How GM Destroyed Poletown

written by Hank Kennedy | September 10, 2023

A block of Poletown.

The deadline for the current United Auto Workers (UAW) contract covering the Big Three automakers is fast approaching. While it is unknown which company will be the target to be struck, or if all three automakers will be struck at the same time, one of the plants that may be picketed is GM's Detroit/Hamtramck Assembly, the Poletown Plant. The story of the construction of the Poletown plant is illustrative of many tendencies in American political and economic history, such as the collaboration between big business and government, the failures of business unionism, and the shortcomings of liberals and the Communist Party. Given this, it's worth knowing this history for all those involved in the labor and socialist struggles, whether Detroiters or not.

Detroit in the 1980s was the site of a bonanza of large-scale developments pushed by Democratic Party Mayor Coleman Young in order to revive the cities' flagging economy. Young had made a name for himself as a radical, and according to conservative historians he was a member of the Communist Party. If he was not a member, he certainly was a fellow traveler given his membership in the National Negro Labor Council and Henry Wallace's Progressive Party. Young ran for mayor in 1973 as an aggressive proponent of affirmative action in city hiring and as a fierce opponent of the police department's STRESS (Stop The Robberies Enjoy Safe Streets) program. Under STRESS, there were four hundred warrantless police raids and twenty-two police killings of Black civilians, giving Detroit's police the highest number of civilian killings per capita in the country (Rich, 208). STRESS officers even raided a card game attended by

Wayne County deputy sheriffs when they mistook the deputies for criminals. The resulting shootout led to the death of one deputy, Henry Henderson (Boyd, 227).

However, during his mayoral campaign and after, Young began tacking towards the center. His campaign literature promised to "lead a business resurgence that will produce jobs by the thousands, revitalize our downtown, and our entire city." While some viewed the coalition that elected Young as a repeat of the one that elected Marxist Justin C. Ravitz to a judgeship, the difference was that "the radicals set the ground rules in the Ravitz effort with the liberals playing a supporting role, while with Young's campaign the opposite would be true."(Georgakas & Surkin, 222-224)Young's lengthy term in office showed even more clearly who was calling the shots.

Shortly after Young was sworn in he reneged on a promise to support the United Farm Workers grape and lettuce boycott. By the late 70s-early 80s his administration was actively steering federal Housing and Urban Development (HUD) community development money to rich businessmen like Al Taubman and Max Fisher. The city promoted luxury apartment complexes downtown that most city residents could never afford. One of these, the Millender Center, cost $71 million with only one-tenth of that being paid for by developers. The public footed the rest of the bill. Young's economic prescription was Motor City Reaganism, make the rich richer and the benefits would trickle down. What became the Poletown Plant fitted into this theory of growth.

Poletown was a neighborhood bordering Hamtramck, originally settled by Polish immigrants in the late 19th century. Unfortunately for the working-class people living there, many of them senior citizens, GM wanted the site for a new factory. The area GM selected was 465.5 acres in size, and contained 1,176 buildings, 16 churches, 2 schools, and a hospital. The area was also home to over three thousand people. GM promoted the factory as a way to create jobs, even though they were also shutting down two factories in Detroit, leading to a net loss of auto manufacturing jobs. Mayor Young and the City Council were all in favor and would pay $200 million to clear the site and give the company a 12-year tax abatement. They also made use of a new "quick take" law that made it easier to use eminent domain to seize private property for "public purposes". It was only the tenacity of Poletown residents and the Poletown Neighborhood Council (PNC) who stood in their way.

Given that the struggle to save Poletown pitted working-class residents against the government and a powerful corporation, one would think that the organized Left would be strongly supportive. This was far from universally true, though. Due to its deep respect for Mayor Young's radical past, the Communist Party put out a statement absolving the Mayor of his complicity in the destruction of Poletown (Wylie, 102). The Party later panned the documentary film made about the struggle, *Poletown Lives!*. Nominally, they did so because of the references to the Solidarity movement in Poland, but it is also possible that their feelings were colored by their closeness to Mayor Young. Also on the Stalinist left, the Communist Workers Party made mention of the destruction of the neighborhood in *Workers Viewpoint*, contrasting the expense involved with Young's claims that Detroit was broke and needed concessions from the unions and a tax increase.

