

Detroit: Disappearing City?

Thursday 13 January 2011, by [FEELEY Dianne](#) (Date first published: 1 January 2011).

FORTY PERCENT OF Detroit today is considered virtually “unoccupied.” The administration of Mayor Dave Bing is trying to figure out how to move the remaining residents of these areas out, in the name of “rightsizing” the city. Of course he hasn’t revealed any specifics — and the devil is in the details! Residents are wary: without the money to relocate people and the services needed, it’s just another round of displacing the urban poor.

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Detroit is often compared to New Orleans after Katrina or Haiti, although Chris Hedges’ description of Camden, New Jersey as a “City of Ruins” also comes to mind, “the poster child of post-industrial decay (and) a warning of what huge pockets of the United State could turn into” [[1](#)].

The state of Detroit is not really surprising given the reorganization of the U.S. auto industry, which was the “meat and potatoes” of the city’s work force in the first three quarters of the 20th century. Although still among the dozen largest U.S. cities, Detroit has seen its population decline from 2.2 million in the “prosperous” 1950s to 850,000-870,000 pending 2010 statistics.

While it’s not true that auto manufacturing has left the city, it has certainly downsized. More than 50 years ago it started moving out to the nearby suburbs and to the more rural areas of the Midwest and South. Since the passage of NAFTA in 1993, whipsawing one plant’s workforce against another has deepened. The Big Three are also big players in such far-flung countries as China and India, where workers earn 10% of what the average U.S. autoworker used to earn. Wherever today’s plants are located, management employs robotics, just-in-time production, lean manufacturing and “team concept” as methods to increase productivity and profitability while reducing the number of workers. The Big Three sold off most of their parts plants, further reducing their work force, and increasing their ability to impose conditions on those captive manufacturers to drive costs down.

When negotiating for its bailout with the U.S. government, General Motors predicted a U.S. work force of fewer than 45,000 wage earners. One might suspect that high labor costs were the reason — but they represent only 8-10% of the total cost of producing a vehicle.

Within the Big Three, management has made the decision to outsource jobs that don’t result in immediate “value.” Thus jobs that keep the plant clean, bring parts to the line, sort and organize components are increasingly performed by low-wage workers from another company.

The UAW has gone along with these changes — with the companies' chopping up the work force into tiered wages and benefits and with the introduction of more and more "temporary" workers — all in the name of keeping the corporations "competitive" in order to save jobs. (When I got a job as an assembly worker at Ford at the end of the 1970s there were 1.5 million UAW members, almost all in manufacturing. Today the UAW has 355,000 workers including nurses, casino employees, state workers and graduate students.)

It used to be that autoworkers could eventually get off the assembly line and find better jobs, or even advance to learning a skilled trade. But with those avenues cut off, newer workers will find the intensity and pace of the work wears them out within a decade.

Detroit has been an industrial city for more than 150 years — beginning with shipbuilding and metal work, stove, bicycle and railroad manufacturing and a pharmaceutical industry, but "good" jobs have always been the result of successful unionization.

Once 90% of the auto parts industry was unionized, and workers made within a few cents of the wages in assembly plants. Today 90% of the parts industry is nonunion, with the wages ranging from little more than the minimum wage to \$19 an hour.

African Americans — except at the Ford Motor Company — were unable to find work in the auto plants until 1943, and faced murderous white "hate strikes" when they finally did. Hired in later, they were concentrated in the more dangerous or more intense jobs that were also affected by automation.

From Detroit's 338,400 manufacturing jobs in 1947, 138,000 disappeared by 1963, a deindustrialization which as historian Thomas Sugrue observes was underway well before the 1967 rebellion and subsequent "white flight." By 1977 Detroit lost an additional 50,000, more than halving the city's manufacturing base in 20 years.

When Murray Body (1954) and Packard (1956) closed, Black workers were twice as likely to run out of unemployment benefits and forced to take lower-wage jobs than their coworkers. The decline also disproportionately affected Black youth. [\[2\]](#)

Reuther's Fatal Choice

The most articulate challenge to the Big Three strategy of decentralization, speedup and downsizing came from UAW Local 600. Ford Rouge workers went out on wildcat strikes. Their radical leadership set up a committee in 1950 to investigate the potential impact of Ford's "runaway" plants and to develop a campaign to counter it. They opposed the use of overtime as a way of reducing jobs and petitioned the UAW International to fight for a 30-hour week.

But UAW President Walter Reuther had already given up challenging the corporate elite. He called for union cooperation with government and corporations in order to manage the problem. On the UAW side this included demanding the extension of unemployment benefits, retraining programs, early retirement, a guaranteed annual wage and a national health care system.

