

Detroit mayoral election takes place as major cities are facing cuts—and troops—ordered by Trump

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The Detroit mayoral election is taking place as the Trump administration, acting as a representative of the capitalist oligarchy, is implementing an unprecedented assault on the working class through gutting social programs, presiding over mass layoffs and threatening social reforms such as Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security, and other gains won by the working class over more than one hundred years.

Trump's fascist power grab and descent into authoritarian government to carry out these social attacks were foreshadowed more than a decade ago in the political process that led to Governor Rick Snyder imposing an emergency manager, wealthy attorney Kevyn Orr, to put the city through the process of municipal bankruptcy that devastated the jobs and livelihoods of the working class.

As Tom Carter explained in his presentation at the February 2014 Workers Inquiry into the Bankruptcy of Detroit the Detroit bankruptcy was part of a shift away from the rule of law and democratic forms of government and towards authoritarianism. The result was the slashing of wages and benefits for city workers and retirees, and the selling off or privatization of city assets like Belle Isle Park and the Detroit Institute of Arts.

This is not a concern in the mayoral campaign of 2025, where all the candidates hailed the city's supposed "recovery" under three-term Democratic mayor Mike Duggan. The non-partisan contest is now pared down to two Democrats, Detroit City Council President Mary Sheffield and the Reverend Solomon Kinloch for the November election. Sheffield beat Kinloch and several other contenders in the non-partisan August primary, taking in 51 percent of the vote to Kinloch's 17 percent. She is heavily favored to win the runoff.

As far back as 2016, in his second term as mayor, Duggan proclaimed "success" in post-bankruptcy Detroit. But for workers in Detroit there has been no "comeback."

The poverty rate in the city stands at 34.4 percent, the highest since 2017. Detroit again has the highest poverty rate of any city in the US with a population over 500,000. The child poverty rate stands at 44 percent, edging back toward recent historical levels that found the majority of children in the city in poverty. Eighty-five percent of students in Detroit schools were eligible for free or reduced price lunches, meaning their income fell below 130 percent of the poverty level, an income too low to survive on.

Public schools have been forced into becoming providers of healthcare, food pantries and even provide washing machines so children can wear clean clothes in class. At least 6 percent of students in Detroit's schools are in fact completely homeless.

After three terms in office, Duggan is stepping down to campaign for governor of Michigan, hoping to replace the term-limited Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer. Duggan is running as an independent to

avoid a potential defeat in the Democratic primary next year, hoping to win a plurality in a three-way contest.

Duggan and Sheffield started their political careers at the time of the city's imposed municipal bankruptcy. Sheffield and Kinloch both started their church careers around the same time.

Both Kinloch and Sheffield draw on their religious backgrounds. Kinloch advertises his past life trials, living in an abandoned house with his mother in 1979. She had lost her job as a major wave of auto layoffs devastated the city. Kinloch built a small Detroit church with a congregation of a few dozen to a 40,000-member congregation that he describes as one of the largest black mega-churches in the US.

Sheffield is the daughter of Horace Sheffield III, Pastor of New Destiny Christian Fellowship, and is a top leader at her father's church. The Sheffield dynasty has been a fixture in the Democratic Party in the Detroit area for three generations. Her grandfather, Horace Sheffield II, was part of the initial organizing drive that founded the UAW in 1941 while he was working at the Ford Rouge plant in Detroit. He was prominent in the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s and worked in Democratic Party politics along with Mayor Coleman Young, the first black mayor of Detroit, who held that position for 20 years.

Tax breaks for billionaires

Duggan's role as mayor has been to facilitate massive tax breaks for wealthy developers at the city and state level. Over a billion dollars in tax breaks for real estate speculators and billionaires like Dan Gilbert, founder of Rocket Mortgage and the richest man in Michigan, with a fortune of \$26.7 billion. The Ilitch family, owners of the Little Caesar's pizza empire, and to various business, real estate and professional sports ventures in the city's downtown, including both the Detroit Tigers baseball and the Detroit Red Wings hockey teams.

Sheffield was elected City Council president in 2022. She has been on board for shepherding the billions in tax breaks handed over to the wealthy. In one notorious instance, in 2022, the Detroit City Council voted to approve a \$60 million tax break for Gilbert, with Sheffield casting the deciding vote, while public school teachers protested outside.

Kinloch, who has been endorsed by the UAW, is promising to work with non-profits as key to his strategy and promotes charity efforts conducted by churches. He promises jobs and job training in his search for votes. Industrial jobs, including in auto, have plummeted in the metropolitan area as auto plants have been closed or downsized. Wages in the plants have fallen to a fraction of their previous value following the

bail-out of the auto giants arranged under the Obama administration. Detroit's median income is less than \$40,000, half the median income in the US as a whole.

