

We Need a Peoples' Movement and Not the World Economic Forum

Detroit has long been a target of capitalist globalization and the mass exploitation of the workers and oppressed

By [Abayomi Azikiwe](#)

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Author's Note: This presentation was written and delivered in part to the New York City People's Forum during a webinar on the struggle against the opening of an office of the World Economic Forum (WEF) in downtown Detroit. Other panelists were Mike Shane of the Moratorium NOW! Coalition, Rev. Bill Wylie-Kellerman, retired pastor of the Episcopal Church of Detroit, Crystal Bernard, Michigan State University senior and member of the Poor People's Campaign and moderator David Chung of the People's Forum.

Detroit, which remains a major industrial center in the sectors of automotive and other sources of production and services, is a focal point for the economic and social transformations of urban areas in the United States and internationally.

Since the 19th century, the city has been a location for various forms of manufacturing, mining and shipping.

Initially there was the strategic location linked to the Great Lakes and rivers which flow into them. The mining of copper during the mid-to-late 19th century which fueled migration eventually gave way to steam engine manufacturing for shipping and the timber trade.

By the early decades of the 20th century, the first assembly line within auto production was established by Henry Ford. The production of millions of automobiles within a matter of years, created the demand for jobs and the consequent suppression and division of labor.

Significant numbers of Africans were brought into Michigan and Detroit as enslaved persons and later through what became known as the Underground Railroad. The first urban rebellion in the city took place in 1833, when an African couple, the Blackburns, fled to the city from enslavement in Kentucky, taking refuge in Detroit.

When the Blackburns were faced with capture and re-enslavement, the African Americans in the city broke them from captivity, made threats to burn down the city and then transported the couple across the Detroit River to Canada. It was 1833 when African enslavement was abolished in the British crown territories. After this period, Canada became a destination point for thousands fleeing from the slave catchers fueled by the Fugitive Slave Acts.



Detroit Hasting Street under demolition to build Chrysler and Fisher Freeways in the early 1960s
(Source: Abayomi Azikiwe)

We are saying this to note that the current efforts by modern-day exploitative interests are a continuation of policies of containment and repression. The opening of the World Economic Forum (WEF) offices in Detroit inside the headquarters of the worst capitalist expropriators and abusers, Quicken Loans, Rocket Mortgage, and their various iterations, signals to the conscious elements in the city and nationally, that these interests are by no means done in furthering the aims of finance capital within metropolitan areas of the country.

The Housing Question in Detroit

One of the major issues which the Moratorium NOW! Coalition has been engaged is the burgeoning housing crisis in Detroit and throughout the southeast Michigan region. Although there are tens of thousands of abandoned structures and vacant land, these resources, which by right belong to the people of the city, are controlled largely by the Detroit Land Bank Authority (DLBA). The DLBA, which was chaired by Dan Gilbert of Rocket Mortgage, is the largest landowner in Detroit, a city more than 80% populated by Black, Brown and other people of color. What right do these people have to seize land destroyed as housing, commercial centers, community institutions, etc.? This land belongs to the people of the city and not the capitalist ruling class.

The forced removals of people in Detroit have been ongoing for more than a century. For the purpose of this discussion, we can begin in 1935, during the Great Depression and the New Deal of the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt came to

Detroit in 1935 to announce the construction of the Brewster Projects on the lower east side where tens of thousands of African Americans had settled as a result of the Great Migration.

This act on the part of the Roosevelt administration was viewed as being progressive since it was replacing what was considered “substandard housing”: lacking in-door plumbing, structural deterioration, overcrowding and other problems. There is a long and intricate history of the Brewster and other public housing complexes. Since 1935, there were the so-called Race Riots of June 1943, which occurred during World War II. The third major racial disturbance took place in 1943, 80 years after the 1863 Race Riot during the Civil War.

After the War, the City of Detroit developed and initiated its urban renewal plan which targeted the African American and other oppressed and working class communities. From the mid-1950s through the 1970s, the building of expressways and new upscale housing areas destroyed thousands of homes, apartments, flats, businesses, religious institutions, fraternal organizations, schools, etc.

Of course, by July 1967, the social combustion fueled by displacement, police brutality, de facto segregation, overcrowding in housing and schools exploded into what became the Great Rebellion. The actual violence lasted for six days, yet the aftermath between 1967-1973, was even more dynamic in regard to the efforts to reshape the city which had national and international dimensions.

Independent Political Thinking and Action

The city has been a source of independent and innovative political, social and cultural thinking particularly within the African American community. The Underground Railroad was not only an avenue of escape. It created the conditions for the establishment of African religious institutions, newspapers and new philosophical approaches in the U.S. and Canada to the eradication of the enslavement through mass struggle including emigration.

Mary Ann Shadd who emigrated to Canada after the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act was the founder and editor of the Provincial Freeman. She was one of the first women who spoke publicly in the U.S. in defiance of social norms and even laws designed to silence half of the population.