Over the years the UAW International was able to secure pension and health care benefits after 30 years of work, supplemental benefits to one's unemployment compensation, a jobs bank for laid-off workers, even paid personal days that were to go toward reducing the work week. But these benefits were for UAW members only — not for the U.S. working class as a whole — and most of them have been swept away in the aftermath of the corporate bailouts of 1979-81 and 2009.

As the city's oldest plants closed, production moved outward. General Motors, Chrysler and some parts suppliers built new plants in the city — particularly GM's Hamtramck plant (3,000) and Chrysler's Jefferson North facility (6,000) — when extensive tax abatements and the use of eminent domain to clear land sweetened the deal. But relatively few manufacturing jobs remained — in 2005 the total was estimated at 35,289, but it's less than that today.

Along with the decentralization of the auto industry, urban renewal and the freeway construction reshaped Detroit. This displaced several working-class neighborhoods, from Black Bottom with its array of Black-owned businesses to Poletown, and opened up corridors that turned farmland into suburbia. Of course this dynamic occurred in other major industrial cities including Buffalo, Cleveland and Pittsburgh, but the depth of racial segregation of Detroit dramatically sharpened the dynamic.

Detroit had been a stronghold of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s and almost elected a Klan supporter mayor in 1924. By the beginning of World War II Blacks at the national level successfully pressured the federal government to end discrimination in the defense industry, and, combined with a tight labor market, secured a foothold in the auto industry. But 1943 saw "hate" strikes within Detroit plants over hiring and promotion of Blacks, as well as by a full-blown race riot. Of the 34 killed in the course of the three-day riot, 25 were Black, of whom 17 were shot to death by the police.

From the 1920s housing had been a particularly contested terrain: restricted covenants were backed by homeowners' associations that mobilized their memberships against any Blacks moving in. During World War II the riots that broke out when African Americans moved into the Sojourner Truth housing project let officials know threats would become a reality if housing was set aside for the needs of the Black community. As a consequence, less public housing was constructed in the Detroit area than in other major cities.

By the time the civil rights and Black Power movements of the 1950s and '60s successfully challenged Detroit's racial discrimination in housing, jobs and political life, the economic dynamics of the city had shifted. Whites, particularly as more Blacks moved into their areas, made the decision to leave. Their individual decision — based on race, jobs and class — opened the door to the white flight of 1967-'74. As chronicled extensively in Heather Ann Thompson's study, *Whose Detroit?*, the flight took off following the riot/rebellion of 1967 and was completed in the aftermath of Coleman Young's inauguration as the city's first Black mayor. [3].

Every mayor, from Coleman Young to former Detroit Pistons hero Dave Bing, has focused on rebuilding downtown, and neighborhoods have been starved of funding. Detroit now has three casinos and two downtown stadiums. It boasts having the headquarters of General Motors, Compuware and Quicken Loans.

But Detroit, with a population at least the size of San Francisco, has no department store or national chain grocery store within its city limits. Yet the population density is about 6,000 per square mile, twice the density of sprawling cities such as Jacksonville, Florida.

Detroit's population is about 83% African American, 10% white and 7% Mexican American. Before the current economic crisis 55% owned their own homes, although many were too financially strapped to repair them; by 2008 over 100,000 homes were vacant.

The city's population is 10% less likely to be in the work force than other big cities and one third lives in poverty. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Detroit's rate of unemployment since 2000 is the highest of the 50 largest U.S. cities. That is, the economic crisis that hit the United States in 2008 hit Detroit well before.

Today Michigan's official unemployment rate stands at 15%. Detroit's is officially double, but newspapers write about a 50% unemployment rate.

The Role of the Police

Part of the legacy of Detroit's racism and segregation is rooted in the role of the police. In 1925 one of the reasons Dr. Ossian Sweet dared purchase a home outside the Black Bottom neighborhood where he had his practice was the number of killings by the police that occurred there. Black professionals like Sweet faced harassment and intimidation when they purchased homes outside of Black neighborhoods, often while police looked on.

Police brutality has been a constant over the years. In his mayoral campaign in 1974, Coleman Young promised to disband STRESS, the police squad most responsible for harassing and killing Black youth. He kept his campaign promise but police killings, by both Black and white officers, continue.

One of the most recent and well-publicized cases occurred in June 2010, when seven-year-old Aiyana Stanley-Jones was shot to death by Officer Joseph Weekly as she slept on a couch next to her grandmother. The police were looking for a murder suspect who was in the upstairs apartment.

