

What's behind the certification fight in Michigan

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Election workers in Detroit prepare to begin processing ballots on November 3, 2020.

Detroit — On Monday, Nov. 23, the Michigan Board of Canvassers met to certify the votes from the Nov. 3 elections, a necessary step to complete the archaic U.S. Electoral College process. Eyes have been on Michigan throughout the election and after, targeted by the Trump regime's efforts to overturn the election results. This is the backstory to that struggle.

Focusing on the question, "Will the Michigan Board of Canvassers certify or won't they?" obscures the roots and role of the Black freedom struggle in this battle, and the struggle of all oppressed nations inside the U.S. in this election.

The MAGA theme present since before the 2016 election is a not-so-thinly-veiled synonym for "make America white again." The campaign to disenfranchise, to nullify the votes of Detroiters is as much a part of that campaign as the brutal treatment of migrant families and asylum seekers at the border with Mexico as well as the Muslim ban, or sending body bags to the Navajo nation when they requested PPE.

What are Detroiters to think when accused of "dead" people voting? How many deaths were suffered when the unchecked pandemic swept through the city's Black, Latinx and Indigenous communities? The traumatized community publicly mourned the dead in a citywide public memorial event with huge remembrance photographs displayed throughout Belle Isle Park.

Knowing the disproportionate deaths among communities of color, Trump embraced the fallacy of "herd immunity," accepting the deaths that would come. Genocide? Urban removal through pandemic?

Detroit is the largest city in the state of Michigan. Although the population declined after the auto industry abandoned the city, Detroit remains the major U.S. city with

the highest percentage of residents of African descent, still 80 percent or more.

Detroit has worn a target since Black workers were decisive in the fight to unionize the auto industry, were a militant force on the shop floor with the League of Revolutionary Black Workers and the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement, and won a Black political voice with the election of Coleman Young and leftwing militants like Ken Cockrel Sr.

These political figures resulted from and were lifted by the mass rebellions against police repression and racism that are now, at last, widely recognized as being intertwined with the very foundation of the U.S.

Cockrel, later elected to the Detroit City Council, famously put Chrysler racism on trial in the successful 1970 defense of Black autoworker James Johnson, who had killed two foremen and a job setter at the plant.

Similar to what Cuba has endured, Black Detroit had to pay for its rebelliousness and struggle for self-determination with decades of economic exclusion and financial blockade. The city corporation itself as well as residents were cut off from loans and financing, or when not cut off had to pay higher rates.

Neoliberalism hits home

A fundamental of capitalist economics is the exploitation of the majority of people by a small handful who gain wealth and wield political power. With the defeat of the Soviet Union and the end of the “Cold War,” neoliberalism’s war against the working class became unchecked.

A universal right-to-vote would make capitalist rule more difficult and could get in the way of forcing concessions on the “free” working class. So roadblocks and barriers to universal suffrage were invented: poll taxes and so-called “literacy tests” to prevent Black voters in Southern states from exercising that right, backed up by

terror and night riders.

Then in recent times, voter ID laws and the “cleansing” of voter rolls were measures added to existing barriers preventing participation in the elections: holding voting on a work day, limits to mail-in voting, excluding formerly incarcerated people, confusing deadlines for voter registration, and drawing districts after the 10-year census to keep neoliberal politicians in control of state legislatures.

Further, destroying the organized labor movement was on the neoliberal to-do list. In 2011, a law was being pushed through the Wisconsin state legislature that would require annual membership votes to maintain certification for public workers’ unions. Media reports called it the “Wisconsin Budget Repair” bill. The law pushed the budget crisis — a result of the 2007-2008 “Great Recession” — into the pocketbooks of the working class in government jobs.

Wisconsin originated public employee unions. What is now called the Wisconsin State Employees Union/Council 24 of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) was formed in Madison, Wis., in 1932. Workers in Wisconsin were the first in the country to win full recognition of union collective bargaining rights for public workers. That was in 1959.

From Wisconsin to Michigan

In February 2011, a mass mobilization was initiated by Wisconsin teachers to occupy the state capital with mass marches on the weekends to oppose the “budget repair” bill. The marches drew as many as 100,000 workers. This writer joined in those actions in Madison.

A Michigan reporter who was also there asked me, a Detroit city worker retiree, why I was in Madison. I told her that if we didn’t stop this steamroller in Wisconsin, it would be in Michigan soon.

In fact, the very next month, March 16, 2011, in Michigan, the Emergency Manager Law Public Act 4 was enacted by the same kind of pro-business, gerrymandered legislature, giving the governor the power to “declare the city or school board in receivership and appoint an emergency manager to act for and in the place and stead of the governing body ... of the local government.”