On the Trotskyist Left, things were a little better. Jeannine Wyle, author of *Poletown: Community Betrayed* said that *the Bulletin*, put out by the Workers League, was a favorite among locals. It gave them a forum for their unedited opinions, especially given how universally pro-GM the mainstream media was (Ibid. 99). But, when Ralph Nader got involved in the campaign, the Workers League backed out and warned residents against trusting the legal process"("Beware Nader's Raiders"). The Socialist Workers Party invited Thomas Olechowski of the PNC to address its Detroit Militant Labor Forum, where he called GM's plan "an economic abomination", and the Party's mayoral candidate cited the fight as an example of Mayor Young's pro-big business policies. But, the SWP did not take a leading role in fighting the displacement. Easily the socialist group most involved in the fight to save Poletown was the Revolutionary Socialist League, a spin-off of the International Socialists. The

Revolutionary Socialist League covered Poletown extensively in their publication *The Torch*. The League also helped organize a protest march through the neighborhood that drew out 150 people on a bitterly cold December day.

The National Organization for an American Revolution, associated with Detroit's Grace Lee Boggs, issued the leaflet "What's Good for GM is Not Good for America" which pointed out that "GM comes like a knight in shining armor to revitalize our communities when, in fact, it is destroying the few communities that still remain." But the organization did not play a role in organizing resistance to the city government and GM. Boggs reported that some members felt opposing Mayor Young was a betrayal of Black unity (Boggs, 179-180).

If the Left was divided, the United Auto Workers was actively hostile. UAW researcher Dan Luria bluntly said "I don't believe in community" and that the Poletown struggle was "petit bourgeois" (Wylie, 102) The President of UAW Local 22 said, "I can't in good conscience speak out against the plant when there are so many families around here out of work"(Brown). When Poletown resident Walter Duda, an early UAW organizer, went to the union's headquarters in Detroit, he was told that the union couldn't help him. While some auto workers centered around the rank-and-file newspaper *Fighting Chance* opposed the demolition of Poletown, they were not able to alter the course of the wider union.

On the city council, the only firm opponent of the Poletown land grab was Ken Cockerel, a Marxist veteran of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. Cockerel opposed giving GM a tax abatement saying "I don't see how we can justify giving a multibillion dollar corporation tax relief, when we are asking our citizens to dig down into their own pockets" (Jackson "Tax Break for GM Unsure, Council Says"). Young shot back that Cockerel was wrong on "the whole question of whether GM needs the money. They ain't running no…welfare program" (McGraw, 8). Emmett Moten, advisor to the Mayor, and director of the Community and Economic Development Department had to admit that earlier promises of 6,150 jobs being provided by the project were "psychological grantsmanship" (Rich, 188), i.e. not true. In response Cockerel said "You talk about 'new' jobs, and keep pumping up the 'big lie,' while anyone questioning the administration's credibility is considered stupid. It's beginning to sound like a shell game" ("GM Plant Won't Add to Job Rolls").

Other politicians were almost uniformly in favor of the project, from Republican governor William Milliken to liberal Democratic Senators Don Reigle and Carl Levin. Riegle, who refused to meet with Poletown residents, stated that community resistance to the Poletown project "borders on the irresponsible." Congressman John Conyers, a member of the Democratic Socialists of America, was the only member Congress from Michigan to criticize the project and offered to hold congressional hearings on the matter. They were never held. The other DSA Congressman from Michigan, David Bonior, made no comment on the project.

The PNC tried a variety of approaches to stop the destruction of their neighborhood. At first, they asked GM to reconsider the footprint of the area requested. For example, the Immaculate Conception Church would be flattened for a parking lot rather than GM building a vertical parking structure. The company wasn't interested. They petitioned public officials and the UAW to try to sway their opinion. As previously mentioned, those entities didn't want to hear it. Some of their protests were quite creative. For example, they hired out a bulldozer and parked it in front of GM chairman Roger Smith's house the day before Mother's Day, 1981. Taped messages on the bulldozer read "GM, Don't Bulldoze our Church" and "Happy Mother's Day, Mrs. Smith, Talk to Roger." All the while, the group continued with their lawsuits against the city questioning the legality of using eminent domain to take private property to give to a private corporation. The PNC were assisted in their work by the Poletown Support Team, a Ralph Nader affiliated group. When Mayor Young heard about Nader's involvement, he went berserk saying "This man [Nader] has a phobia. Whenever you

mention General Motors he foams at the mouth" (Doerr and Blankenship). His verbal attacks escalated, calling Nader a "carpetbagger" (Roach and Tucker) and a "publicity-grubbing prick." (Binelli, 132) Young's vitriol for Nader exceeded his volleys at Poletown, which he derided as "imaginary" and "so-called Poletown."

While Poletown residents were fighting in the courts and in the streets, GM and their friends were pulling out all the stops to ensure the project moved forward. Not content with the fawning coverage in the media, they bussed in pro-plant demonstrators to make it seem like GM had more support than it did (Jackson "Buses Help Swell Ranks at GM Rally"). Signs contained slogans like "Import Jobs Deport Nader" and "Nader is a Lemon." It wasn't until a month after the rally that newspapers picked up the story that attendees were not Poletown residents. Much more sinisterly, Detroit Police arson investigator Robert McClary suggested that the city or GM could be behind the rash of fires in Poletown in an attempt to burn residents out. He told PNCl members "With enough money, you can do anything" (Wylie, 121).

