

Mass abstention in Detroit mayoral primary election

By Eric London
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Tuesday's Detroit mayoral primary election was marked by mass voter abstention. With less than 18 percent of registered voters casting ballots, former Detroit Medical Center CEO Mike Duggan, running as a write-in candidate, came in first with 45.9 percent of the vote. Former Detroit Police Chief and current Wayne County Sheriff Benny Napoleon placed second, with 29.3 percent of the vote.

Duggan and Napoleon, both of whom support further austerity measures and the use of the federal bankruptcy court to ram them through, will face off against one another in the general mayoral election, to be held November 5.

Whoever wins the general election will exercise no real power as long as the unelected emergency manager—and de facto financial dictator—Kevyn Orr remains in his post. Orr, a wealthy bankruptcy lawyer with close ties to Wall Street, has pledged to slash the city's public employee pension funds by 90 percent and strip municipal workers of their city-paid health benefits, throwing them into Medicare or forcing them to buy health insurance from private firms on the insurance exchanges set up under President Obama's health care "reform."

He also plans to privatize basic city services such as lighting and sanitation and sell off city assets, including the world-famous art collection of the Detroit Institute of Arts, to repay the outstanding loans held by the banks and hedge funds.

That so few Detroiters bothered to vote under such crisis conditions is an expression of the profound alienation of the working-class population from the entire political system.

Only 8.3 percent of registered voters in Detroit cast ballots for Duggan. The figure for Napoleon was 5.3 percent.

There was an element of protest vote in Duggan's results. His percentage of the ballots cast, extraordinarily high for a write-in candidate, showed that his exclusion from the ballot on a technicality actually worked in his favor. It helped him to demagogically present himself as an "outsider" and "maverick" who was bucking the entrenched, largely African American political establishment in Detroit.

Those workers who voted for the millionaire corporate executive in the hope of effecting a change for the better will be quickly disabused of their illusions if he wins in November.

Duggan oversaw the privatization of the Detroit Medical Center when it was sold to Vanguard Health Systems, which is owned by the Blackstone Group, one of the largest private equity/investment banking firms in the world. The sell-off resulted in the layoff of hundreds of employees.

He was promoted by powerful sections of the corporate and financial elite, receiving the endorsement of both the *Detroit Free Press* and the *Detroit News*. He was backed by Dan Gilbert, the billionaire CEO of Quicken Loans, who has bought up large tracts in downtown Detroit and is spearheading a drive to turn parts of the downtown area into an enclave for the well-to-do, while services are slashed for residents of working-class neighborhoods.

Benny Napoleon, a long-time fixture in the Detroit Democratic Party establishment, resigned from his position as Detroit police chief in 2001 in the midst of an FBI investigation into corruption within the department and popular anger over a string of fatal police shootings.

Napoleon was touted as the front-runner due, in part, to the support given to him by the trade union bureaucracy. The support of the AFL-CIO and the

United Auto Workers for a right-wing police official underscored the reactionary essence of their alliance with the Democratic Party.

The only candidate who spoke for the working class and opposed the emergency manager and bankruptcy was D'Artagnan Collier, the mayoral candidate of the Socialist Equality Party. Collier's campaign was devoted to initiating an independent movement of workers in Detroit in defense of pensions, health benefits, wages, jobs and the basic social and democratic rights of working people.

He called on workers to reject the bankruptcy and oppose any and all demands for cuts and concessions. He rejected the claim that there was "no money" to meet the social needs of the population and that workers' meager pensions and health benefits were to blame for the financial crisis. This lie was being peddled by all of the other candidates and the entire political and media establishment in the midst of record high share prices on Wall Street, record corporate profits, and soaring CEO pay. Collier pointed out that the Obama administration, which ruled out any federal aid to Detroit, had made trillions of dollars in public funds available to the banks and auto companies.

The SEP campaign called for workers to establish committees of action, independent of the Democratic Party and the unions, in their workplaces, schools and neighborhoods to develop a campaign for a general strike to bring down the emergency manager, end the bankruptcy and replace the City Council with a Workers' Council.

Collier explained the need for socialist policies, including the nationalization of the banks and major corporations and their transformation into public entities under the democratic control of the working population. His platform included the repudiation of the city's debt to the bankers and a multibillion-dollar program of public works to put the unemployed to work and rebuild Detroit in the interests of the people, rather than the bankers and auto bosses.

Campaign supporters took Collier's socialist program into many sections of the working class. They were warmly received, particularly among firefighters who had initiated a series of protests and tenants fighting attempts to evict them to make way for real estate speculators such as Gilbert.

The well of support for the SEP campaign could not

find a clear expression in the vote results, under conditions of a massive abstention and a virtual media blackout of Collier's campaign. Those who did vote for Collier, however, made a class-conscious statement of opposition to the political establishment and support for a socialist alternative.

Following the election, Collier pledged that the Socialist Equality Party would intensify its campaign to mobilize the working class in Detroit, in Michigan and nationally against the growing assault on workers' living standards and democratic rights.

He told the *World Socialist Web Site* :

"The working people of Detroit were given no alternative outside of my campaign to address the urgent crisis they face. For our movement, the election marks the initiation of a new stage of struggle to build an independent mass movement on the basis of socialist policies. The bankers and their political stooges in both parties want to make Detroit a model for attacks on workers in cities across the United States. We are seeking to develop a working-class counteroffensive and make the Battle of Detroit an inspiration and model for struggles by workers all across the country."

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