

Detroit City Council endorses the creation of a racialist Reparations Task Force

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On July 5, the Detroit City Council unanimously passed a resolution calling for the initiation of a city commission to explore the establishment of reparations payments for Detroit's African American population.

The resolution also endorses a national reparations policy framework that is being promoted by the Democratic Party-dominated Congressional Black Caucus which, significantly, has made this policy its number one priority, and not poverty, housing or the social crisis facing African American families.

A similar commission has been established by the state government in California. The city of Evanston, Illinois established a program in 2021 in the name of reparations which provides public funds to a limited number of black residents to pay for a mortgage or home improvements.

The demand for racial reparations has long been percolating within the Democratic Party, heavily promoted by well-off upper middle class African American politicians. The late Detroit-area representative John Conyers became associated with annual Congressional demands for reparations, along with other entirely symbolic political efforts that did nothing to actually improve the conditions of life for oppressed blacks.

Detroit Council President Mary Sheffield motivated the resolution, stating, "Today was important because it also shows council's support for the idea of reparations and supporting a process to explore it moving forward."

"There's a lot of systemic issues that African Americans face, and this is a predominately black city," Sheffield said. "I think it's important that we acknowledge it, and we at least begin to have conversations on how to address the issue of reparations."

The resolution was also endorsed by Michigan Democratic Party Black Caucus Chair Keith Williams.

Councilwoman Sheffield, as well as her father Horace Sheffield III, have been cashing in on the name of her

grandfather Horace Sheffield Jr., who played an important role in the 1941 UAW-CIO drive to unionize Ford Motor Company. Henry Ford had hired thousands of black workers as scabs to undermine the union. Sheffield Jr., a leader of the youth division of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), broke with the parent division to support the campaign of the UAW-CIO led by socialists. It was a critical turning point in the fight to unite black and white workers against Ford's nakedly racist attempt to divide the workers.

The fact that his descendants are seeking to do the opposite, i.e., to amplify racial divisions with this reparations gambit, is a testament to the political degeneration of an increasingly wealthy layer of the black petty bourgeoisie firmly ensconced within the Democratic Party and the capitalist system.

The crisis of the council and the Democratic Party in fact expresses its vast degeneration. Horace Sheffield Jr., working with the UAW, had developed an alliance with civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther Jr. King, especially in the last years before he was killed in 1968, called for a massive redistribution of wealth and became an opponent of capitalism.

While the initiative occurred after a city-wide vote in November 2021 which registered 80 percent support for the resolution, it is thoroughly reactionary.

Workers should make no mistake: preferential or privileged treatment based on race is a ruling class ploy to divide and weaken the working class. The aim is to suppress the class struggle, promote false stereotypes and pit the impoverished and oppressed against each other.

Behind the claim of redressing past wrongs, the Democratic Party is protecting Wall Street and big business by propping up a right-wing upper middle class elite and promoting a measure that will penalize "whites," "Hispanics" and others supposedly for the benefit of African Americans. The reparations campaign occurs

alongside the promotion of the *New York Times* discredited 1619 Project, a falsification of American history designed to inject racialist politics into popular consciousness, particularly in the schools.

The campaign in Detroit occurs under conditions where uncounted trillions in wealth have been created by autoworkers of every skin color, ethnicity, gender and national origin and funneled to the Detroit Big Three, the banks, and the ruling elites for decades. Yet poverty persists at over 30 percent (2019 statistics), crumbling infrastructure results in flooding and power outages with every storm, water shutoffs to impoverish residents have attracted the attention of the United Nations, and public schools have become infamous for their black mold, rodent infestation and disrepair.

Detroit is a microcosm of the situation nationally. Mass suffering plagues the working class under a bipartisan pandemic policy of “let it rip” and 9 percent inflation. The Democratic Party, no less vicious in its defense of the profit system than the Republicans, has imposed drastic austerity and poverty, not least of all within cities with majority African-American populations such as Detroit.

While the Detroit City Council asserts that reparations will address issues such as freedom from discrimination, housing, public safety, along with water and sanitation shutoffs, this is a lie. These are all legitimate issues, but none of them are exclusive to Detroit, nor can they be resolved on the basis of race.

The 80 percent approval vote expresses years of ruling class propaganda, after decades of oppression. But there is another side to this development. The 1970s and '80s witnessed a sharp decline in the conditions of life for working people alongside deindustrialization, which hit black workers dramatically.

From 1980 to 1990, Detroit lost 43,050 jobs in auto alone. Since 1978 over 350,000 autoworkers lost their jobs. As part of their strategy of control, the ruling elite consciously built up a black middle class who were promoted to politically dominate industrial cities such as Detroit, Cleveland, Gary, Indiana and others. After more than 50 years of African American mayors and politicians at every level—including the first black president—workers are worse off than they were in the 1960s. Today, Detroit—known as the “Arsenal of Democracy,” the “Motor City,” etc.—is the poorest big city in America. It has been bled dry by the financial elite, including through a punishing bankruptcy in 2013.

Now the politicians, as always concealing the financial interests which govern society, seek to obscure the

systematic exploitation of capitalism with the cover of race.

The well-heeled Detroit politicians dismiss the critical question of who will pay for these reparations. Instead, absurdly, they claim that revenue from taxing marijuana businesses will fund it. There is nothing remotely oppositional or progressive in such proposals.

The reality is that the solution to the poverty black workers face is the same as for white or Hispanic workers—the abolition of the capitalist profit system which demands the increased exploitation of workers.

Who are the real friends of black workers in Detroit? Last week Ventra autoworkers in Evart, Michigan voted for strike action by 98 percent. Ventra is owned by Shahid Khan, a Pakistani-American billionaire who also owns Flex-N-Gate. Khan considers himself to be a “man of color” and was the chief investor in the Black News Channel.

Khan is doing what every other capitalist does, exploiting his workers for as little pay as possible. The top workers at Ventra make \$17 an hour, with this low pay enforced by the UAW.

The overwhelming majority of workers in Evart are white (92.4 percent) and poor; over 36 percent live below the poverty line. The poverty rate is higher than in Detroit, where it stands at 33.2 percent. It is to these workers, and workers around the world, that Detroiters must turn in the fight against social inequality.

Proponents of identity politics—whether it be the racial politics underlying the Detroit reparations initiative, or that of elevating gender and sexual identities above that of social class—are engaged in an exercise in apologetics for decaying capitalism. The working class must reject the reparations drive by the Detroit City Council and the Democratic Party and fight for a socialist solution that guarantees housing, water, education and health care for all—black and white, native born and immigrant.

Only in this way can a progressive, socialist movement be constructed to put an end to the capitalist system and class society, the source of all crimes and oppression, past and present.



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