and Michigan.

The Stalinist school of opportunism

Trained in the Stalinist school of cynicism and opportunism, Young was more than willing to serve. With the support—political and financial—of Ford and most of the other corporate moguls in New Detroit, as well as the UAW and AFL-CIO, Young defeated Nichols in the 1973 mayoral race. He is not the only black Democrat with previous Stalinist credentials to win a top spot in the local Detroit hierarchy. The head of the Detroit Common Council, Erma Henderson, was president of the Michigan chapter of the Stalinist-supported American Youth for Democracy in

1947, according to a report in the CP-backed state paper, the *Michigan Herald*, of March 9, 1947.

And there are other alumni or close associates of New Detroit who went on to become top Detroit city officials in the 1970s. City Councilman Clyde Cleveland, for example, was project director of the Community Development Division of New Detroit Incorporated before winning a seat on the Common Council in January 1974. Councilwoman Maryann Mahaffey is married to Herman Dooha, a controller for New Detroit.

In the immediate aftermath of the riot, Ford, GM and Chrysler made some attempt to recruit unemployed black workers for jobs in their plants. At that time Detroit was the unquestioned center of the world auto industry and it was still possible for an unskilled worker to get a decent-paying job in a Big Three plant.

The sharp decline in the auto industry in the aftermath of the 1974 oil crisis put an end to that period. As for the talk of massive new housing for the poor, the Housing and Urban Development program in Detroit degenerated into a scandal as real estate speculators and bankers made bundles with the help of federal subsidies, while poor families, unable to secure decent jobs, were forced to default and abandon their HUD homes.

From the beginning of Young's tenure, the essence of Detroit's so-called renaissance was the abandonment of the industrial working class of the city and a turn to more lucrative sources of profit for the New Detroit capitalists.

Renaissance Center

Young granted Henry Ford generous tax abatements, low-cost loans and land grants for his \$500 million Renaissance Center, the huge office, hotel and commercial complex erected on the riverfront in 1977. It was the beginning of a government-subsidized downtown real estate boom, which has siphoned off virtually all funds from the reformist programs promised by New Detroit in its infancy, most of which never got off the ground, and enriched the banking and industrial establishment as well as a thin layer of middle-class blacks.

Since the Renaissance Center, the downtown area has seen the construction of the Joe Louis Arena, a \$200 million expansion of Cobo Hall, the Trolley Plaza, Millender Center (named after Young's 1973 campaign director), the exclusive Riverfront West apartments, the Omni Hotel, Stroh River Place and the People Mover.

This November, with major input from New Detroit Incorporated, Young will unveil his "Strategic Plan" for the future of Detroit. So far, he has made as his major new proposals the construction of a new prison in a working class section of the city and the introduction of casino gambling.

In the intervening years, the industrial base of Detroit has been largely dismantled, producing a social catastrophe for the working class and youth of the city, black and white. Those who have made the decisions to close the plants and wipe out hundreds of thousands of jobs in Detroit and Michigan are the very same corporate "statesmen" who founded New Detroit and continue to sit on its board.

Chrysler began closing most of its plants in Detroit in 1979-80. In 1980, the year it demolished its Dodge Main plant in Hamtramck, former Chrysler Chairman John J. Riccardo was chairman of New Detroit, Inc. Now Chrysler is about to begin demolishing a section of the east side community to make way for a new plant that will provide far fewer jobs than the Jefferson Avenue assembly plant it will replace.

General Motors, working with the Young administration, tore down the working class community of Poletown in 1981 in order to build its robotized plant on the site and closed down its three factories in southwest Detroit, producing a net loss of about 5,000 jobs.

Peter Stroh, a later New Detroit leader, closed his brewery, wiping out hundreds of jobs, in order to make way for his office building and high-rent apartment development on the riverfront. Joseph Hudson Jr., the first chairman of New Detroit, closed down Detroit's only downtown department store several years ago.

In the midst of rising unemployment, deteriorating housing, an underfunded and floundering school system, increasing hunger, a plague of abandoned houses and a growing population of homeless people, Young and the entire black Democratic establishment in Detroit have made the "war against crime" their number one priority.

Expressing the fear and hatred of this middle-class social layer for the working class, they have instituted a vicious law-and-order crackdown against the youth, including the enforcement of a curfew, the deployment of police in the schools and the practice of mass weapons searches of high school and junior high school students.