Detroit's police department has been under federal consent decrees since 2003 over its use of lethal force and deplorable incarceration conditions in the precincts. Its error-ridden crime lab was shut down in September 2008 and the state police assumed responsibility for testing. Police error and misconduct continue although the Detroit Committee Against Police Brutality and the Detroit Chapter of the National Lawyers Guild defend victims of police brutality, campaign to end police patrol chases that result in killing bystanders and advocate for police accountability.

Resources and Schools Under Attack

It's a reasonable conclusion to say that Detroit is still being "redlined," i.e. starved of credit and capital through race and class discrimination. With the erosion of the city's tax base and the racism from those who see Detroiters as having caused our own poverty, Detroit's remaining resources are under attack. Public officials, including a previous mayor, have been indicted on charges of extortion, bribery, fraud and conspiracy. While politicians of all ethnicities have been caught with their hands in the till, the misdeeds of Black officials provide a pretext for suburban politicians to proclaim Detroit incapable of governing itself.

Previous mayors have outsourced portions of a water and sewerage system developed over 150 years, serving four million people in 126 communities. But the rates are high and thousands of Detroiters have their water turned off for non-payment.

Despite the city's already inadequate bus service, Mayor Bing threatened to completely shut down the buses on Sundays. He backed off when hundreds showed up at public meetings across the city. However he downgraded a system that many depend on by increasing the time between buses and laying off 25% of the drivers.

Bing also threatened to end service to half of the city's parks but dropped that proposal when it became too controversial.

Speaking of the 3,500 city workers represented by AFSCME, Mayor Bing told the press, "They've

crippled our ability to do the things we need to do.” He then mandated a 10% pay cut through imposing further furlough days. [4]

Recently the Detroit City Council awarded DTE Energy a \$150 million, four-year contract for servicing what had previously been powered by the city-owned utility, Mistersky Power Plant. It gave the contract to the company rather than spend \$80 million to upgrade the system — which provided lights for municipal buildings, for Wayne State University and the Detroit Medical Center — and preserve jobs. Yet last fall the combination of a wind storm, DTE wires not properly trimmed and maintained, and a fire department that doesn’t have enough trucks or firefighters resulted in 81 houses in northeast Detroit burning down in one afternoon.

At the end of 2010 Detroit Medical Center — a non-profit complex built after World War II through clearing the dilapidated housing where African Americans lived — will be sold to Vanguard Health Systems for \$1.5 billion. Vanguard will receive 15 years of tax breaks and promises to honor all commitments to provide care for low-income patients over a 10-year period. It pledges to refrain from selling any DMC acute-care hospitals during that time.

As a non-profit, DMC was unable to obtain the financing it needed for further construction, but financing is not a problem for Vanguard, which earned \$2.1 million in the third quarter of 2010. It operates 18 hospitals, surgery centers and health plans in half a dozen states. An equity company, The Blackstone Group, owns 66% of its stock.

Shortly after my retirement from a parts plant, I decided to leaflet the complex in support of an independent running for city council. I assumed most white workers no longer lived in the city, but that most Black workers did. During that week of leafleting, however, I learned that a surprising number of older white workers remained in the city while a hefty proportion of younger Black workers lived in working-class suburbs.

When I thought it over, I realized that most of the Black workers had children and left the city because Detroit schools do not have the same resources as the suburbs. When I was a substitute teacher in the early 1990s, I found the school I’d been assigned to teach in had no art or physical education classes and a very limited music program.

Given that Detroit is a vital center for music and art, this was particularly distressing. But when I taught in nearby Southfield the schools had computers in the classrooms, a full curriculum, well-maintained schools and an efficient administration.

Just as Detroiters are urged to pick themselves up by their own bootstraps when their boots have been stolen, teachers are blamed for the state of the Detroit Public Schools (DPS). Both current and past mayors wanted to take control over them, but so far residents have successfully resisted.

Twice the state of Michigan has intervened to take the system over. In 1999 former governor John Engler (Republican), in cahoots with then mayor Dennis Archer (Democrat), dismissed the elected School Board and appointed another board and superintendent. Before returning the school system back in 2005, the state managed to turn a hundred million dollar surplus into a \$219 million deficit. A major boondoggle was the decision to move DPS’s office out of its building and into rented space.

In March 2009, Governor Jennifer Granholm (Democrat) seized control of the district’s finances and appointed Robert Bobb its Emergency Financial Manager to a one-year term. Reappointed for a second year, Bobb drove the deficit up to \$327 million. His term was to be up in March 2011, shortly after the new governor, Rick Snyder (Republican) had been installed, but Snyder has indicated he will extend his term to the end of the school year.

