

The Wars Come Home ... to Detroit, Michigan. Flint, General Motors and the Water Crisis

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Many people have been made aware of the corporate media reports about the purported rebirth and revitalization of Detroit.

The city during the period of 2012-2014 underwent the agony of a state-imposed "Financial Stability Agreement", and later the appointment of an emergency manager who filed for bankruptcy, the largest municipality in the United States where this was carried out.

The underlying causes of these actions had more to do with the political agenda of the right-wing Republican Governor Rick Snyder than the actual financial situation in the city. After the 2010 mid-term elections, numerous conservative spokespersons took to the airwaves and leading publications calling for the elimination of defined pension systems, a wholesale assault on unions representing municipal employees and teachers, along with the passage of "right to work" legislation.

The Democratic Party won control of both the U.S. House and Senate in 2006 and later extending that majority in 2008 when President Barack Obama was elected by a substantial majority. Many working and oppressed people felt this was a mandate to not only end the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan but to also initiate significant reforms on a domestic level aimed at job creation, the rebuilding of the cities, increased revenues for public education and genuine empowerment efforts targeting African Americans, Latino/as, Women and other marginalized groups.

The experience of Detroit proved just the opposite of what many had anticipated. During the first several months of the Obama administration, a Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm appointed an emergency manager over the Detroit Public Schools without the consent of the elected board, a situation which remains intact through 2016 under a Republican state administration.

A so-called bailout of the banks and the auto industry resulted in the continuing loss of homes through foreclosures and evictions as well as hundreds of thousands of jobs eliminated in production facilities across the U.S. However, cities such as Detroit and Flint were affected disproportionately due to their historical character.

This downsizing in the heavy production industries extended back at least to the mid-to-late 1980s where plant closings in Detroit and Flint were taking place at a rapid rate. The broader impact of plant closings was felt in other sectors including services, education and municipal affairs. People left cities such as Detroit, Flint, Highland Park and Benton Harbor in search of employment, better schools and public services.

These developments coincided with the election of the first African American mayors and city councils of these cities. White racist media outlets claimed that the economic downturn was closely related to the growth of Black political power.

Flint, General Motors and the Water Crisis

Another major issue involving a majority African American populated city in Michigan is the poisoning of the water system in Flint which was under emergency management in 2014.

Flint like Detroit was victimized by the wave of industrial “restructuring” that was characteristic of the mid-to-late 1980s. General Motors had announced during this period that it would eliminate hundreds of thousands of jobs in order to maintain its profitability and to ensure that it could compete in a changing global market. Since the late 1980s through 2016, the volume of sales in Asia has far outstripped the U.S.

In a similar trend as Detroit, which went from a population of 1.8 million in 1950 to approximately 670,000 in 2016, Flint dropped from a city of nearly 200,000 to one less than 100,000. Today Flint is 65 percent African American where Detroit is said to be 79 percent Black.

After the appointment of an emergency manager over Detroit in early 2013, the stage was set for a “restructuring” of the Detroit Water & Sewerage Department (DWSD). By the spring of 2014, Flint was disconnected from the DWSD creating a new system that drew water from the polluted Flint River. This source had been contaminated for years in part due to the industrial waste from plant closing by General Motors.

Immediately residents of the city began to complain about the foul smelling and discolored water coming out their taps. People were made ill by the water along with their pets.

Nonetheless, the emergency manager Darnell Earley, who was later appointed to head the Detroit Public Schools, working on behalf of Governor Snyder, denied that there was a problem. Officials from the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) claimed that they were testing the water and the lead and other contamination levels were acceptable for human consumption.

A group of community activists worked tirelessly demanding that the emergency manager, MDEQ and later the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) take action. All of these entities continued to deny there was a problem until interventions by a pediatrician in the area who wrote reports indicating that children were suffering from lead poisoning as well as scientists from Virginia Technological University whose assessments substantiated these claims.

Children, adults and pets were sickened by the tap water which due to corrosive contaminants that went untreated or not properly treated, caused the old and decaying pipes to leech lead into the system. Many are currently suffering from lead and copper poisoning. There was also an outbreak of Legionnaires disease that many have traced to the problems with the water system.

By late 2015 and early 2016, the state could no longer deny the problem and declared a “water emergency” in Flint eventually leading to the reconnection of the city water supply back to the DWSD system. Nonetheless, the damage had been done. Lead poisoning in

children is irreversible.

Three lower level officials have been indicted in the water crisis. However, the masses are calling for the resignation of and prosecution of Snyder.

Since the Flint crisis, the problems of elevated blood lead levels across the U.S. are being exposed. Therefore, we must salute the people of Flint for making this contribution at great costs to their families and community.

Free Rev. Edward Pinkney: the Benton Harbor Crisis

Finally we must look at the political prosecution of Rev. Edward Pinkney of Berrien County in the southwest region of the state on Lake Michigan. Rev. Pinkney is the leader of the Benton Harbor Black Autonomy Network Community Organization (BANCO). This group has been fighting over a decade against the racist police practices, unjust courts, the privatization of city services, including the theft of land and water resources.

Rev. Pinkney became known nationally after a rebellion in Benton Harbor in June 2013 in response to the death of an African American motorcyclist who was chased by several law-enforcement agencies to his death in a crash. The youth rose up in rebellion for several days, prompting the deployment of the state police.

In later years Rev. Pinkney was unjustly prosecuted in 2006-2007 allegedly for tampering with absentee ballots during a recall election targeting two city commissioners. He was sentenced after two trials, the first ending in a hung jury, to one year of house arrest and four years of probation.

By the end of 2007, after he published a letter quoting the Bible in a Chicago-based publication, a Berrien County judge said it was a threat against his family and sentenced Pinkney to 3-10 years in prison. This conviction was overturned on appeal by the late 2008 after a nationwide defense campaign.

The most recent prosecution of Pinkney was also racially and politically motivated. He was unjustly charged with altering five dates on a recall petition to remove the-then Mayor James Hightower in 2014. There was no material evidence, eyewitnesses or any real motivation cited in the trial. He was tried by an all-white jury, a white prosecutor and judge who allowed his political views to be entered as evidence in the trial.

Pinkney was sentenced to 30-120 months in state prison. He now resides at Marquette correctional facility in northern Michigan, twelve hours from his home and family.

An appeals court hearing was held on May 11 in Grand Rapids. Another motion for bond pending the outcome of the appeal was filed the following week by his lawyer. His supporters are continuing to build a national campaign in his defense. On May 28, a delegation from Detroit will travel to Benton Harbor to join others from around the country to protest the Professional Golf Association (PGA) Senior Tournaments which have been held in Benton Harbor since 2012 on land stolen from the people and privatized.

Conclusion

These case studies on the plight of African Americans and working class people in general in Michigan are not isolated instances. They reflect a national and global phase of the

international crisis of capitalism.

From the U.S. and Greece to France and South Africa, the working class and poor are being subjected to heightened degrees of exploitation and oppression.

The struggles of the people of Michigan should be studied for clear insights into the world system which has unfolded over the last four decades.

Note: This paper was presented at the Left Forum held at John Jay College of the City University of New York (CUNY) on a panel entitled "The Wars Come Home." Other participants on the panel were Ana Edwards, a member of the editorial committee of the Virginia Defenders newspaper based in Richmond; Margaret Kimberley, senior columnist for Black Agenda Report; Jaribu Hill, founder of the Mississippi Workers' Center for Human Rights; and Christine Marie of 350.org.

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