Shadd was reported to have been the only woman to participate in the Colored Convention on Freeman as a speaker and theoretician. She wrote a study on the question of emigration as an avenue of resistance to encroaching enslavement of African people. (See [this](#))

In the 20th century, many of the pioneering and impactful organizations were founded in city of Detroit including the Nation of Islam (NOI), Republic of New Africa (RNA), League of Revolutionary Black Workers (LRBW), National Black Economic Development Conference (NBEDC), the Black Manifesto and many others. On a cultural level, Joe Von Battle of JVB Records and Barry Gordy, Jr. of Motown transformed the recording and distribution of urban music.

In 1973, the first African American Mayor Coleman A. Young, a former labor organizer and Leftist, was elected to head the city. Young served for two decades under conditions of increased disinvestment, capital and white flight to the suburbs and other regions of the country along with an ageing and deteriorating infrastructure. Despite these challenges, a struggle to end homelessness, unemployment, police repression and the privatization of

education continued among mass organizations.

The HUD Crisis of the 1970s

Some 50 years ago, the Housing and Urban Development (HUD) crisis gained national attention through an article published in the New York Times. The failure to implement the 1968 Fair Housing Act, ostensibly designed to eliminate discrimination in the sale and rental of properties, the federal government through benign neglect and inherent institutional racism extended the crisis which arose during Great Migration i.e., the National Housing Act of 1934 and the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956. These Acts represented the federal rationalization of de jure and de facto residential segregation in the U.S.

According to the [New York Times article](#) of December 4, 1971:

“A major scandal involving Federal mortgage programs in Detroit has left the Government the owner of thousands of decrepit homes and may cost up to \$200-million in Federal funds. The Federal programs inadvertently contributed to the decay of troubled neighborhoods, the victimization of the poor who expected homes and the enrichment of real estate speculators. The details of the scandal have been emerging for months in newspaper articles, in local investigations and, this week, in an investigation of the Legal and Monetary Affairs Subcommittee of the House Government Operations Committee, which held hearings here today. Similar troubles exist in other cities, but Detroit is believed to be the worst example of the perversion of a program aimed to help the poor. The program, to allow the Federal Housing Administration to help poor people, including welfare mothers, to buy homes, began in 1968.”

Destroying the housing stock of a municipality does not only create a crisis of habitation. There is a huge impact on funding for municipal services, education and job creation. During the mid-to-late 1970s, a decline in credible housing was inherited by the Young administration and all residents of the city.

Consequently, there is a direct line between the depression-era construction of public housing, the 1943 race riot, the post-War urban renewal, the 1967 rebellion and its aftermath, leading into the HUD scandal and the continued loss of jobs and services. By the close of the 20th century, the city was poised for further destabilization and depopulation.

Foreclosure Crisis of the 2000s

After the purported deregulation of the financial industry in the years of the presidency of Bill Clinton, by the close of the 1990s, there was the proliferation of “first time mortgage and refinancing schemes” which had a deleterious effect on Detroit and other cities around the U.S. Although the racist practices reinforced by the FHA and HUD had escalated depopulation in the city, the beginning of the decade of the 2000s was still characterized by a majority of residential home ownership in Detroit. However, that would soon change with the deliberate targeting of homeowners for predatory lending schemes. Moreover, it was workers and impoverished which were forced by acts of Congress to bailout the banks, insurance companies and other corporations responsible for the theft of trillions in monetary resources and services.

The predatory lending practices in housing was also reflected in municipal financing. The fact of the rapid decline in populations and household incomes, drained the treasuries of the

city making it prey to the financial institutions. Both the municipality and the communities became drowned in debt to the banks through usurious mortgage deals and monetary obligations designed to refinance payments to some of the same entities responsible for the housing losses.

These sources of profit-making for finance capital are directly related to the illegal imposition of emergency management and bankruptcy during the period of 2013-2014. Those who suffered the impact of these measures included the municipal retirees, active employees—who had negotiated pensions and other benefits reduced—along with community members who previously controlled Belle Isle, the Detroit Public Works and Lighting, the Art Institute, among other public institutions, seized by the State of Michigan and “authorities”. This paved the way for the ascendancy and false legitimacy of the Duggan administration and the usurpation of local control of municipal governance.

We Must Reject the WEF and All It Represents

Consequently, the People Against Corporate Theft (PACT) coalition has come into existence to emphasize the necessity of continuing the struggle against displacement, exploitation and oppression. The WEF has nothing to offer the people of Detroit, the U.S. and the globe other than the current crises of their making: environmental degradation, climate change, the privatization of municipal services and education, state repression, a housing shortage amid the COVID-19 pandemic and other social ills.

After 50 years, when the WEF was formed in Switzerland in 1971, the overall conditions of residents living within urban areas like Detroit have further deteriorated. The only alternative we have as the nationally oppressed, working class and poor is to organize against these adversaries.

Demands for quality housing, education and municipal services for all is key. The end of corporate welfare and the demonization of the workers and the poor is essential. We can only rely on ourselves to resolve these issues and create a society of genuine equality and empowerment for the emerging majority.

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Featured image: Detroit MLK Day 2011 March Down Woodward Ave. (Source: Abayomi Azikiwe)

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