



Benton Harbor, MI



Fighting the Corporate Dictatorship in America's Rust Belt



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An economic system that doesn't feed, clothe and house its people must be and will be overturned and replaced with a system that meets the needs of the people. To that end, this paper is a tribune of those struggling to create such a new economic system. It is a vehicle to bring the movement together, to create a vision of a better world and a strategy to achieve it.

Labor-replacing electronic technology is permanently eliminating jobs and destroying the foundation of the capitalist system. The people's needs can only be met by building a cooperative society where the socially necessary means of production are owned by society, not by the corporations.

We welcome articles and artwork from those who are engaged in the struggle to build a new society that is of, by and for the people. We rely on readers and contributors to fund and distribute this paper.

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Benton Harbor: A harbinger of America's future

Editor's note: *This is a revised version of a pamphlet originally published in 2009. It includes updates that make it current as of June 2014. See page 7 for a timeline of relevant events.*

How could a minister in America be arrested and imprisoned for quoting the Bible? It may seem strange, but this very thing happened in Benton Harbor, Michigan.

As the economic crisis continues to grip America and threatens to get deeper, people in working class communities across the country are beginning to stand up and demand that the government serve the people's interests—not those of the corporations. And as they have stood up, the people have come under fire from the corporations and the government. This is especially true in America's former industrial heartland, the "Rust Belt."

The struggle that has taken place in recent years in Benton Harbor is a case in point, and one that holds a number of lessons for the American people. The fight in Benton Harbor is a war over whether Americans will have prosperity and democracy, or live in poverty under the heel of open corporate rule.



Demonstrators march through the streets of Benton Harbor to protest the emergency manager take over.

Benton Harbor and its sister community across the river, St. Joseph, are in Berrien County, on the southwestern shore of Lake Michigan. Historically, the Whirlpool Corporation, a global appliance manufacturer, has been the largest single employer—and the main political influence—in the county. The factory jobs it provided gave the workers of predominantly Black Benton Harbor and predominantly white St. Joseph stability and a good standard of living. Then in the late 1990s, in a pattern typical of the “Rust Belt,” the jobs began to disappear, partly because of globalization and partly because advanced technology replaced manufacturing labor with robots and computers. What had once been a relatively prosperous working class in Benton Harbor became plagued with unemployment and poverty as Whirlpool and other corporations began transitioning the area from an industrial to a tourist, real estate and service-based economy. This process has prompted resistance from the people of Benton Harbor, and that resistance prompted a political attack on the people by Whirlpool and its local political machine.

As the bulk of the manufacturing jobs were either replaced by robots or sent elsewhere, Whirlpool set its sights on turning the Benton Harbor-St. Joseph area into a lakeside resort for the wealthy. The former CEO of Whirlpool advocated in 2003-4 for developing a \$500 million marina/residential/golf course complex that would take 465 acres of Benton Harbor. It would privatize the City’s only beach and pay the City less than \$1 million for the property. Rev. Edward Pinkney, a Black community activist in Benton Harbor, and many others, opposed the plan because it would do nothing for the poor and would deprive the city of some of its greatest assets. Benton Harbor City Commissioner Glen Yarbrough was the key local politician supporting the plan.

As the largest local employer, Whirlpool has historically been the single biggest influence on local government in Berrien County. In 2004, Pinkney and the organization Black Autonomy Network Community Organization (BANCO) circulated petitions to recall Commissioner Yarbrough (who is Black) because Yarbrough was representing only Whirlpool’s interests, not the community’s. Pinkney and the BANCO network rallied the community to get out the absentee vote, winning the recall election by 54 votes. Whirlpool’s local political forces—Yarbrough, the local police and sheriff’s departments, and the Berrien County judiciary—then went into action to overturn the recall election, to isolate and crush Pinkney, and to contain the people of Benton Harbor. “Vote fraud” was used as an excuse by the county prosecutor to sue the city to overturn the recall election.

Then Pinkney was framed—he was arrested and indicted on trumped-up “vote fraud” charges, and in March 2007 he was convicted by an all-white jury. There was ample evidence to show that Pinkney was framed, but the judge refused to allow it to be admitted during the trial. The city clerk, who allied herself with Pinkney, was forced out of office.



Victory when judge ruled that Pinkney would not go to prison in 2007. This was a result of a powerful movement that stood up to corporate-government power.

Pinkney was given one year’s probation (house arrest) for the “vote fraud” conviction. Then, he published an article in the *People’s Tribune* quoting the Biblical admonition from Deuteronomy that God will punish those who act unjustly against others. The trial judge declared that this amounted to a personal threat against him, and he found Pinkney guilty of violating his probation and jailed him. In early 2008, another judge sentenced Pinkney to 3 to 10 years in prison—double the recommendation of the probation department and prosecutor—for quoting the Bible in the newspaper article.

