

Detroit Summer

A new city or paint-up, fix-up?

E.B. Maple (Peter Werbe)

1992

At their National Gathering last August, the U.S. Greens decided to embark upon a project they called "Detroit Summer" as one of their three major campaigns for 1992.

The idea was to express an urban consciousness for ecological issues through the establishment of a "Green alternative" for an economically and socially disintegrating urban environment. Part of this ambitious project involved the recruitment of Youth Greens, many of whom constitute the most radical and even anarchist wing of the Greens, to come to this city for the summer.

However, as the project began to coalesce under the auspices of local community groups, it quickly lost its distinct Green character and has become a sprawling, unfocused effort which at this point seems to be primarily a paint-up, fix-up campaign with little, if any, environmental content. Plans now call for mobilizing 600 young people for three weeks in July and August to aid community groups in their ongoing programs.

The intent here is not to be hypercritical of an effort which seems based on good conscience and a desire to affect the immediate and desperate circumstances of much of the city. Detroit certainly could stand massive painting and fixing. However, this type of palliative activity occurs regularly, but without receiving as much fanfare as Detroit Summer, like a recently announced campaign to plant an abundance of trees in the city (another good idea).

Also, the idea that a few weeks of urban experience might be beneficial for the consciousness of those involved is solid as well. But for someone with a Green or radical perspective, Detroit Summer leaves much to be desired.

Detroit Summer's analysis, its programs and its vision go no further than a vaguely liberal call for "reclaiming our neighborhoods" with programs like "growing urban gardens," "cleaning up alleys," and "marching on crack houses" as the extent of the defense against capital's devastation of the town built for the manufacture of cars. When a socialist involved was reproached for the summer project's decided lack of radical content, he responded that the workshops scheduled would contain more of "that" and encouraged us to apply to give one.

Detroit, like all rust-belt urban areas, is in a rapid state of decomposition and with that come all of the social phenomena associated with capital's wreckage. One would expect a Green perspective to take recognition of the nature of industrial production and the urban blight that accompanies it instead of sounding like a neighborhood booster club.

However, a Detroit Summer press release issued March 16 calls on Detroiters to "...rebuild our city, block by block, and brick by brick," and a draft "Call to Detroit Summer 1992" states the project's goal as "rebuilding our cities as places of productivity." This enthusiasm resonates with a desperate hope for a dying city, but comes off sounding little different from Ronald Reagan's discredited urban opportunity zone strategy of the 1980s and with an equal chance of success.

Further, Paul Stark, of the minuscule Detroit Greens, writing in the Fall 1991 "Green Letter," bemoans the city's deindustrialization and de-urbanization as if he were writing from the Mayor's office rather than a radical environmental group. He decries Detroit's loss of population, its declining tax base and even the demolition of buildings.

Also, Stark and Detroit Summer are vastly overstating the quality and impact the community groups involved actually have on the city. The constituent organizations range from paper shells with no membership to foundation-funded projects to a few authentic community-based groups involved in heroic, but mostly futile efforts to defend themselves against the onslaught of urban deterioration. None of them offer a vision which extends beyond what used to be called the American Dream, a vision increasingly unrealizable even for suburban communities and impossible for those assigned to urban sacrifice zones by capital's new priorities.

Stark and the Detroit Summer people appear to be under the double illusion that the city was once "ours" and that it can be "reclaimed" by determined citizens. From its origins, Detroit was built for purposes destructive to nature and its inhabitants—from the original native peoples to the Southern farmers and European immigrants later lured to the auto plants as their pastoral cultures were decimated by the juggernaut of industrialism. Now that this "jewel" of manufacturing has shed its reason for existence, there is the temptation to see the past as "the good old days."

Compared to the present, they probably qualify as such. There were jobs, workers could buy houses, the streets were safe and people lived in relative security. But to identify class society even at its best as worth "reclaiming," negates the understanding that whenever someone, some nation or some sector within capital prospers, it is only at the expense of misery elsewhere. Now it is Detroit's turn on the capitalist wheel of misfortune to occupy the losing end.

The once prosperous city has changed dramatically. Large parcels of land formerly occupied by homes have reverted to a pre-industrial "non-developed" setting leaving miles of open fields, and many of the city's residents have entered a post-capitalist existence, living without wage work or commodity consumption.

This process of "de-urbanization" and "depopulation," instead of being seen as negative could signal a direction for a project based on a radical critique of urban industrial capitalism rather than Detroit Summer's current Peace-Corps mentality. However, a vision of radical deconstruction and Green renewal would necessitate an explicitly anti-capitalist perspective prepared to build autonomous, self-sustaining communities and resist assaults on the environment such as the Detroit incinerator and other urban polluters.

As it is, the latter ecological concerns are not mentioned in project literature and were only belatedly discussed at the insistence of environmental activists attending their meetings.

As I write this, I fear it will sound preachy or arrogant. It's easy from my position of relative affluence to criticize the activity of people facing much worse life circumstances than myself. But if it all looks like so much painting of the decks on the Titanic, shouldn't I say so?

If, I ask myself, I live life in Detroit at its "best," why isn't its worst enough to impel people to move beyond the empty definitions capital enforces upon us? One reason may be that a radical path, when it leaves the realm of the theoretical, is dangerous.

MOVE, the Philadelphia-based urban, revolutionary group, took up such a perspective as indicated above in the 1970s. They realized that people of color were being forced further out to the margins of this society. With a critique of capitalism and racism, they created urban gardens, communal housing, and self-sufficiency efforts based on a perspective of survival and revolutionary vision. However, their successes were viewed as a threat to the state, which launched a bombing attack and police raid on their compound, killing many of their members (including children) and imprisoning the remainder.

One could argue that the resulting state repression of MOVE's efforts doesn't highly recommend such a strategy. But what, then, a hopeless effort which ultimately leaves participants no less discouraged than if they had been attacked by the state?

Despite all the misgivings about the project, the prospect of having several hundred radical Youth Greens in the city still seemed intriguing. However, as it currently stands, only one-third of the young people will be recruited from outside of the city and as it is presently constituted, the project is probably not something which will attract anarchist youth.

For one thing, there are project application requirements such as getting recommendations from teachers which might be difficult for some radical young people to obtain. Also, a "code of conduct" for participants, containing a curfew and a restriction-to-site requirement unless given "permission" to leave, seems decidedly unappealing.

At a recent Detroit Summer meeting, an FE staff member inquired as to what was the overall intent of the project. There was considerable hemming and hawing until one of the key organizers stated that probably only after the summer activities were completed would a definition be clear.

So, given this open-endedness, maybe there is a chance the project will define itself in more radical terms than the organizers intend as the summer progresses. Perhaps the recruited youth will break their tethers, spend wild nights at the 404 space and spill over into radical demos and actions. And, maybe the entire effort will transcend its limited scope and take on the fearsome tasks which are necessary if real change is to occur.

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