

“Detroit Has Been Revitalized”: Privatization, Foreclosures, Bankruptcies and Forced Removals of African Americans

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Image: Kenneth Kabaka Reynolds President of the Metro Detroit Cab Drivers Association at rally on July 21, 2015.

Shop owners, taxi drivers protest against real estate magnates, unlicensed drivers

A rally and march in Hart Plaza and at the Coleman A. Young Municipal Center (City Hall) on July 21 exposed the false narrative emanating from the corporate media saying that Detroit is being revitalized. The city emerged from a contrived financial emergency and forced bankruptcy late in 2014 with billions stolen from pensioners and residents who witnessed public assets taken over by private interests under the guise of cost-cutting. Over 60,000 households are still facing property tax foreclosures while hundreds of millions of dollars in subsidies are being awarded to billionaires such as banker Dan Gilbert and stadium owner Mike Illitch.

Despite the propaganda advanced by the daily newspapers and television stations, the majority African American population has not witnessed any semblance of an economic revival since the Great Recession which began in late 2007. Well over 100,000 bank foreclosures were carried out against the working class city while the politicians did nothing to protect the interests of their constituents.



Detroit rally against ethnic cleansing on July 21, 2015 at City Hall

Even small African American shop owners are being driven out of the downtown and Midtown areas. Taxi drivers are now forced to compete with Uber Technologies, Inc., a transportation service which has generated controversy and protest internationally.

On July 21, both the shop and restaurant owners rallied beginning with a caravan from Eastern Market to Hart Plaza. Bert's Market Place, a jazz club and restaurant, owned by an African American Bert Dearing, has been threatened with closure.

Dearing had owned the location but lost it to foreclosure after a lengthy illness. The property was listed on auction.com with a starting price of \$700,000 and Dearing says he has until 2017 to resolve the issue or move.

Bert's has been a mainstay for people in the downtown area and throughout the city. Dearing opened his doors for a fundraiser in support of people's attorney Vanessa Fluker in 2011 after she had been fined by a local Wayne County judge in her militant efforts to save a family's home through appealing an unjust decision that had racial implications.

Other small business people were also present at the demonstration who discussed familiar scenarios. Owners of building have sold to other interests that want the African Americans and their constituents out.

Taxi Drivers Join Demonstration

In addition to the shop owners and their supporters, the Metro Detroit Cab Drivers

Association were also present protesting against the growing influence of Uber services which they say puts the local drivers at a disadvantage. Taxi cabs have to undergo expensive inspections, as well as pay excessive fees for insurance and bond plates.

These costs are compounded with the potential for random stops by the police who often ticket drivers for various spurious violations such as not having an updated log of trips.

Kenneth Kabaka Reynolds, the president of the Cab Drivers Association said of Uber that ““They are illegal in the state of Michigan and they’re operating with impunity.”

Reynolds, a longtime activist and professional photographer, said if Uber is to continue operating in Detroit, city officials should regulate it like the traditional taxi cab industry. “And if you’re not going to regulate Uber, deregulate the taxi cab industry.”

During the rally a statement of solidarity was delivered by Cecily McClellan, a leader in the Detroit Active and Retirees Association (DAREA). This organization was formed in the aftermath of the pension and healthcare cuts imposed by Judge Steven Rhodes who presided over the bankruptcy.

DAREA’s leaders were the most vocal opponents of the bankruptcy during the proceedings during 2013-2014. At present they have filed an appeal in federal court to overturn the attacks carried out against municipal retirees.

After the demonstrators marched from Hart Plaza on the Detroit River to City Hall for another rally, dozens of taxi vehicles began to circle the building honking their horns in an act of defiance. Later the rally participants marched around the building chanting slogans against current city policies under the administration Mike Duggan, the first corporate-imposed white mayor in forty years.

Calls for Solidarity Evoking Ferguson and Baltimore

The Moratorium NOW! Coalition participated in the demonstration and addressed the crowd and encouraged them to endorse the upcoming People’s Assembly and Speak Out scheduled for Grand Circus Park downtown on Aug. 29. Moratorium NOW! Coalition reminded the crowd that African Americans still constituted the overwhelming majority of the population of Detroit and that the people of Ferguson and Baltimore had spoken to the concrete conditions prevailing in urban areas and pointed to a way forward.

If African Americans are being ignored by the city administration then the streets must be filled with angry people who are committed to reversing the business as usual atmosphere in the downtown area, the activists concluded. Despite the claims of an economic boom downtown and in Midtown, many businesses are still closing, even those not owned by African Americans.

One major problem is the construction along Woodward Avenue, the main thoroughfare in the city, where the M-1 rail line is being put down. With the disruptions along the street from downtown to the New Center area, there is no parking on the street along Woodward.

Moreover, the poverty and jobless rate among the people who live in the city is hovering near 50 percent. There are no plans for the implementation of a jobs program locally or nationally and consequently hundreds of thousands will remain on the margins of the working class.

The People's Assembly and Speak Out scheduled for Aug. 29 is being held under the theme, "Rally For Our Future: Stop the War on Detroit! The leaflets being circulated in the city say that "From Greece to Puerto Rico to Spain and Across the United States workers are fighting back against the austerity being imposed by the banks and financial institutions."

A list of grievances and demands on the leaflet publicizing the event calls for the stopping of police killings and brutality and the jailing of killer cops. In addition other issues to be address includes the need for at least a \$15 an hour minimum wage; health care for all and single payer now; the halting of tax and mortgage foreclosures along with a demand that the Hardest Hit Homeowners funds be released to keep people in their residences in Detroit and Wayne County.

This demonstration will emphasize the need for a moratorium on water shut-offs and to stop the ongoing attempts to privatize the Detroit Water & Sewage Department (DWSD), which is undergoing a regionalization process as the Great Lakes Regional Water Authority. The Moratorium NOW! Coalition along with DAREA is supporting a petition drive to force a vote on the regionalization of the water services.

On July 21, the same day that the demonstration was held at City Hall, the Detroit City Council in a 5-4 vote, approved a 7.5 percent water rate increase. These actions prompted by the state- run Detroit Financial Oversight Committee, which really runs the city in the post-bankruptcy and emergency management period. These policies will force more people into poverty risking their water services being terminated.

The Moratorium NOW! Coalition is asking other organizations locally, nationally and internationally to endorse the Aug. 29 rally and demonstration. Anyone interested in supporting the initiative should contact the organization at moratorium-mi.org or call 313-680- 5508.

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