

Corporate interests, racial politics dominate Detroit mayoral election

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With the backing of the city's corporate interests and the Democratic political establishment, incumbent Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan is expected to be reelected by a wide margin in today's mayoral election. Neither Duggan nor opponent Michigan State Senator Coleman Young II have any solution to the social crisis that afflicts the former Motor City, which is surpassed only by Philadelphia for the dubious distinction of being America's poorest big city.

Duggan, a multi-millionaire former Wayne County prosecutor who led the conversion of the non-profit Detroit Medical Center into a for-profit operation, was first elected in November 2013, with barely 25 percent of the electorate participating. He took office as the city's unelected financial emergency manager, appointed by Republican Governor Rick Snyder, released his bankruptcy "adjustment" plan of savage austerity measures.

The 2013-14 municipal bankruptcy, then the largest in US history, was backed by the Obama administration and used to set a precedent for gutting pensions and privatizing public services in other US cities and Puerto Rico, ravaged by the collapse of the housing market and financial meltdown between 2007-09, and the subsequent reductions in federal and state aid.

At the time Duggan posed as a proponent of "home rule" against the deeply unpopular emergency manager and criticized the huge fees extracted from the city by the army of lawyers and consultants who cashed in from the bankruptcy. During his first four years in office, however, Duggan has dutifully catered to the needs of the Wall Street investors and corporate elite, sanctioning the selloff of large portions of the city to billionaire developers Dan Gilbert and the late Mike Ilitch for pennies on the dollar under the guise of Detroit's "comeback."

Duggan is one of several public figureheads on the Detroit Financial Review Commission, which holds the real power in Detroit, overseeing spending decisions by city and school officials, and guaranteeing the debt repayments to wealthy bondholders. Duggan has boasted that the city could emerge from state oversight by the spring, but a new three-year period of control would restart if the city were to run a deficit.

Even though the US bankruptcy court trampled over the state constitution and slashed city worker pensions, Duggan has suddenly discovered a nearly \$500 million budget shortfall in the city pension payment obligations, which, he claimed, was due to a miscalculation of life expectancy rates by the bankruptcy officials. This only means that the next mayor will impose even deeper cuts to the inadequate benefits retirees and their dependents survive on, ensuring that they live far shorter lives.

Duggan has received national accolades for "turning around" Detroit and endorsements from former Vice President Joe Biden, US Congressman John Conyers Jr., various corporate entities, both of Detroit's daily newspapers, the trade union bureaucracy, and over 100 church leaders.

While Duggan has touted paltry achievement, including tearing down thousands of abandoned and blighted homes, rehabbing the city's barely functioning bus system and turning on 65,000 previously darkened streetlights, the daily life for the majority of the city's population continues to worsen.

The official poverty rate is 35.7 percent and unemployment rate is around 10 percent, with the real jobless rate far higher due to the large numbers of workers who have fallen out of the labor force. Thirty-six percent of Detroit residents work for less than \$15,000 a year and 25 percent do not have access to

vehicles. Insurance rates in Detroit are among the highest in the country and over 100,000 homes have had their utilities shut off.

Duggan is being opposed by Coleman Young II, the biological son of former Detroit Mayor Coleman Young, the city's first African American mayor who ran the city from 1974 to 1994. During the sole debate between the two candidates on October 25, Young made thinly veiled racist appeal against Duggan, who is white, saying, "It's time to take back the motherland."

Such politics have a long and discredited pedigree in Detroit and throughout the country. The original Coleman Young was one of several African American mayors put in power in the aftermath of the ghetto uprisings of the 1960s whose job it was to quell social opposition and promote the illusion that poverty, police brutality and racial discrimination could be overcome by elevating black politicians and business owners into positions of economic and political power.

While they oversaw the enrichment of this corrupt layer, Young and the succession of black mayors, city council members and judges were just as servile as their white counterparts to the auto corporations and the banks, which used mass unemployment and deindustrialization to strip workers of the gains won through generations of class struggle.

By 2013, the working-class residents of this majority African American city were so tired of self-serving racist appeals by corrupt politicians that they tried their luck by electing a white mayor. Regardless of the race of the mayor, the Democratic Party, which has run the city since 1962, has led workers into a dead end.

On all issues of substance, there is nothing that distinguishes Duggan and Young. During their October 25 debate both candidates called for more cops on the streets, and had no answer to the social deprivation that lies behind Detroit's designation as the most violent city in America.

Responding to popular anger over the continued deterioration of working-class and poor neighborhoods, while a small section of downtown has become a mecca of business headquarters, luxury apartments and sports and entertainment destinations, the candidates offer nothing more than more tax cuts and incentives for new businesses and minority contractors.

They offered no solution to the crisis in public

education except to back the current push for more charter schools and privatization schemes. Both said the schools should channel more students in vocational training programs, which they said should be run by the unions. Such a proposal, as the corruption scandal engulfing the United Auto Workers union shows, would be nothing more than another payoff for the trade union executives, who would get a kickback from channeling young workers into low-paying, part-time jobs.

When asked by the moderator about working with the Trump administration Duggan said, "I have built bipartisan partnerships that have delivered."

Young replied "There's more that brings us together than divides us."

After only 14 percent of registered voters participated in the mayoral primaries, the turnout for today's election is expected to be very low. The vast majority of workers and young people are politically disenfranchised and completely alienated from the Democratic Party, which, no less than the Republicans, is oblivious to their social concerns and aspirations.

This was underscored by the large abstention in the 2016 presidential elections where large numbers of African American and other working class voters in Detroit, Flint and other cities saw no reason to turn out for Hillary Clinton after eight years of the Obama administration, which only served to increase the social divide between the ultra-rich and the working class.



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