In response, a massive mobilization based in the labor movement collected more than 400,000 signatures to put that law — a weapon aimed against Detroit — to a vote of the people. At the next presidential election, Nov. 7, 2012, PA4 was overwhelmingly repealed by the voters of Michigan.

Then the coup began. The lame-duck legislature passed the Emergency Manager bill again on Dec. 26, but with a clause that protected it from repeal by the voters, effective March 28, 2013. Just two weeks earlier, on Dec. 11, 2012, that same legislature struck a blow against the heart and origin of the industrial union movement by enacting a so-called right-to-work, anti-union law — in the home state of the United Auto Workers and the Flint sit-down strike.

The Emergency Manager Law was aimed at Detroit, Flint and Benton Harbor. Detroit is still the largest city in Michigan, a Black and Latinx working-class center that controlled the water supply for all southeastern Michigan, held the gateway to Canada, owned the stellar Detroit Institute of Arts collections and sat on a prime location on the Detroit River, the waterway connecting the Great Lakes, not to mention billions in accumulated city workers pension funds under control of the city administration.

In the face of the racist ruling-class financial blockade and redlining, the pension fund provided a development lifeline for Black city administrations. Limited only to solutions within the capitalist system, the city administration couldn’t go forward, caught between the needs and demands of the people and an economic and political system designed to exploit the working class. Responsive to community pressure to

say “No,” the city’s elected officials refused to go along with sweeping privatization proposals.

When the Detroit city administration proposed in the late 1970s to close Detroit General, a public hospital, a mobilization opposed the closing, including sit-ins and arrests at City Hall. Detroit General was transferred and renamed Detroit Receiving in 1980, with the promise that it would remain a public facility; that promise held for 30 years.

Current Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan was CEO of the Detroit Medical Center when it was sold in 2010. Today it is part of the for-profit Tenet Healthcare. By 2013, the Detroit Health Department and the Herman Kiefer Health Complex became collateral damage. The Detroit Health Department was completely dismantled except for the few legally required health officials. All other services went to private nonprofits.

The early days of the COVID-19 pandemic could have been less deadly if robust public health services had remained intact.

On March 14, 2013 — even before the Emergency Manager law went into effect officially on March 28 — the Emergency Financial Manager took over Detroit. By July 18, 2013, the city of Detroit was forced into bankruptcy.

Fight against bankruptcy

Emergency management dictatorships stripped elected representation from more than half of Michigan’s Black residents in Detroit, Benton Harbor and Flint. In Detroit, the bankruptcy was fought in the courts and in the streets, closing the road in front of Federal Court. In Benton Harbor, community activist the Rev. Edward Pinkney was railroaded to jail. Every step of the way, resistance and protest called out the robbery by the Wall Street bankers.

But the biggest headline crime was against the people of Flint, home of the sit-down strike in 1934. To cut costs, Flint's emergency financial manager in collusion with then-Gov. Rick Snyder transferred the public water supply from the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department system to the Flint River, an industrial waste dump.

An outcry began about smelly, discolored water flowing from residential faucets. Ridicule was heaped on the people who protested. They were accused of making up stories, until Flint pediatrician Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha blew the whistle on the massive lead poisoning of Flint's children. State officials, including Gov. Snyder, escaped accountability for this crime and the fight continues for reparations and replacement of water pipes.

The Emergency Manager Law couldn't be repealed, but the struggle isn't over.

In 2018, the Michigan Constitution was amended by two initiative petitions to democratize voting in Michigan — each submitting more than 420,000 signatures. Proposal 2: People not Politicians took redistricting out of the hands of the neoliberal state legislature. Proposal 3: Promote the Vote granted that anyone who had not been convicted of a crime and as a result was in jail could register and vote.

Also provided were automatic and same-day registration, early voting, mail-in ballots without reason, and in 2020, satellite voting stations across Detroit, plus drop boxes for mail-in ballots for those worried about the post office cutbacks. Voting has never been so easy.

The struggle in Wisconsin was diverted into gathering signatures to recall Gov. Scott Walker. The recall vote failed when the Democratic Party ran the same candidate against Walker instead of the militant leaders of the mass protests.

This is the backstory to the fight to have the 2020 election certified. Detroit has fought for the right to vote and will not give it up to slick maneuvers.

Three hundred people logged on to the Wayne County Board of Canvassers zoom meeting making their voices heard. Hundreds more testified at the State Board of Canvassers meeting on Monday, Nov. 23, speaking for hours even after the Canvassers certified the Michigan election with 3 out of 4 voting for certification with one abstention.

