

Implications of the Electoral Defeat of the Detroit People's Charter

Ruling class interests illustrated the clear dictatorship of capital in one of the most oppressed urban centers in the United States.

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Global Research, September 09, 2021

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

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A grassroots initiative to rewrite the municipal charter of the City of Detroit, Proposal P or the People's Charter, was drowned out by a multi-million dollar propaganda and psychological warfare campaign aimed at maintaining the status quo.

In 2018, a citywide election was held for candidates to serve for three years on a Charter Commission assigned to develop a new guide for the municipality.

The outcome of the 2018 Charter Commission elections startled the ruling class and its agents within city government including the corporate-imposed **Mayor Mike Duggan** and the majority compliant City Council. Several of the Commissioners elected in 2018 were committed to making sweeping changes in how the city has operated for many years.

Of course, there were sharp differences between members of the Charter Commission after the officials took office. Meetings during the early phase of the process were marked by intense debate and discussions.

Detroit police officers were called into Charter Commission meetings which were held at various community centers. Such a repressive atmosphere was designed to squash the process of developing a new governance document which was slipping beyond the control of the local ruling elites beholden to the multi-national corporations, banks and the federal government.

To coincide with the actual work of the Charter Commission, numerous task forces were established across Detroit to discuss revisions in the guidelines regulating public safety, water rights, affordable housing, disability rights, immigrant rights and the division of power within the administrative and legislative structures. Meetings for the focus groups were open to the public where people from various neighborhoods, social backgrounds, nationalities and genders participated.

The process under which the revisions were drafted represented the most democratic exercise that the city has undergone in decades. A 145-page document was eventually published encompassing the desires and interests of the majority African Americans, People of Color, immigrants and working-class peoples as a whole.



Detroit Action organizer speaks at rally to demand release of federal CERA funding, Sept. 8, 2021

In previous years during the charter revision process, the City of Detroit through the City Council would provide funding to publicize the proposed charter among the electorate. The funds would be utilized for literature, media ads and other methods of encouraging eligible voters to either support or reject the revisions. These funds desperately needed by the Charter Commission were restricted, hampering the ability of the elected body to educate the voters about the importance of the document.

However, the political and social character of the document drafted by community activists outraged the existing corporate-allied officials. A Committee to Protect Detroit's Future was formed on May 19 to launch a campaign of legal challenges and disinformation.

The Committee to Protect Detroit's Future was funded and endorsed by the leading capitalist entities in the city. The Chamber of Commerce, the Restaurant Owners Association, DTE Energy and Blue Cross-Blue Shield were leading firms and associations propping up the anti-charter grouping.

Local compromised ministers, police officials and supporters of the Duggan administration were recruited to appear in television ads and on billboards to spread outright distortions and lies to turn people away from voting yes on the revised charter during the primary elections on August 3. Perhaps the most insidious falsehood was that the Charter would bankrupt the City of Detroit once again. Yet, no discussion was forthcoming on what interests engineered the Financial Stability Agreement (FSA), Emergency Management and

the illegally imposed bankruptcy, the largest in the history of the United States. These events took place between 2012-2014.

In fact, it was the banks through predatory lending within the housing sector and municipal finance which drove the City of Detroit to the crisis which occurred beginning in the years between 2005-2009. Hundreds of thousands of African Americans and working-class people were driven out of the city during the census period of 2000-2010. Job losses, home foreclosures, utility and water shut-offs, insurance red lining, police brutality, inferior education and environmental degradation were all caused by the racist and super-exploitative character of governance which prevailed within the city.

The People's Charter advocates did receive support from two major labor unions, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) and LIUNA, which organizes in the construction industry. These two endorsements were important. However, they were no match financially for the total hostile opposition of the banks, the criminal justice establishment and the comprador operatives within the community that are promoted by the ruling class.

Housing Crisis Escalates in Detroit

Moratorium NOW! Coalition in alliance with several housing and social justice groups including Detroit Action, Detroit Eviction Defense, Charlevoix Village Association and Detroit Will Breathe have mounted a political struggle for the immediate release of the COVID Emergency Relief Assistance (CERA) funds provided through the legislative bills designed to provide a lifeline to people severely impacted by the pandemic and the subsequent economic crisis. A press conference was held on September 1 outside the Coleman A. Young Municipal Center (CAYMAC) located in the heart of downtown. The press conference was given extensive coverage in the local television market as well as some newspapers such as the Metro Times and MLIVE. com.

During the September 1 action, the demands were clear: a moratorium on evictions until the CERA funds are completely dispersed; that the U.S. Congress pass legislation to remedy the legal dilemma created by the Supreme Court decision during late August essentially outlawing the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) moratoriums declared as a measure aimed at stemming the new wave of infections taking place throughout the country; and that Chief Judge of 36th District Court, William C. McConico, reimpose a moratorium on eviction proceedings until a methodology is created to address the burgeoning threats of evictions.

The question of quality housing availability and access to supplemental rental funds are inextricably linked to the ruling class war waged against the People's Charter. Municipal policy under the administration of Mike Duggan seems to be designed to force as many Black, Brown, working class and impoverished people out of the city.

After the mortgage foreclosures of the 2000s involving tens of thousands of homes in the city, by 2015, due to the over assessments of property taxes, there were the imminent seizures of tens of thousands of other homes for delinquencies in taxes for the City of Detroit and Wayne County. Moratorium NOW! Coalition and other community organizations from across the city were able to mobilize public opinion to force the Wayne County Treasurer to allow people to make arrangements on illegally assessed tax bills, therefore, in effect halting yet another exodus from Detroit. A compounding problem to the property tax

debacle was the placement of liens on homes by the County for unpaid water bills. A wave of water shut offs in the tens of thousands were implemented during the bankruptcy in the summer of 2014.

Clauses within the People's Charter viewed water and housing issues as fundamental human rights. A water affordability plan to prevent shut offs would have been embedded in the document governing the city's operations. In addition, the municipal government would have been compelled to respect the rights of immigrants and people living with disabilities.

The Need for a People's Movement Remains

Although the People's Charter was targeted and derailed by the ruling class led by Dan Gilbert, the Illitch Holdings firms, Chase Bank, DTE Energy, among others, the process of democratic discussions and popular actions around the fundamental needs of the working majority continues to be paramount. In reality, there is no real alternative to the continued mobilization and organization of the communities in Detroit based upon their own interests. The failure to not pursue this course of thinking and political work will only result in the rapid decline in population and the consequent political power for the people.

The impact of climate change has been starkly evident. A series of floods since June have damaged untold numbers of homes, apartment buildings and small businesses. A class action lawsuit against the Detroit Water & Sewerage Department (DWSD) and the post-bankruptcy Great Lakes Water Authority (GLWA) portends much for the fiscal stability of the city and the region. The failure of pumping stations, antiquated equipment and the systematic downsizing of the workforce employed in water services, has resulted in the current situation.

The most recent Census data for Detroit indicates a further decline in population. Among the African American people, the numbers within this majority community have declined by 16% since 2010.

Corruption which is rife within municipal government has been further exposed with the federal investigations and raids against several City Council members. All of the people convicted or presently under scrutiny by U.S. District Attorney for the Eastern District are staunch puppets of the Duggan administration who routinely vote in favor of capital.

These issues will create the conditions for an eventual social explosion in Detroit and other major cities across the U.S. The task of organizers is to be prepared for this inevitability in order to assist in directing the struggle toward victory.

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