Twenty years later: A balance sheet

Twenty years after the Detroit rebellion, the conditions of life for the working class of Detroit—white and black—are far worse than they were when the city's ghettos exploded in social revolt. And the impact of economic decay and the virtual looting of the city by Young and his corporate backers has fallen hardest by far on the city's black workers and youth.

To cite some statistics:

* From 1967 to 1987, the city has lost a third of its people and a larger percentage of its jobs. More than half of Detroit's manufacturing, wholesale and retail businesses and workers disappeared between 1967 and 1982. Between 1969 and 1986, the number of Detroit residents holding jobs fell by half, from 650,000 to 326,000.

* In 1960, 45.6 percent of the tax base of the tri-county area surrounding Detroit was inside the city itself. By 1985, the city's share of the wealth had declined to 12.6 percent.

* In 1967, the median family income of Detroit families was 21 percent less than that of families in the metropolitan area, which includes the suburbs. By 1985, the median income of Detroit families was 44 percent less.

* The city's welfare dependency rate has increased from 8.5 percent of the population in 1965 to 34 percent today.

* In 1967, the unemployment rate in Detroit was 6.2 percent. For blacks, it was 9.8 percent. Today, the unemployment rate is 11.4 percent and 22 percent for blacks.

Recently, Michigan State University's Urban Affairs Programs released a study on the social conditions of blacks in Michigan 20 years after the riot. Titled "The State of Black Michigan: 1987," it documented the drastic worsening of conditions of the majority of blacks in the state since 1967 and the widening gap between them and their white counterparts.

The report also noted, however, the growth of a small but affluent black middle class over the same period: "Despite the negative trends, the number of black upwardly mobile professionals (BUMPies) in Michigan has grown significantly... Higher up on the scale, the proportion of blacks with family incomes above \$9,999 grew more rapidly than that of whites from 1959 to 1979. The larger percentage gain for blacks reflects the very small number of black families above this income bracket in 1959, as well as the increasing black middle class occurring simultaneously with a larger black underclass."

Unemployment of both whites and blacks in Detroit has gone up, but since 1976 it has risen at a rate about twice as fast for blacks as for whites. Youth unemployment in Detroit stands at about 55 percent.

Concerning health, the gap in life expectancy between white and black males has grown wider since 1960. The rate of infant mortality for blacks since 1974 has gone from twice that of whites to 2.5 times the white rate. Detroit has the second highest rate of infant mortality in the country. Its rate of 20 per 1,000 live births is nearly double the rate for white babies statewide.

Since Coleman Young became mayor, both Detroit General and Wayne County General hospitals have been closed down.

In higher education, the percentage of blacks in Michigan's public universities has gone from 5.3 percent in 1970 to 11 percent in 1976, and down again to 7 percent in 1986. The number of blacks in graduate schools and the number of blacks earning college degrees have also fallen since the mid-1970s.

As for public education in Detroit, the schools have become far more segregated and the quality of education has declined sharply. Between 1967 and 1986, the percentage of white students in the Detroit schools dropped from 41 percent to 9.2 percent. A recent study by the University of Chicago concluded that Michigan has the second most segregated school system in the country, surpassed only by Illinois.

In 1965, the federal government allocated money to train teachers of students in poverty areas. The program was criticized by the Kerner Commission as too limited. In 1980, the program was terminated completely.

Detroit schools today spend \$2,939 per student, as compared to \$5,259 in the suburban Birmingham school district. Over 40 percent of the students who enter the ninth grade in Detroit schools do not graduate four years later. In his latest school budget, Detroit Superintendent of Schools Arthur Jefferson has proposed a cut in spending and the elimination of over 600 staff positions.

These figures are a pale reflection of the social decay and human misery of Detroit 20 years after the ghetto rebellion. They constitute an indictment not only of the capitalist politicians, black and white, Democratic and Republican, but of the capitalist profit system which they defend.

The liberal promises of the "War on Poverty" 1960s have yielded the mass unemployment, urban decay, renewed racial attacks, union-busting and onslaught on democratic rights of today. This is the product of the objective decay of capitalism internationally, and, above all, within the United States. It is producing a movement of the working class that will far outstrip the explosions of the 1960s, and will be to a far greater extent a political movement of the working class as a class—black and white, native-born and immigrant—against capitalism.

The conscious preparation of this struggle, on the basis of the political independence of the working class and a socialist program, is the life-and-death issue before class-conscious workers and youth. They are called on to join the Workers League and build the Marxist leadership needed to carry it through.

Concluded



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact