

Reflections on the Poor People's Campaign in Michigan

Activists project the need for a broad based coalition of popular forces

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Featured image: Poor People's Campaign of Michigan rally outside the Department of Treasury on June 11, 2018

Six weeks of rallies, mass demonstrations and civil disobedience concluded in Michigan on Monday June 18 when hundreds of participants in the Poor People's Campaign (PPC) moved their events to the city of Detroit, the most populated municipality in the state.

This effort is part of a national mobilization to place emphasis on the plight of the growing numbers of impoverished people in the United States.

Issues related to income inequality, environmental racism, state repression, union organizing among service employees, massive water shutoffs and contamination, the need for a moratorium on foreclosures and evictions, the struggle against imperialist war and militarism, among others, were the focus of discussions and protests.

The first five weeks of the PPC of Michigan took place around the state capitol building in Lansing where a Republican right-wing dominated legislature and governor has enacted a myriad of reactionary laws which have overturned decades of guarantees for job security, pensions, organizing rights for unions, civil rights and local control of governments. Over the last decade, over 50 percent of the African American residents of the state have at some point lived under emergency management.

This emergency management system is designed to systematically disenfranchise municipalities with majority African American inhabitants. A bank-led executive is appointed with authority to essentially break contracts and overrule regulations adopted by the elected officials of the area.

Image on the right: Abayomi Azikiwe co-chairing a rally at the Poor People's Campaign in Lansing, Michigan on June 11, 2018



Only the coercive payments on debt service, avaricious loans and bonds, which reinforce the capacity of finance capital to dictate the terms of urban life in the modern period, are the principal tasks of the emergency managers. These individuals had no experience whatsoever in administering public services and were beholden to no one except the multinational corporations and banks.

Taking it to the Streets

Perhaps the highlight of the PPC in Lansing was the character of the June 11 actions where members of D15, demanding a sharp hike in the minimum wage to \$15 per hour, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local One, Communications Workers of America (CWA), United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), Lecturer's Employee Organization (LEO), members of the UAW, joined with community activists from across Michigan for a rousing march and rally.

The June 11 action began with a lunch and pre-rally at a local area church. Participants then marched to the Department of Treasury building where another speak out was held.

One of the speakers was **Yvonne Jones** of the Detroit Active and Retired Employees Association (DAREA), who represented the Moratorium NOW! Coalition in their effort to redirect hundreds of millions of dollars in Federal Hardest Hit Funds for the originally intended purpose of keeping working and poor people in homes. **Lisa Franklin** of Warrior on Wheels, a People Living with Disabilities advocacy group, drew attention to the failure of the state of Michigan and the U.S. to provide accessibility to all of its residents.

Other speaks were **Aurora Harris** of the LEO which has been in a protracted struggle for a contract providing a living wage and affordable healthcare benefits for University of Michigan at Dearborn instructors. **Jennine Spencer**, a homeowner and community organizer from the eastside of Detroit, briefly chronicled her ongoing efforts to maintain a home in light of exorbitant property tax rates and encroaching gentrification.

The day of action ended after a one mile march to the headquarters of the Michigan State Housing Development Authority (MSHDA). Several demonstrators sat in outside the building while four members of the Moratorium NOW! Coalition went in to put forward the demand

for the utilization of federal funds given to the state to save people's homes. Several people were arrested and charged with blocking the entrance to the building.

Over \$300 million has been turned over to the Detroit Land Bank Authority (DLBA) which has used the funds to seize properties through the courts. Many of these homes have been razed as opposed to being rehabilitated for human habitation.

The DLBA is the focus of an ongoing federal grand jury investigation for bid rigging involving demolition contracts. All the while the DLBA is continuing to operate in the same fashion totally disregarding the essential needs of the people of the city.

Officials from MSHDA maintained that they were legally unable to use the federal funds to save all homes that are facing the auction block. However, during the period of emergency management and bankruptcy in Detroit, the design for the funds was shifted dramatically towards what is called "blight removal." Many in Detroit feel that this is just another manifestation of the forced ethnic cleansing of the more than 80 percent African American population.