Bobb has no experience as an educator, but was a 2005 graduate of The Broad Foundation's Superintendent's Academy. The foundation's aim, according to its website, is to "dramatically transform American urban public education." [5] Bobb supposedly "earned" his reputation from his work in restructuring school finances in Oakland, California and Washington, D.C.

From the beginning, Bobb insisted that his mandate gave him the right to take charge of the district's academic policy, maintaining that finances and academics can't be separated. His yearly salary from the Detroit Public Schools is \$280,000. but his 2010 contract with the state of Michigan allows him to receive additional compensation: \$56,000 from The Broad Foundation and \$89,000 from unidentified "philanthropic" organizations for a total package of \$425,000. (The \$89,000 was later identified as being paid by the Kresge and Kellogg foundations.) There is no accountability to anyone other than the governor.

Certainly the DPS system is troubled. Superintendents of education have come and gone over the last decade, and only 58% of the students who start high school graduate within four years; the dropout rate in 2008-09 was 27%. The "average" student misses 46 days of school every year — one-fourth of the school year.

Since school closings were instituted in 2003, enrollment has dropped 10,000 a year. For 2010-11 enrollment stands at 77,669, less than half that of 2002-03. Thousands of Detroit students now attend suburban public school while charter schools have siphoned off an additional 44,375. The loss of each student decreases the state's allotment to DPS by \$8,200.

Eighty-eight percent of Detroit students are African American, 9.5% are Latino/a and 2.5% are white. Seventy-seven percent are entitled to a free or reduced-price lunch. With nearly 40% of the city's children living in poverty, family access to resources is limited. Many have special needs, starting with the problem of developing healthy eating habits in a city with few grocery stores and where more than a third of all families rely on bus transportation. While urban gardens have grown like wildfire over the last few years — and some schools have gardens — cheap, fast food is readily available.

Additionally, a recent study revealed that of the 169,000 Detroit children tested for lead poisoning between 1992 and 2008, 74,171 had unsafe levels. Given the reality of segregated housing, such exposure goes far to explain the achievement gap in reading between African-American and white students. As Randall Raymond, a geographic information specialist for DPS, commented to the *Detroit Free Press*, "This is an educational crisis, and we should be doing something about it." (5/16/10)

Lead poisoning is only one of the many pollutants that can harm children living in Detroit. Others include metal dust from the cement, gypsum, steel, asphalt and oil recycling plants and diesel fumes from the 13,000 trucks that drive daily through my neighborhood in southwest Detroit. My zip code is one of the top 10 most polluted areas in the state, with two neighboring zip codes right up there as well (48209, 48210, 48217).

Last September Bobb received a letter from the Michigan Department of Education, informing him that the state would block nearly \$5 million in funding because of noncompliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. While Bobb's spokesperson laid blame on a previous administrator's tenure, the state increased its supervision for 7,000 disabled students' progress four months after Bobb was appointed. At the beginning of this school term, local newspapers recounted the problems disabled students had in not being picked up for school, or being picked up one day but not the next.

When questioned, Bobb's office issued a press release claiming more special education students are working toward diplomas this year. An accompanying attachment suggested that parents of special education students have a reason not to want their children to finish school: "Parents make \$433 in SSI (Supplemental Security Income) per kid each month for special ed.... Don't want to graduate kids." [6]

Bobb's "Irreparable Harm"

During the first five months of his tenure Bobb made two presentations to the School Board, but by the summer of 2009 consultation was out the window. Bobb accelerated school closings and by August, disregarding the procedure in place for text adoptions, signed a \$40 million contract with Houghton Mifflin Harcourt for the purchase of new books.

In a recent NPR interview Bobb stated that the Detroit school deficit stood at \$330 million. On his watch he has closed 57 buildings (mostly schools) and plans to shut 20 more. ("Change of Guard Likely for Troubled Public Schools," NPR interview, 11/3/10).

Last summer he laid off 226 unionized school security guards and outsourced their jobs, claiming they cost at least \$11 million a year and replaced them for a mere \$6.5 million. But they successfully sued and are back at work.

