

“Dying Detroit”:: The Impacts of Globalization. Social Decay and Destruction of an Entire Urban Area

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A YouTube video titled “Dying Detroit” takes you on a tour of “neighborhoods literally falling apart”—through streets that look like “a hurricane has recently swept through, destroying nearly everything on its path.” Thousands of houses have been abandoned—in many areas 50-60% of the houses are in foreclosure. Some blocks have only a few homes left standing. A thousand people a month are leaving what has been called “America’s fastest dying city.”

There used to be almost 2 million people in Detroit . Today the city’s population is just under a million and 85% Black. Many thousands are living the city’s slow death:

- 1 in every 3 people live below the federal poverty level. Almost half of the children live in poverty. (2004 figures)
- The unemployment rate among Black people, especially the youth, is over 30%—city officials say it is actually closer to 50%.
- There is NO public hospital for the uninsured and, due to budget cuts, public health departments have largely eliminated programs providing direct health care services.
- 29 schools were closed the summer of 2009. An additional 32 schools—almost 20% of the city’s schools—were closed the summer of 2010. Detroit ’s dropout rate of 68% is the highest in the country (along with Indianapolis and Cleveland). The illiteracy rate is close to 50%.
- Michigan state spends more on prisons than it does on higher education and has the second highest incarceration rate in the country.

For many decades after World War 2, big auto plants and other factories that once hired tens of thousands of workers moved to the suburbs and overseas. And more recently, over the last 15 years, U.S. imperialism has forged a globally integrated cheap-labor manufacturing economy, with huge labor reserves from China , India , and other parts of the Third World .

These larger workings of global capitalism/imperialism have deeply impacted Detroit, leading to further de-industrialization, loss of jobs and many people moving out of the city. In 1992 the big Chrysler plant moved, and overnight 4,500 people were left unemployed.

More recently, when the sub-prime bubble burst, a wave of foreclosures displaced an estimated 5,000 people. Today, Detroit has at least 80,000 empty houses.

The federal and city government has responded to all this by basically throwing the city and the people to the dogs. And meanwhile all kinds of schemes are being proposed to find new ways to exploit the people and “rebuild” the city in a way that will be profitable.

The twisted and cruel logic of current federal and city policy in Detroit is that since fewer people now live in the city, everything must be “downsized”—which means cutting back on health care, education, city services, etc., and abandoning whole neighborhoods where people still live. And in line with this, DTE Electric has been heartlessly cutting off power for non-payment to tens of thousands of people in poor neighborhoods even in cold weather—making it even more difficult and dangerous to remain in these areas.

The Obama administration has an “urban policy” to deal with “shrinking cities” which the Mayor of Detroit, David Bing, is following. Bing is using a \$40 million federal award for “renewal work” to carry out a plan which amounts to expelling poor people from “desolate” neighborhoods and promising to relocate them to more “stable” areas. According to the Detroit News, “Brookings Institution, local foundation leaders, several national funding groups and the White House offered financial support of up to \$100 million a year for downsizing the city.” The vice president of the Brookings Institution Metropolitan Policy Program, Bruce Katz, said, “There is a nothing-left-to-lose quality in Detroit, much like there was in New Orleans after Katrina.”

Mayor Bing has said he will use studies to determine who the “winners and losers” will be and put it this way: “If we can incentivize some of the folks that are in those desolate areas, they can get a better situation. If they stay where they are I absolutely cannot give them all the services that they require.” The city is reportedly planning to use eminent domain laws to physically remove people who resist and then seize their homes and bulldoze them. The city’s argument is that a single house in an abandoned neighborhood is “blighting” the city because it requires fire and other services to the detriment of the larger community.

Bing explains: “There is just too much land and too many expenses for us to continue to manage the city as we have in the past... You can’t support every neighborhood. You can’t support every community across this city. Those communities that are stable, we can’t allow them to go down the tubes. That’s not a good business decision from my standpoint.”

Think about it: The city and the people are dying an accelerating death and the Mayor justifies massive cutbacks and the abandonment of whole communities by saying these are “good business decisions.”

Good business decisions is what has led to tens of thousands of people in Detroit losing their jobs. Good business decisions is what’s behind the killing cutbacks in healthcare and education. Good business decisions is what is killing the city and the people of Detroit.

This is a system that develops and brings together vast productive forces, including masses of working people. It organizes and utilizes great resources that have great potential to benefit society and people. But when these things and people cannot be profitably used by the capitalist system—factories are shuttered and left to rot, people are tossed aside and left with no way to feed their families. Cities are devastated and left to decay.

Just think about the fact that the “dying city” of Detroit is overwhelmingly Black. The USA arose on the foundation of the genocidal theft of Native American (Indian) lands, and the enslavement of African people. Since that time, the oppression of Black people has been essential to the functioning of this system, changing as that system has changed, but always deeply woven into the very fabric of society. For generations, Black people in Detroit have faced vicious discrimination in all spheres of life—and this continues in old and new ways.

This doesn’t necessarily mean a place like Detroit will be left to completely die. But as long as capitalism is running the show, any “re-invention” or “revival” of the city will be because new ways have been found to extract profit from the people and the city.

The productive forces in society—natural resources, technology, the creativity and knowledge of the people—are all held back and constrained, by the private and exploitative nature of capitalism. They are fettered by the need of capital to constantly produce for profit—not to meet the needs of the people.

This basic rule of capitalism—that the whole point of production is to make profit—means that people are treated as things to be used or tossed aside. It means the system considers thousands of Black people, especially the youth, as just so much surplus that can’t be profitably employed. It means the system, through its armed enforcers, must come down with even more repression against this socially combustible and potentially rebellious section of society. And it means poisonous ideological assaults that justify such attacks and blame the people for the oppressive situation the system has put them in.

Detroit is a painful and clear example of how we need a whole new way, a whole new system, a whole new society. And we need revolution to bring this into being.

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