

America: The Wars Come Home

Domestic conditions of the oppressed reflect United States foreign policy

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On July 23, 1967, a rebellion erupted in the center of the African American community in Detroit on the near west side. For five days the city was the focus of national and international attention related to the state of race relations in the United States.

This outbreak of civil unrest in a city that was considered almost immune from such a degree of mass outrage against racism and national oppression, spoke volumes as it relates to the degree of social and political delusions so prevalent within the U.S. ruling circles of the period.

Detroit is known as the Motor City and auto production was at a high level in 1967. There were thousands of industrial plants, steel mills, distribution centers, car dealerships and related service sectors.

Nonetheless, despite its designation as a so-called “model city”, Detroit erupted into the largest urban rebellion in U.S. history up until that time. After a week of police, national guard and army occupation, 43 were known dead, hundreds more were injured and 7,000 people had been jailed.

Large swaths of the city had been devastated through widespread property damage and arson.

The character and nature of the unrest alarmed the ruling class of automotive and industrial firms as well as leading retailers.

The-then President Lyndon B. Johnson appointed a group to study the violence which swept 160 cities across the country in 1967. Known as the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (The Kerner Report), the body issued its findings in March 1968, right on the eve of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., on April 4, which prompted additional rebellions in 125 cities. The report was quite contradictory in character.

On the one hand it called for the immediate end to the rebellions saying they would not be tolerated. At the same time the report calls for an unprecedented level of government funding of social programs aimed at ameliorating the living and employment conditions of African Americans.

In the introduction the report says “Violence cannot build a better society. Disruption and disorder nourish repression, not justice. They strike at the freedom of every citizen. The community cannot-it will not-tolerate coercion and mob rule. Violence and destruction must

be ended—in the streets of the ghetto and in the lives of people.”

The report then continues noting “Segregation and poverty have created in the racial ghetto a destructive environment totally unknown to most white Americans. What white Americans have never fully understood but what the Negro can never forget—is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it.”

Stressing the need for reforms the reports says

“It is time now to turn with all the purpose at our command to the major unfinished business of this nation. It is time to adopt strategies for action that will produce quick and visible progress. It is time to make good the promises of American democracy to all citizens—urban and rural, white and black, Spanish-surname, American Indian, and every minority group.”

The Commission then puts forward suggestions for the Johnson administration to ponder, emphasizing that

“Our recommendations embrace three basic principles: to mount programs on a scale equal to the dimension of the problems; to aim these programs for high impact in the immediate future in order to close the gap between promise and performance; to undertake new initiatives and experiments that can change the system of failure and frustration that now dominates the ghetto and weakens our society.”

Soon after the rebellion of July 1967, agitation and organizing escalated in the African American communities, the schools and workplaces. By early 1968, the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM) was working to organize people in the plants.

That same year the Republic of New Africa (RNA) was formed in Detroit calling for a separate state for Africans in the U.S. located in the southern region of the country. One year later, the RNA would be accused of involvement in the shooting of two white police officers outside their national meeting held at New Bethel Baptist Church on March 29, 1969.

The following month on April 26, the National Black Economic Development Conference (NBEDC) was held at Wayne State University. Emerging from this gathering was the demand for reparations from the white-dominated religious institutions across the U.S.

James Forman, the former executive secretary of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), drafted and presented the Black Manifesto, a call for the payment of \$500 million to the African American liberation movement to develop printing presses, media outlets and land in the South. Forman became an executive board member of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers (LRBW) which grew out of DRUM and other revolutionary union movements in various plants throughout the metropolitan area.

Forman within the Black Manifesto, the first comprehensive demand for reparations among Africans in the U.S. during the 20th century, puts forward one of the most far-reaching appeals for revolutionary change. He says that “while we talk of revolution, which will be an

armed confrontation and long years of sustained guerrilla warfare inside this country, we must also talk of the type of world we want to live in." Later Forman urges that

"We must commit ourselves to a society where the total means of production are taken from the rich people and placed into the hands of the state for the welfare of all the people. This is what we mean when we say total control. And we mean that black people who have suffered the most from exploitation and racism must move to protect their black interest by assuming leadership inside of the United States of everything that exists."