Sheffield has emphasized her record of championing city ordinances around housing and other social issues to avoid embarrassing questions about her alliance with Mayor Duggan on massive tax breaks for the wealthy. He, in turn, has endorsed her. One such ordinance she championed requires developers who receive public largesse, to reserve a portion of their units for lower-income residents. Sheffield also supported a measure to provide limited free legal representation for renters facing eviction and an ordinance to provide homeowners with information on disputing tax assessments.

Thousands of families evicted by fraud

These are minor tweaks of municipal law designed to cover up the ongoing siphoning of wealth by the oligarchy. A recent disclosure related to a lawsuit by residents evicted in Michigan during the notorious county tax auctions gives a glimpse of how the wealthy, who run the councils and courts, fleece the working class with abandon.

Wayne County (Detroit) Treasurer Eric Sabree, who took the post that disposes of Detroit's tax-evicted properties, estimated in 2016 that 5,600 homeowners evicted over the previous decade were owed millions of dollars due to the city seizing excess money generated from foreclosure proceeds. Last year, the Michigan Supreme Court ruled in favor of returning the money to the evicted homeowners.

Sabree then claimed that a one-page form was all it would take to obtain the money, in an attempt to score political points for the Democratic politicians who presided over the destruction of housing in the city over decades. In fact, further bureaucratic and costly steps were involved, and all responsibility was put on the evicted family for failing to carry them out. A week before the October 1 deadline for evicted homeowners to complete the onerous process, only 400 out of the thousands of previous homeowners eligible had made it through all the steps. Tax collection will keep its ill-gotten gains after all.

In the current tax auction, it is estimated that several thousand landlord-owned units and 800 owner-occupied homes were under threat of tax foreclosure. Well over a hundred thousand houses were foreclosed in tax auctions since the housing crisis of 2008-9. There were 25,200 tax foreclosures in 2015 alone, 9,000 of them owner-occupied, at the height of Detroit's liquidation sales.

The hundred thousand or more families who lost their homes unjustly will not be made whole. According to law professor Bernadette Atuahene, residents of Detroit were overtaxed for years because when home prices fell, city property taxes, supposedly based on one-half the home's current value, were not proportionately reduced.

From 2008 to 2010, median home values in the city fell from \$80,000 to \$23,000, and though Duggan has admitted several times in major speeches as mayor that the overtaxing was acute, he puts the onus on homeowners for their plight. But most did not know they could dispute their tax bill. Nor did they have the funds to complete the arduous and costly process of protesting the bloated assessments.

In addition, many evicted from owner-occupied homes should not have been paying taxes at all and should never have been evicted. With 40 percent of the city under the poverty line, many would obviously have been eligible to forgo taxes altogether under the city's Property Tax Exemption.

Class, not race, is the issue

Atuahene suggests that the systematic robbery of Detroit residents was an expression of systemic racism, while making favorable statements in the local news about Sheffield's role on housing issues. This only serves to cover up the central issue in the crisis in Detroit and every other city: the class gulf between the billionaires and CEOs at the top of the capitalist system and the workers who produce all the wealth.

Kinloch's references to non-profits organizing job training and churches doling out pantry food piece-meal help, is a cover for the failure of the Democratic Party nationwide to stop the incessant assault by Trump on the massive federal programs Medicare, Medicaid and food stamps (SNAP), whose destruction is demanded by the oligarchy.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has previously documented how such window dressing "help" for the victims of high utility costs actually operates. The ongoing water and utility shutoffs continue and the "help" programs merely serve to cover for the rapacious profits of utility owners or bondholders. Just last year, DTE shut off gas or electric service to 211,647 customers for nonpayment in Michigan, according to a recent report from Outlier Media. All the "help" programs like THAW (The Heat and Warmth fund) and MEAP (Michigan Energy Assistance Program) have helped only a fraction.

While the "comeback" narrative continues in the media and official political circles, the truth is tragic. Earlier this year public anger erupted over the freezing deaths on February 10 of two-year-old A'millah Currie and nine-year-old Darnell Currie Jr. Their mother, Tateona Williams, unable to find relief through the Detroit and Wayne County homeless aid systems, parked in her car in the garage of a Detroit casino to try to keep her children warm at night. Duggan claimed homeless services were available, a claim the beleaguered population of the city scoffed at. The assertion was belied by Tateona's multiple calls for help to homeless shelters and housing agencies in the area, including Detroit, which went unanswered.

The Democratic Party and the trade union bureaucracy will not stop the assault on workers' living standards or the drive to dictatorship that the oligarchs are pursuing through the Trump administration. All the social reforms extending back to the Progressive era of the first two decades of the 20th century, the New Deal of the 1930s, and the Great Society of the 1960s are under attack.

The Socialist Equality Party is proposing the building of a new form of organization, rank-and-file committees, independent of the Democrats and the trade union bureaucracy, to defend basic rights like jobs and adequate housing. This can unify the working class and mobilize its vast industrial and economic power against the Trump regime. They must be established in every factory, workplace, school and neighborhood to organize resistance to Trump's drive to dictatorship.



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