The last Michigan day of action was held in Detroit where hundreds took to the streets during business hours marching on the Detroit Water & Sewerage Department demanding an end to service terminations. Earlier in the year, the DWSD announced that 17,000 households and small businesses were in arrears and subject to shutoffs.

After leaving the DWSD building, demonstrators walked to Campus Martius, the center of corporate control, and later occupied the area taking water out of the year-round running fountain (with 100 jets) in order to illustrate the waste of resources by the billionaires at the expense of the working class and poor. Later 23 people were arrested for blocking the entrance of Quicken and Loans headquarters owned by billionaire ruling class magnate of Detroit **Dan Gilbert**. Later the Q-Line hybrid coaches were deliberately stalled by dozens of people going both north and south.

Where Do We Go From Here?: Chaos or Community

This question was posed by **Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.** in his final book published in 1967. It was Dr. King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) which proposed the PPC of 1968.

Tragically Dr. King was struck down by an assassin's bullet in Memphis on April 4, 1968 while he was in the city to support a sanitation workers' strike which had paralyzed the municipality. Many believe that the highest echelons of the ruling class and the capitalist state were responsible for his death.

Some five decades later the number of people living in poverty in the U.S. has actually increased although statistics indicate that the proportion of people living in immiserating circumstances has ostensibly been reduced. Nonetheless, the criteria for determining poverty require re-examination.

Official figures indicate that the unemployment rate is at 3.8 percent. Yet the Labor Participate Rate (LPR) remains at only 62.7 percent of the eligible workforce. ([Source](#))

According to an article published earlier this year in New York Magazine these statistics projecting the lowest official unemployment rate in more than a decade does not reflect the

actual conditions facing working families. The writer Eric Levitz notes that households are swamped in debt with marginal prospects for significant income increases.

The [reports](#) emphasize that:

“Now, Deutsche Bank economist Torsten Slok has added two new, (profoundly) disconcerting data points to the pile: The percentage of families with more debt than savings is higher now than at any point since 1962, while the median American family’s net worth is lower than it’s been in nearly a quarter-century.... So, this is what a ‘good’ economy now looks like in the United States: shrinking household wealth; soaring middle-class debt; wage growth that can’t keep pace with the rising costs of housing, health care, and higher education; job growth concentrated in part-time positions; widespread retirement insecurity; and more wealth-less households than America has seen for 56 years.”

A panel discussion was held on June 21 during the Michigan Coalition for Human Rights (MCHR) Annual Meeting held in Oak Park, a suburb right outside Detroit. The three featured speakers were leaders within the PPC: **Crystal Bernard**, a youth organizer; **Yexenia Vanegas**, a Detroit school teacher; and **Rev. Ed Rowe**, Pastor Emeritus of Central United Methodist Church downtown.



Rev. Edward Pinkney of Berrien County Michigan demonstrates alongside the Poor People’s Campaign in Detroit on June 18, 2018

The discussion centered on evaluating the success and weaknesses of the PPC in Michigan as well as nationally. All three panelists recognized the need to continue organizing around the major areas of concern within the PPC: environmental justice, racist repression, the elimination of poverty and gender oppression—demands which are often conveyed as requiring a “moral revival” in the U.S.

Through interactions between the panelists and the audience it was suggested that the coalition built by the PPC in Michigan over the last few months consisting of fighting labor unions, housing activists, environmental justice organizations, those groups opposing

imperialist war and militarism, cultural workers and progressive youth be strengthened and expanded. In addition, the civil disobedience activity which resulted in the arrests of approximately 100 people over a period of six weeks pre-figured the potential for larger efforts involving thousands and tens of thousands which could shutdown central cities at critical points of production, services and commerce.

Also the role of the corporate and government-controlled media outlets in their lack of coverage of the PPC reinforced existing notions of censorship and bias against those concerns impacting the working class and nationally oppressed. With specific reference to Detroit, Flint, Benton Harbor, Detroit, Highland Park and other cities, the existence of a movement aimed at addressing the plight of the poor contradicts the contrived narrative of the for-profit and purported publically-funded press agencies.

This, of course, requires the development of deeper ties within distressed communities and population groups. Such an approach will ultimately lead to long-term solutions in the overall movements to transform the existing capitalist order towards full social equality, self-determination and economic justice.

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