

Circus in Town

Dave Wheeler

1969

The Ringling Bros., Barnum and Bailey Circus is coming to Detroit. Running a poor second in entertainment value is the election campaign for the mayor of Detroit.

Traditionally, the people of Amerika have come to expect great election extravaganzas each year. One of our great spectator sports—like a Lions' game.

But like most hypes, capitalist elections are an illusion. And the contest for the office of mayor between Sheriff Roman Gribbs and Richard Austin, CPA is no exception:

The elections each year are supposedly an exercise in democracy where the institutions of power change hands. Where all the people get a hand on the reins of government for a minute. Organized struggle. Controlled change. Pretend participation.

Of course "organized" means that the people never get to vote Ford's money away from him, to withdraw all US military bases, or to return Latin American coffee plantations to the residents of those countries, etc.

At this point most people would be inclined to say, "It's all an illusion, so I'm not even going to bother with it. It doesn't affect me." But while the side presented to us is strictly illusion, there are issues at stake here. And they do affect us. It's just that there is a concerted effort to keep us—the laborers and people who built Detroit and who just have to live here—from finding out what's really happening. Watch out now!

Gribbs vs. Austin. The Pig vs. The Politician. White Fascist Racism vs. The Black Bourgeoisie. That's the way it comes-off at first. And if the stereotypes up front don't look good, what's behind it looks worse.

Sheriff Roman Gribbs...Law degree from University of Detroit...started law practice...assistant prosecutor for Wayne County in 1963...made his rep on the prosecution of civil rights demonstrators, sitting-in at First Federal Savings in 1964 over discrimination in hiring...elevated to Traffic Court Referee...returned 'to private practice...appointed to fill Wayne County Sheriff Buback's unexpired term...carried on Buback's unsuccessful struggle to get use of MACE gas...elected to full term as sheriff last year.

Gribbs is trying to act before the voters as if he was a level-headed front man that can keep the pigs in line. But a recent investigation by the County Board of Supervisors revealed that Sheriff Gribbs has single-handedly set up a Wayne County CIA agency — the sheriff's department now has a special committee on "Motorcycle Groups, Militants, and Compiling Statistics on Activities of Subversive Groups."

County supervisors were wondering who Gribbs was investigating and why such a committee was necessary. But Gribbs wouldn't give any information as to his activities. "This is classified information. Oink, oink. The CIA doesn't have to give out information on its investigations. Why should we?"

"How do you decide who to investigate?"

"Oh, when we get reports from friends and neighbors, we check them out."

"Isn't it unconstitutional to investigate these groups before they do anything illegal?"

"Well, we feel the members of these groups may be a potential threat." Oh, yeah?

What are we to expect from a pig with a head like that?

County Auditor Austin...first black CPA in Michigan, 1941...worked on various business interests...delegate to 1961 state Constitutional Convention...on state

Re-apportionment Committee ran for Congress, 1962, lost to John Conyers in primary by 81 votes...appointed county auditor, 1967...elected 1968.

Austin can be described as a moderate conservative. His genius is in opportunism and political strategy turning a situation to his own advantage. He is the candidate of the black bourgeois business interests and those who want to keep big money inside the city of Detroit.

Austin is trying to play the traditional election game of "lesser of two evils." Because he is black, because he has no bad record to draw out, he is trying to pose as the candidate of change and a better deal for the black community.

But Austin is not the representative of the black community — or anybody. He does not serve the black people because he has presented no program of what changes black people can expect if he is put into office.

He is content to remain the "black candidate" and work for the 20 to 25% of the white vote that he needs to be elected. This is why Austin will not take positions on issues like the turmoil in the city's schools, the black construction workers' demands or define his overall relationship to his people's struggles.

This is why when candidate Gribbs proposed, "Let's not make race an issue in this election," candidate Austin agrees. Imagine, moving into the 1970s with the immense struggles that are going on in this city and around the world, and a candidate for office can make that arrogant proposal. And when his opponent, a black man, tacitly agrees to this.

But the question to be asked of this election is, "Who do they represent?" For although the people are excluded, there are issues and profits at stake.

For instance, the big money and backing of the monopolies is riding with Sheriff Gribbs. At a recent fund-raising meeting, the guests included representatives from the biggest manufacturing monopolies — Ford, GM, Chrysler, Excello, etc.

At the meeting Gribbs' campaign treasurer, Phil Tanion (who gives his address as the assistant prosecutor's office) issued pledge cards to each company rep with the amount they were expected to contribute written on it.

What were the companies buying? Their overall plan to keep the lid on Detroit is to rob the city of all political power by shifting the base to an economic region that includes all of the metropolitan Detroit. The overall plan of these suburban-based monopolies is to make Detroit politically obsolete.

Already studies have been done about the economic development of the Great Lakes Region, as it's called — which go along with studies in other parts of the country. Along with the economic realignment, political structures are already being built for the proposed regional plan, such as SEMCOG (Southeastern Michigan Council of Governments) that would replace the city with the predominantly white suburban area as the center of power.

The candidate who will go along with this plan is the candidate who will get the monopolies' backing. This is all they require — cooperation with the phase-out from Detroit and a rearguard action to protect the remaining investments, including a police state if necessary, to keep the lid on the city until the evacuation is complete.

The monopolies realize the city will be the black people's domain eventually. They would have been willing to back a black mayor this year if someone like William Patrick, of the New Detroit Committee, and in on their plans for domination, would have consented to run.

Austin, however, is backed by the larger black businessmen and concerns like Winkelman's whose investments are chained to the city and who see it in their interest to keep the city the powerful center of the region.

That's what's at stake in the elections.

But what about the people of Detroit? What happens to us while our fortunes are manipulated from the top? We still have to face schools that don't have money to teach, hospitals too busy making profits to provide health services, urban renewal pushing people into more crowded conditions, and constant pig terrorism.

Everybody must be fed. But the—landlord's at the door, the credit company is after the furniture, and there isn't enough money in the house for groceries.

We've been sold out enough by the jackal politicians so that we're beginning to learn. We are not going to vote the capitalists out of power! Power to the people comes only to those people who seize the power.

The students who are coming together to humanize their schools have learned this lesson. Those demonstrating to free John Sinclair and end the narc busts are learning this lesson. The people who say “no urban renewal until I have a good home” are learning this lesson.

Necessity is our teacher. And we now all have a responsibility to use our knowledge to spread the word around to others. Unite, for the real New Detroit.

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