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Detroit is the Nexus of New American Apartheid

Glen Ford

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A Black Agenda Radio commentary by executive editor Glen Ford

“What is emerging in the second decade of the 21st century is a new version of American Apartheid, in which the inhabitants of largely Black urban centers are denied a meaningful vote or the legal capacity to safeguard their collective and individual property from the grasping hands of the rich.” A conference in Detroit confronts the crisis, October 5 and 6.

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On October 5 and 6, the International People’s Assembly will hold a conference Against Banks and Against Austerity [9], in Detroit. By that time, many of the 10,000 party-goers expected at this week’s Congressional Black Caucus annual gala will just be getting over their hangovers, having spent thousands of dollars apiece strutting around DC hotel lobbies celebrating their personal upward mobility amidst Black America’s greatest economic and political crisis in modern times. The conference in Detroit is about the real world, where Wall Street is devouring the public sphere and driving actual living standards inexorably downward for the vast bulk of Americans, especially people of color.

Detroit is the epicenter of the African American economic and political crisis, an 85 percent Black metropolis whose citizens have been stripped of their fundamental democratic rights so that their public assets and private pensions can be confiscated by the finance capitalist class. Wall Street now runs the city outright, through an emergency financial manager. A similar regime prevails in all of Michigan's largely Black cities, resulting in the disenfranchisement of more than half the state's Black population. What is emerging in the second decade of the 21st century is a new version of American Apartheid, in which the inhabitants of largely Black urban centers are denied a meaningful vote or the legal capacity to safeguard their collective and individual property from the grasping hands of the rich. In the language of declining capitalism, this is called austerity, but in America it takes the form of a racialized order in which concentrated populations of Blacks have no rights that the bankers are bound to respect. While the party-goers clink their glasses at the Black Caucus gala in Washington, a great political and economic implosion is unfolding in urban America, with Detroit as ground zero.

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The International Peoples Assembly conference demands that the so-called debt to the banks be canceled – not just for Detroit, which supposedly owes Wall Street \$22 billion, but for cities, school systems, states and countries around the world that have been purposely made into debt slaves for the rich. Workers pensions and jobs, and the vital services they provide to the community, must be guaranteed. This is a critical demand, since the emergency management regime in Pontiac, Michigan, has stripped the municipal workforce down to only 20 people [10] for a city of 60,000. The unemployed must be put back to work repairing the damage inflicted on Detroit by the bankers' foreclosure and disinvestment policies. Public education, which is rapidly being privatized, must be restored to the public sphere and fully funded.

There are many more demands, but the solution begins with real popular democracy and the disempowerment of the banks. The struggle also requires the rejection of what has passed for Black leadership in Detroit and the rest of America: a chattering, swaggering, class of self-servers who have been selling the people down the river ever since they got a taste of power on the backs of the Black Freedom Movement of the Sixties. These are the folks who will be toasting President Obama this week, in Washington, a servant of the banks who cares no more for the people of Detroit than for the people of Damascus, or Baghdad, or Mogadishu.