

The Democrats and Detroit

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With its selection of Detroit as the site for its second presidential debate, the Democratic Party is once again trying to posture as a champion of the interests of workers and low-income minority residents in America's impoverished inner cities.

The political theater started days before the debate with Senator Amy Klobuchar making her pilgrimage to the lead-poisoned city of Flint to call for a \$1 trillion infrastructure program and Senator Bernie Sanders taking a group of US citizens with diabetes to buy lower-costing insulin in Windsor, Ontario, just across the river from Detroit.

Hours before the first debate, Democratic National Committee Chairman Tom Perez hosted a meeting with state Democrats and United Auto Workers officials to denounce General Motors for closing US factories, including the Warren Transmission Plant, which will shut Friday.

The Democrats suffered an electoral debacle in 2016 with Hillary Clinton losing to Trump in Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania. The collapse of the supposed "Blue Wall" was largely due to a substantial decline in the voter turnout, including among minority voters, in traditional urban Democratic Party strongholds. While Clinton won Wayne County, which includes Detroit, she received 93,000 fewer votes than Obama in 2012. Trump won the state by the narrow margin of 10,740 votes.

The fall in voter turnout, and the shift of a section of workers, many of whom voted for Sanders in the primaries, to Trump was result of a devastating decline in living standards that workers suffered under the eight years of the Obama administration. The Democratic president bailed out the Wall Street banks, initiating an historic transfer of wealth to the super-rich, while overseeing an escalation of the class war against the jobs, living standards and social rights achieved by the working class.

Detroit has been ground zero in the social counter-revolution conducted by the American ruling class and its two political parties over the last four decades. As a result of the semi-insurrectional struggles by autoworkers in the 1930s, Detroit had the highest per capita income in the nation by 1960. By the late 1970s, having lost its previously unchallenged dominance in the world economy, American

capitalism jettisoned its policy of class compromise and shifted to a program of class war.

The first Chrysler bailout of 1979-80, carried out under Democratic President Jimmy Carter, initiated a decade of deindustrialization, union-busting and relentless austerity throughout the country. In the face of the historic decline of American capitalism and the globalization of production, the United Auto Workers and other unions abandoned any defense of workers and became the enforcers of the dictates of corporate management. This was epitomized by the appointment of the UAW president to the Chrysler board of directors and the union's collusion in the destruction of 60,000 jobs, including the closure of 12 factories and layoff of 30,000 autoworkers in Detroit alone. By the early 1990s, the former Motor City became the poorest big city in America, a tragic distinction that it still retains today, with an official poverty rate of 39.4 percent.

The Obama administration came to power in January 2009, determined to carry out what the corporate and financial elite considered the unfinished business of the social counterrevolution begun in the 1980s, particularly in regards to health care and public education. After continuing the bailout of Wall Street started by his Republican predecessor, Obama's next major act was to destroy the so-called "middle class" living standards of Detroit autoworkers.

The 2009 forced bankruptcy and restructuring of GM and Chrysler, carried out with the collaboration of the UAW, led to the halving of wages of new hires, the elimination of the eight-hour day, more plant closures and layoffs and the expansion of the number of low-paid temporary workers who could be hired and fired at will.

The assault on autoworkers was the template for the gutting of the wages, health and pension benefits of every section of the working class, along with the proliferation of temporary, contract and other casual employment associated with the so-called Gig Economy.

But Obama and the Democrats were not done. While the Wall Street banks and the fortunes of financial speculators who crashed the economy were made whole, there was no similar bailout of the states and cities like Detroit, which

were ravaged by the collapse in housing prices, spikes in unemployment and growing indebtedness to the same criminal financial houses responsible for the 2008 crash. Instead, following the mantra of his White House chief of staff, Rahm Emanuel, who declared, “Never let a good crisis go to waste,” the Obama administration backed the conspiracy to use the bankruptcy courts, which had previously been used by major corporations to strip workers of their pensions, against public employees in cash-strapped municipalities.

In 2013, Detroit became the test case for a nationwide attack on public employee pensions. The mechanism was Michigan’s reactionary “financial emergency manager” law first introduced by Democratic Governor James Blanchard in the late 1970s. The state’s Republican Governor Rick Snyder appointed Kevyn Orr, a life-long Democrat, backer of Obama’s presidential campaign and a bankruptcy attorney for Chrysler during its restructuring, as Detroit Financial Emergency Manager and Obama’s Justice Department wrote a legal brief to oppose any efforts by public employees to defend their pensions, protected under the Michigan state constitutional.

In the end, with the collusion of the unions, which joined the “Grand Bargain,” much of the city’s publicly owned lighting and water systems were fully or partially privatized, pensions were cut, and the city’s billionaire real estate developers were essentially handed control of the city, along with hundreds of millions in tax cuts and subsidies for their profit-making ventures.

The Detroit bankruptcy coincided with efforts by Flint’s emergency manager and Democratic political establishment to launch their own looting operation on behalf of wealthy bondholders and developers which would result in the poisoning of an entire city in April 2014. Obama’s Environmental Protection Agency, along with the Snyder administration in Lansing ignored the complaints and protests of city residents and health experts who ultimately forced the city to switch back to using water supplied by Detroit.

A succession of Democrats, from Jesse Jackson to Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton, came to the city to issue bogus promises of relief that never materialized. The most disgusting was Obama’s 2016 visit where he sipped what purported to be a glass a Flint tap water, dismissed residents’ concerns and said as a child he ate lead-paint chips and turned out okay.

In 2016, just months after autoworkers rebelled against the UAW and the two-tier wage system imposed by Obama, Detroit public school teachers launched a series of wildcat strikes against decaying schools and intolerable conditions, which would foretell the wave of statewide strikes in

2018-19.

In taking a stand they were defying school district emergency manager Darnell Earley, who had overseen the disaster in Flint. They were also in a direct conflict with the Obama administration whose Race to the Top program had been used to scapegoat teachers for educational problems caused by poverty and decades of budget cutting and to sharply expand the number of charter schools and other for-profit operations. With protests escalating, the teacher unions and the local Democratic establishment quashed the protests, paving the way for yet another restructuring at the costs of teachers and students.

In their remarks during the debate, Sanders, Elizabeth Warren and others echoed the anti-Chinese and anti-Mexican rhetoric of the UAW, claiming that the economic devastation in Detroit and other cities was the result not of capitalism, but of “unfair trade” and the supposed rapaciousness of China. These remarks, which echo Trump, are aimed at dividing the international working class and subordinating the interests of workers to the trade war and militarist policies of the American ruling elite.

In a similar vein, the Democrats blamed “racism” for poverty, poor housing conditions and the lack of critical services, suggesting that these social problems caused by the profit system would be resolved by reparations and funding “black entrepreneurs.” This too is aimed at dividing the working class, and its refutation is nowhere clearer than in Detroit, which has long been controlled by a black Democratic Party political establishment, which serves the banks and big business no less ruthlessly than their Republican counterparts.

The experience of the working class with the Democratic Party in Detroit underscore the need for a political break with this party of Wall Street and the Pentagon war machine and the development of a powerful political movement based on the program of socialist internationalism fought for by the Socialist Equality Party.



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