Across Michigan and the country, thousands of people and many institutions rallied to Pinkney’s defense, including community, labor, religious and other activists, attorneys, and the *People’s Tribune*, other newspapers and other media. As a result of this fight, a Michigan appellate court ordered Pinkney released to house arrest pending a review of his case, and the court eventually overturned the lower court decision. Pinkney had spent nearly a year in prison.

The struggle escalates

In 2009, residents who wanted to challenge corporate control of Benton Harbor became the majority on the City Commission. As the city’s economy continued to deteriorate with the global economic crisis

and corporate neglect, its financial situation worsened. Then-Gov. Jennifer Granholm appointed an emergency financial manager (EFM) under Public Act 72 to assume control over Benton Harbor's finances. (This EFM was one of a number appointed across Michigan in the 2000s.) The EFMs had limited power. In early 2011, the Legislature passed Public Act 4, which turned the EFMs into "emergency managers" (EMs) with broad powers to overrule elected officials and take dictatorial control of cities and school districts. Benton Harbor was one of the first cities to have an EM. (When the people of Michigan overturned Public Act 4 by referendum in 2012, the Legislature thumbed its nose at the people and promptly passed a new version of the law, Public Act 436, which is not subject to referendum.)

The emergency manager law allows the EMs to take over cities and school districts and replace local officials, sell public assets, privatize public services, dismantle collective bargaining agreements, and more. They are dictators in the service of the corporations. Between 2010 and early 2014, Benton Harbor had two different EMs, and they stripped the elected city officials of their power, cut city spending and continued giving away public land to Whirlpool.

In 2011, James Hightower, a puppet of Whirlpool, was elected mayor.



Protest against Whirlpool, the dictatorial Emergency Manager system and the PGA (Professional Golfers Association) in Benton Harbor.



With their local democracy stripped away by the emergency manager, the people of Benton Harbor take to the streets in protest.

who signed petitions. In April 2014, prosecutors decided to charge Pinkney with “vote fraud” (five felonies), and soon after, a judge cancelled the recall election. In an alarming display of force, a SWAT team was sent to Pinkney’s home to look for him. At a preliminary hearing May 23, 2014, no direct or indirect evidence against Pinkney was presented, and prosecutors say they need only circumstantial evidence to convict him. The judge has ruled that the trial can go forward, and the trial at this writing is scheduled to begin July 21, 2014. Pinkney is potentially facing many years in prison, and prosecutors say they want to add more time to his sentence by charging him as a “habitual offender.” Another leader, James Cornelius faces lesser “vote fraud” charges. He says they are after him because he is associated with Pinkney.

The attack on democracy in Benton Harbor shows that the corporate power structure is determined to crush anyone who stands in its way. It is part of a process under way across America in various forms. After the once-stable working class community of Benton Harbor was devastated by automation and globalization and the community began resisting, the race card was played to impose the open rule of corporate power as a

When Benton Harbor residents proposed that the city enact by referendum a 1 percent income tax aimed at Whirlpool to help solve the city’s financial crisis, Whirlpool and Hightower worked to defeat the measure through a massive misinformation campaign. In 2013, Pinkney and others launched an effort to recall Hightower. They gathered the required number of signatures to force a recall election and turned them in to the county clerk, who verified them.

The recall election was scheduled to be held May 6, 2014 but, at the mayor’s request, the Berrien County Sheriff’s Department began investigating the petition campaign, intimidating residents

way of containing the entire area. This tactic has been repeated across Michigan, with Black-majority cities being singled out and painted by the media as incompetent to run their own affairs, and then emergency managers imposed on them. The Black cities are the starting point, but the real target is the whole working class and the whole of our society.

Benton Harbor and Michigan, with their growing poverty, and non-elected emergency managers that turn the assets of a city over to the banks and corporations while establishing martial law, are emerging as the center of the fascist assault sweeping the nation. It is a harbinger of the future of America if people do not act. In fact, communities are responding to similar attacks around the country, whether it's the wave of police killings, the attacks on the homeless and the immigrants, or the economic assault on workers' standard of life. We have to defend leaders like Pinkney and Corneilus. And more than this, we have to go on the offensive across Michigan and across our country to begin the process of taking over the corporations so they can be run in the interests of the people. Either we take over the corporations, making the means of life public property, or we continue living under a corporate dictatorship that will only get worse. We have the power to shape our future. We can have a cooperative society where the needs and aspirations of humanity for a decent life are achieved.

The *People's Tribune* has been in the fight in Benton Harbor for many years. We stand on the side of those who are in struggle for a new society. We urge our readers to get the message out nationwide about the battle in Benton Harbor, and to do whatever they can wherever they are to support Pinkney and Corneilus. Let this be our message to the ruling class: We will defend our leaders! We will build a new society free of oppression, violence and poverty, and no power on earth can prevent this. Get involved! Contact us today.

Let's make this struggle a victory for all who are victims of the economic crisis in every city and town in America.

Let's confront the corporations that are destroying this country!

