

# The history that explains why a democratic socialist may be Buffalo's next mayor.

**Authors:** Sean Dinces and Derek Seidman

**Date:** Nov. 1, 2021

**From:** The Washington Post

**Publisher:** The Washington Post

**Document Type:** Article

**Length:** 1,123 words

Full Text:

Byline: Sean Dinces and Derek Seidman

Many eyes will be on Buffalo's mayoral race Tuesday, when Democratic nominee India Walton, a democratic socialist, squares off against the city's current mayor and write-in candidate, Byron Brown. In June, the two faced each other in a Democratic primary, with Walton beating Brown, a four-time incumbent first elected in 2005, by seven percentage points (roughly 1,500 votes). There is no Republican candidate in the general election.

Walton's stunning primary victory made national news, no doubt because it signaled the persistence of the left-wing political insurgency growing within the Democratic Party since at least 2016. That year marked Bernie Sanders's unsuccessful, but formidable challenge to party standard-bearer Hillary Clinton in the Democratic presidential primary.

Walton's ascent into the political limelight has been fueled by the local appeal of Sanders-style rhetoric, including her assertion that "housing, health care, healthy food, and a quality education are basic human rights." Her primary victory also depended on a coalition similar to the one that powered Sanders: working-class people, young voters radicalized by issues like rising rents, and relatively affluent liberals troubled by the growing gap between the rich and poor.

But Walton is also tapping into the mounting discontent in America's central cities. For over half a century, urban revitalization initiatives have failed to combat the social and economic consequences of deindustrialization.

Several interlocking developments in the decades immediately after World War II put cities like Buffalo on the path toward gaping economic inequality. Federal policy encouraged working- and middle-class White families to decamp to the suburbs with affordable, government-backed mortgages. This, along with the relatively low corporate tax rates offered to businesses by those suburbs, drained central cities of tax revenue and relatively good-paying (often unionized) jobs. In Buffalo, the losses were staggering. In 1952, approximately 71,700 production workers labored in the city's manufacturing industry. In 1963, the number stood at 41,000. By 2002, only 17,200 industrial workers remained.

Unable to take advantage of affordable home loans in the suburbs, many Black families were left behind, renting in deindustrializing cities with diminishing economic prospects. The federal government refused to insure mortgages in predominantly Black neighborhoods, even historically affluent ones like Buffalo's Hamlin Park, severely limiting the flow of new investment. At the same time, suburban officials used zoning laws to preclude construction of apartment buildings that might have offered decent housing at affordable rents to Black families.

As White people left for the suburbs after World War II, Black populations in northern cities swelled as more and more African American families fled the Jim Crow South. In Buffalo, between the years 1950 and 2000, Black people went from constituting less than seven percent of the population to more than 37 percent, with the overwhelming majority concentrated within the city's economically depressed and hyper-segregated east side.

By the 1970s, business interests that still had a stake in central cities like Buffalo, particularly large commercial real estate holders, were desperate to stop the economic bleeding. They decided that their future profitability depended in part on the reorganization of local governments' fiscal priorities - specifically, tax cuts targeting business and increased spending on public subsidies for private enterprise. By loudly asserting that such changes were the only way to boost local investment and create new jobs for residents, as well as by doling out increasingly generous campaign contributions, corporate executives and lobbyists won over municipal officials to this way of thinking.

Ever since, city, county and state governments have rapidly expanded the menu of incentives offered to businesses in exchange for maintaining or increasing investment, including direct grants, property tax breaks and the transfer of public property to private firms at well-below-market costs.

But these corporate subsidies failed to generate significant, widely shared economic growth as promised. They did, however, make it more difficult to fund basic services that poorer urban residents depend on, including schools, road and sidewalk maintenance, and public transportation. As these services declined, the reputation of cities like Buffalo also deteriorated.

Municipal leaders responded by rebranding urban centers as trendy places for professionals to work, live and play. This has taken many forms, including advertising cultural amenities like new sports arenas and touting "knowledge economy" infrastructure such as hospitals and universities (known in developer parlance as "meds & eds"). At the same time, local officials have promoted forms of community based on shared consumption patterns at trendy restaurants, chic cocktail bars and pricey music festivals.

This gentrification has gone hand in hand with the hyper-policing of poor and working-class neighborhoods. Intensified surveillance, combined with a lack of affordable housing, has exacerbated the displacement of low-income families of color from central cities, often leading them to relatively impoverished and highly segregated fringe suburbs also hit hard by deindustrialization.

More affluent residents talk about Buffalo's renaissance, with businesses returning to the city and flocks of well-off consumers and suburbanites enjoying the new downtown breweries, restaurants and parks. T-shirts and tote bags adorned with trademarked slogans like "Buffalove" and "One Buffalo" feed a new sense of civic pride and unity, according to Brown and his supporters.

And yet, Buffalo also has the second-highest child poverty rate among major U.S. cities and the third-highest overall poverty rate according to 2019 Census data. Rents have skyrocketed even as whole neighborhoods of dilapidated and abandoned homes stretch across the city. Basic infrastructure has deteriorated. Food insecurity runs rampant, while low-wage service, retail and care sector jobs dominate the local employment market. Public schools continue to struggle, and the city made national news last year when police assaulted a 75-year-old protester. While leaders in nearby Rochester have aggressively tackled lead poisoning, Buffalo maintains one of the highest rates of lead exposure for children.

These developments help explain why Walton, who ran on a platform promising to address these disparities directly, prevailed over Brown in June's primary. Buoyed by small donors and a bottom-up army of volunteers, many of whom cut their organizing teeth in local housing, racial and economic justice organizing over the past decade, Walton now stands on the verge of becoming the first democratic socialist mayor of a big U.S. city in a half-century. She would also be the first woman - and the first Black woman - to be the mayor of Buffalo.

Regardless of the outcome, the popular energy behind Walton's ascent signals new cracks in the old order.

- - -

Sean Dinces is associate professor of history at Long Beach City College (CA) and author of "Bulls Markets: Chicago's Basketball Business and the New Inequality" (University of Chicago Press, 2018). You can learn more about his work at [www.seandinces.com](http://www.seandinces.com).

Derek Seidman is a researcher, educator and historian living in Buffalo, New York. Disclosure: Seidman has donated to the Walton campaign.

**Copyright:** COPYRIGHT 2021 The Washington Post

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/>

**Source Citation** (MLA 9th Edition)

Dinces, Sean, and Derek Seidman. "The history that explains why a democratic socialist may be Buffalo's next mayor." *Washington Post*, 1 Nov. 2021, p. NA. *Gale Academic OneFile*, [link.gale.com/apps/doc/A680876999/AONE?u=cclc\\_lbcc&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=c94771f6](https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A680876999/AONE?u=cclc_lbcc&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=c94771f6). Accessed 1 Nov. 2021.

**Gale Document Number:** GALE|A680876999