The PNCl's case against the legality of the use of eminent domain was appealed all the way to the Michigan Supreme Court. In a 5-2 ruling, the court found in favor of the city of Detroit in taking the property. Incredibly, despite the property being seized solely for the benefit of a multinational corporation, the majority opinion proclaimed "The benefit to a private interest is merely incidental" (Jackson "Court Paves Way for GM Project). After the Supreme Court decision, activists shifted their focus to saving the Immaculate Conception Church, which had housed PNC meetings. The church's priest, Joe Karasiewicz, affectionately known as Father Joe, had supported the PNC's efforts. Although Father Joe was supportive of saving the church, Cardinal John Dearden of the Detroit Archdiocese was not. Dearden, who Poletown residents derided for blessing a Gucci store in Sterling Heights after selling the neighborhood's churches (Bullard), flat out refused, along with Coleman Young, an offer from GM to save the church. Given that GM promised to pay for all costs in moving and refurbishing the church two possibilities arise as to motive. Parishioner and PNC member Walter Jakubowski articulated one, that GM's offer was a "charade, fabricated to counteract the bad publicity the automaker has been receiving over the Poletown issue" (Ewald). The other possibility is that Dearden and Young were so incensed by the opposition from the PNC that they decided to destroy their meeting place out of pure spite.

Undeterred, 12 people occupied the church from June 17 through July 14 in an attempt to prevent its demolition. The same police department that was apparently helpless to stop the epidemic of arson in Poletown mustered together a SWAT team to clear the church of demonstrators, several of whom were senior citizens. On that day, a group of protesters gathered outside GM headquarters downtown. There, they spray painted a car with slogans "Boycott GM" and "GM Destroys Churches" and began destroying it with crowbars and picks in act of revenge against the company that was destroying their church. This protest was a reversal of the protectionist events organized by the UAW where foreign cars and motorcycles were similarly destroyed.

In 1981, the same year Poletown was demolished and GM gifted over $250 million, Young began a campaign to raise city taxes and extract concessions from the city's public sector unions. The Mayor claimed that the city was facing bankruptcy and a takeover by the state unless his plans were enacted. The ballot issue for the tax increase was bankrolled heavily by large corporations like Ford, GM, Chrysler, Michigan Bell, Detroit Edison, and the National Bank of Detroit (Fireman). After the tax increase passed in a landslide, Young turned to wringing concessions out of the unions. While many AFSCME locals resisted, with the president of one local complaining "we already gave. We gave in 1974 and 1977 when we gave up the Cost of Living allowance…the city's problems are not our fault" (Roach "Survival Plan Suffers Wages, Bond Setbacks") the unions would eventually agree to the concessions.

The Poletown plant was delayed several times. In 1983, construction workers picketed the site over attempts to build the plant with non-union, out-of-state workers. Of the 6,000+ jobs promised by General Motors, only 3,700 ever materialized. Even if GM had employed 6,000 people, the city would have spent between $40,000 and $50,000 per job. Liberal city councilman Mel Ravitz admitted "the large corporations have directly benefited from these economic subsidies and political strokings and have eliminated over 50,000 jobs" (Ravitz, 19). To rub salt in the wound, Michigan Supreme Court overturned the Poletown decision in 2004, over two decades too late for Poletown residents.

The human cost of the Poletown plant is more difficult to calculate in terms of dollars. Former residents dispersed across the Detroit metro area, to Sterling Heights, Warren, Eastpoint, Shelby Township, and more. Many of them complained that their new neighborhoods were disconnected and unfriendly. Poletown had been their home and now it was gone. Father Joe died December 14, 1981. Some said it was of a broken heart over his church. Pieces of that church were also scattered. The bells of the Immaculate Conception Church ended up at St. Margaret of Scotland in St. Clair Shores, while pieces of the altar and the statue of the Virgin Mary went to St. Hyacinth in Detroit. Poletown resident Jim Jackowski saved some pieces of the church to build a shrine in his Roseville backyard.

Ken Kockrel, member of the Detroit Common Council.

The lessons of Poletown and the PNC campaign are fairly clear. One is the unreliability of liberals and the Communist left. The Democrats and Coleman Young were unwilling to listen to their constituents and identified more with the corporate titans than the citizenry. Compare this to Marxist Ken Cockrel's firm opposition to the project. Another lesson is of the insufficiency of business unionism and the "team concept" in which unions do their best to help out the corporations. While it's unknown whether UAW opposition would've stopped the destruction of Poletown, by going along with the project they helped ensure its annihilation. They sold their souls, but didn't gain the world in doing so.

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