The work of the League also involved students and youth which coalesced into the Black Student Voice and the Black Student United Front in 1968-69. These youth served as the shock force of the League in the schools and communities where they challenged the racist educational system and the role of the police.

From Black Power to Neo-Colonial Occupation

One may ask what does the history of Detroit some four-and-a-half decades ago have to do with the current crisis facing African Americans. In light of the recent outbreaks of urban rebellions in Ferguson and Baltimore, there are tremendous lessons to be learned from the historical experiences of Detroit.

By the early 1970s, the character of the oppressive system was shifting. The struggle against police terror as exemplified in Detroit with the Stop the Robberies Enjoy Safe Streets (STRESS) decoy law-enforcement units which targeted and assassinated African American youth between 1971-73, the stage was being set for an even more protracted and armed rebellion in the city.

Michigan State Senator Coleman Young, a former communist and labor organizer with the National Negro Labor Councils of the late 1940s and early 1950s, was elected as the city's first African American mayor in November 1973. With a broad public mandate, Young abolished STRESS, instituted affirmative action policies within the civil service and municipal issued contracts, sought to revitalize the cultural life of the city by promoting the refurbishing of the Paradise Theater, encouraging people to repopulate historic neighborhoods on the west and east sides, as well as other projects.

Nonetheless, the crisis was beyond the people inside the city to address within the framework of trade unionism and electoral politics. The so-called Arab Oil Embargo of 1973, the beginning of restructuring of the world capitalist system from 1975 onward, took a horrendous toll on the city.

This has been compounded with consistent job losses, predatory mortgage lending and aggressive utility shut-offs, etc. The failure of electoral politics to address the basic needs of the people is most profound in municipalities such as Detroit.

In Ferguson there were limited African American political officials and in a recent poll several were elected to positions. Just the opposite situation prevails in Baltimore with an entire coterie of elected African Americans who wield political influence but are incapable of ending poverty, home foreclosures, water shut-offs and police terrorism.

Detroit gained international attention during the summer of 2014 when tens of thousands of

households were subjected to water shut-offs during the largest municipal bankruptcy in U.S. history. The Moratorium NOW! Coalition fought both the bankruptcy and water shut-offs in an unprecedented campaign that could serve as a model for other cities facing similar onslaughts by the banks and corporations seeking to drain pension funds, school budgets, public assets and municipal services for their profit-making purposes in the interests of Wall Street.

The Need for a Revolutionary Organization

The Pentagon budget has been a major contributor to the defunding of the cities. Resources that should have been utilized to rebuild the urban areas are being wasted by the war machine where trillions are made by Wall Street off of the misery of the people of the world.

Moreover, the weapons, chemicals and vehicles used by the Pentagon and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) forces in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Somalia, Yemen, Panama, Grenada, Colombia, Lebanon, Libya and other geo-political regions, have been transferred to local and state police agencies for the purpose of the suppression, repression and unforeseeable oppression of the people of color communities and the working class in general. The war being waged against the people of Detroit, Ferguson and Baltimore is an extension of the “shock and awes” perpetuated in the post-colonial states of the Asia-Pacific, the Middle East, Africa and Latin America.

What the phenomenon of the Obama administration has taught is the necessity of a total break with capitalism and imperialism. The Democratic Party has failed to address the principal issues challenging the majority of people in the U.S. The only solution lies in the formation of a revolutionary party and alliance that can fight the system at its roots.

Socialism and national liberation of the oppressed is the only solution to the legacy of racism and economic exploitation.

***Note:** This paper was delivered on a panel at the Left Forum held at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York (CUNY), on May 31, 2015. The panel was chaired by Margaret Kimberley of Black Agenda Report who introduced Marilyn Levin of the United National Antiwar Coalition (UNAC), Ajamu Baraka of the United States Human Rights Network (USHRN) and Abayomi Azikiwe, the author of this presentation.*

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