Let's take control of this country away from the corporations and build a society where the people, not the corporations, make the decisions!

The People's Tribune is your weapon in this fight: Use it!

BENTON HARBOR TIMELINE OF EVENTS

2003

- Terrance “T Shirt” Shurn is murdered by police. Police violently breakup peaceful vigil, creating an uprising. Army is brought in to patrol streets.
- Michigan Gov. Jennifer Granholm forms a task force she says will help Benton Harbor. This is the beginning of the take over of the city by the corporations.

2004

- Led by Whirlpool-backed Commissioner Glenn Yarbrough, beachfront city property is given away for proposed Jack Nicklaus Signature Golf Course.

2005

- Recall election gets enough votes to remove Yarbrough, but the judge sets aside election.

2007

- To keep Yarbrough’s seat, Pinkney is arrested and falsely charged with voter fraud. Trial ends in hung jury. New trial with all white jury convicts Pinkney. He is placed on probation.

2008-10

- Pinkney sent to prison for probation violation for quoting the Bible. Michigan Supreme Court orders Pinkney’s release. He spends nearly a year in incarceration.
- Gov. Granholm brings in unelected Emergency Financial Manager under Public Act 72 to run Benton Harbor.
- Residents take control of city commission away from Whirlpool.
- Young Black men in Benton Harbor are increasingly found dead under questionable circumstances, and this continues. Police say “no foul play.”

2011

- Corporate puppet James Hightower becomes mayor.
- Public Act 4 changes Emergency Financial Managers to Emergency Managers and gives them absolute power over all aspects of city government.
- The Emergency Manager continues giving away public land to Whirlpool and Cornerstone Alliance.

2012

- New Emergency Manager appointed. He continues the giving away of public land to Whirlpool.
- Michigan citizens vote to repeal PA4, the Emergency Manager Law. Governor signs into law another Emergency Manager Law, PA 436. It is almost identical to the original law.

2013

- Benton Harbor residents propose a 1% income tax aimed at Whirlpool. Whirlpool and their puppet mayor defeat the measure through a massive misinformation campaign.
- Recall of Mayor James Hightower begins.
- Petitions are turned in with the required number of signatures.
- Sheriff's Department investigates petition at request of the mayor, intimidating residents who signed it.

2014

- SWAT teams surround Pinkney's home.
- Rev. Pinkney is charged with "vote fraud" (five felonies). No direct or indirect evidence is presented at his preliminary hearing. Prosecutors say Michigan law allows for conviction on circumstantial evidence.
- Pinkney is placed under house arrest and prohibited from using the Internet. He is later released from these restrictions.
- Another leader, James Cornelius, faces lesser "vote fraud" charges.

Please donate to the defense which is in urgent need of funds. Send donations to BANCO, 1946 Union Street, Benton Harbor, MI 49022 or donate at bhbanco.org.



“The *People’s Tribune* plays a tremendous role. They were in it from the beginning. We met in 2002, and from then on, we use the newspaper for our cause. It allows us to grow; it allows people all over the country to know exactly what we are doing and lets us know what other people are doing. The *People’s Tribune* was there on every court day, telling the story, spreading the news, letting people know what

is happening in Benton Harbor. You don’t hear about these things because you don’t have a news outlet. I don’t believe we would have achieved as much without the *People’s Tribune*. I have to applaud them. They go beyond the call of duty. Most newspapers favor the corporations, but the *People’s Tribune* is for the people.”

— Rev. Edward Pinkney

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Find out about the dismantling of democracy, the story of Rev. Edward Pinkney, Benton Harbor, and Michigan.

Truth be told, the charges leveled against Reverend Edward Pinkney in Benton Harbor, MI are but the latest saga in a ruthless pursuit of naked corporate rule that is gripping the state of Michigan. In 2011, current Governor Rick Snyder signed into law legislation that codified the fascist offensive already in motion. The law, a.k.a., Emergency Manager law, dispatches unelected ‘managers’ to designated cities and school districts who issue ‘edicts’ that fast track the sale of precious public assets to bondholders, banks or other corporate interests, privatize public services, dismantle collective bargaining agreements, and more. They are empowered to even dissolve municipalities and school districts, all the while replacing local elected officials altogether.

Benton Harbor, home of corporate giant Whirlpool, is a poster child of the Rust Belt’s post-industrial destruction of the manufacturing life we once knew. Benton Harbor is 90% African American and 42.6% of the population lives in poverty. With its rich Lake Michigan beachfront property park, (which has now been stolen from the people) Benton Harbor was one of the first to experience the wrath of Emergency Managers. Now more than 17 municipalities and school districts, including Detroit, have been pulled into the mire of dictatorship.

Reverend Pinkney has become the face of resistance to the notion that the working class has no rights that the corporation is bound to respect. Any and all efforts must be made to overturn the charges against Pinkney as a step toward overturning the spread of this model to the rest of Michigan and the nation.

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