After being reappointed by the governor for a second year, Bobb released his detailed objectives for Detroit Schools, "Excellent Schools for Every Child: Detroit Public Schools Academic Plan" in March 2010. Bobb and his co-author acknowledge that the plan "coincides" with "Taking Ownership: Our Pledge to Educate All of Detroit's Children" released by the Excellent Schools Detroit Coalition

- Since the coalition plan is the more general statement, I'm outlining its main objectives:
 - Disbanding the Detroit School Board, which currently manages 172 schools, in favor of mayoral control. The mayor would appoint the superintendent/CEO, who would be responsible for day-to-day operations.
 - Creating an independent citywide commission for standards and accountability. It would establish standards and measurable goals, collect "timely performance information" and publish an easy-to-read report card to help parents choose the best schools.
 - Helping parents become "smarter shoppers" and therefore able to make more informed choices.
 - Building public support for closing Detroit's "worst schools." According to their chart, this would mean shutting down 74 schools (including some private and charter schools), involving 39,000 students.
 - Coordinating the opening of 40 new schools by 2015 and 70 by 2020. This includes 35 college preparatory high schools in the Detroit area — some may be small academies within one campus rather than separate buildings.
 - Establishing a leadership academy to provide a training program for teachers and attracting alternative teacher programs such as Teach for America.
- Aside from mentioning that hundreds of millions of dollars are spent each year by city agencies, community organizations and foundations on programs benefitting children and calling for more effective management of "these investments for student success," there is little in either plan about

addressing the particular needs of Detroit children.

Bobb's Map for Going Backward

Bobb's current plan is to close Burton International, a successful K-8 magnet school, and combine it with students from two other schools, to bring the total population to 1,150. Mayberry, a successful K-5 in my neighborhood, would be combined with a middle school, bringing the student population at the new school to 1,161.

The assumption that good schools can be moved into other facilities, combined with other students and remain successful seems wildly optimistic. Many parents in my neighborhood question the rationale of combining K-5 with middle school students. It does make sense if one realizes that the 3rd grade test results are better than those in the middle school. The school's scores would magically increase.

In July 2010 the Detroit School Board sued Robert Bobb for breach of duty. Not only did he fail to meet with the School Board at their monthly meeting, but he attempted to control its academic policy. On December 6 Judge Wendy Baxter issued a 34-page opinion that granted the Board injunctive relief, ruling that Bobb's actions caused "irreparable harm." Politicians have encouraged Bobb not to appeal.

Meanwhile Bobb has asked the state to apply a \$400 million tobacco settlement to \$219 million of Detroit's school debt. To make the deal more attractive to legislators he has urged that the debts of 40 other school districts also be forgiven. However no other school system was put into receivership. [7]

While this proposal publicizes the fact that the debt occurred under the state takeover, since the debt has dramatically risen under Bobb's watch it would seem reasonable that the state should be held responsible for the total amount.

In offering his deficit reduction plan, Bobb outlined two possible outcomes:

- Plan A is to "forgive" a portion of Detroit's school deficit and develop a two-tiered educational system, one being a traditional public school with a second, larger, system composed of charter schools. He describes the charters as being able to provide "autonomous learning and financial environments in which academic achievement will be the centerpiece of decision making and in which flexibility to make decisions will be protected."
- Plan B assumes Detroit is saddled with the debt and would, in Bobb's own words, be an "extremely draconian" measure. Seventy schools will be closed and school real estate sold. Class size will be doubled, along with longer school days, a longer school year, and additional outsourcing.

Neither plan has attracted support from politicians, educators or school board members. Plan A reveals Bobb's drive to charterize Detroit's educational system by any means. What he envisions is a small public system left with special needs children who require extensive services and students whose lack of resources mark them as undesirable for charters.

Another aspect of Bobb's charterized vision is to destroy the teachers union. Clearly the charter schools Bobb outlines do not have unionized teachers who might challenge the "flexibility to make decisions."

As for Plan B, it is just a threat — after all, there aren't even classrooms built for 70 students. But it

stands as a dramatic image of the urban school as a prison.

This year Bobb did unilaterally raise class size for students in grades 4-12 to 38, in violation of the contract with the teachers, and the Detroit Federation of Teachers has an unfair labor practices suit pending against the district.

Even if Bobb left next week, the two state takeovers have severely damaged a resource-deprived system. The weakening of Detroit's public schools, symptomatic of the increased inequality in America as a whole, is the result of a conscious decision to loot and scapegoat.

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P.S.

* From Against the Current, January/February 2011, No. 150.

Footnotes

[1] The Nation, November 22, 2010, <http://www.thenation.com/article/155801/city-ruins>

[2] See Chapter 4 in Thomas Sugrue's The Origins of the Urban Crisis, Princeton University Press, 1996.

[3] Whose Detroit? Politics, Labor, and Race in a Modern American City, Cornell University Press, 2001

[4] "Mayor: AFSCME Obstructing Bargaining," Detroit News, 2/25/10

[5] <http://broadereducation.org/about/overview.html>

[6] "State hits DPS for \$4M over disabled," Detroit News, 10/21/10.

[7] Funds are currently allocated for Medicaid and the Michigan Merit Program.