

City union prepares capitulation to Detroit mayor

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Hundreds of Detroit city workers gathered Thursday night at a meeting called by the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Council 25. Last year the city's new mayor, David Bing, unilaterally cancelled bargaining agreements for the more than 3,500 AFSCME members who make up the largest segment of the city's 10,000-person workforce. He demanded sweeping concessions, including forcing workers to take 26 furlough days, the equivalent of more than a 10 percent wage cut.

AFSCME negotiators have already agreed to the furlough days and other major concessions but have balked at the city's demands for additional givebacks. Among the givebacks Bing is seeking are the gutting of longevity pay and overtime protection. The mayor is proposing to pay time-and-a-half only after 40 hours a week rather than eight hours a day. In addition, he wants to roll back health care benefits for current workers, their dependants and retirees, eliminate tuition reimbursements and attack long-standing working conditions.

At the meeting Thursday night, AFSCME Council President Al Garrett and other officials claimed that appeals to a state-appointed fact finder, the media and the Detroit City Council might persuade Bing to back down on some of his demands.

Garrett said part of this process involved eliciting sympathy from city officials by showing the hardships concessions would cause. "We need a couple of tear-jerkers for the fact-finder," Garrett said. A union attorney added, "Everyone is going to hurt from the concessions, but we need particularly bad cases, like the cutoff of sponsored dependants is going to cause someone to die from cancer or the furloughs are going to cause you to lose your home and get thrown out into the cold. You know, beyond what people are already going through. We're trying to pitch this to the public and the city council."

Such remarks only underscore the cynical indifference of the union apparatus to workers, who are already suffering from years of betrayals by AFSCME. Moreover, the futility of groveling before the labor board and the Democratic City Council was exposed when a union attorney acknowledged that, whatever the outcome of the fact-finding process, Bing had the power to impose the city's "last, best and final offer" on city workers who are legally prohibited from striking.

All the talk of appealing to the powers-that-be and consulting

with the membership is only an attempt to cover up the fact that AFSCME is preparing a complete capitulation to the city. The AFSCME officials, who endorsed Bing in his initial run for mayor, accept without question that workers have to pay for the city's \$300 million budget deficit. After decades of deindustrialization, Detroit is being hammered by the economic crisis. The official unemployment rate is 28 percent with estimates that half of all workers lack a full-time job.

Bing, a multimillionaire and former owner of the Bing Group steel and auto parts manufacturer, has been intransigent in his demands to "downsize" the city—that is, privatize and cut services in line with the drastically reduced population of Detroit. The Obama administration has worked closely with local and state Democratic officials, using Detroit as a model for its urban policies. This includes attacking Detroit teachers through demands for more charter schools and the implementation of merit pay.

During the meeting, Garrett and other union officials repeatedly tried to assure members that they were on their side, admonishing, "We don't have to fight each other." They claimed they had said "no to concessions," unlike other city unions.

During the course of the meeting, however, it became clear that, in addition to accepting the 26 furlough days, a three-year wage freeze and Bing's demand to eliminate daily overtime protection, AFSCME officials had accepted sweeping concessions for newly hired workers in particular, using the specious claim that destroying the wages and benefits of future workers would somehow guarantee the jobs and living standards of current workers. Among other things, it would take new-hires many more years to reach the top pay step, which would be lower than top pay for current workers.

This follows the pattern set by the United Auto Workers union, which agreed to reduce the wages of new-hires by half—to \$14 an hour—giving the auto companies the incentive to drive out higher paid, senior workers and replace them with young workers making near poverty wages.

In the course of the meeting, several workers denounced the concessions. A water and sewerage worker said, "In 1992 we took a 10 percent pay cut, the same in 1996. None of these cuts helped the deficit. If they want me to take a pay cut, have them

put on coveralls and dig up streets and drive the buses.”

As union officials read off the concessions being demanded by the city, another worker shouted, “It will be like working at McDonald’s.”

Another worker denounced the suggestion by Garrett that rank-and-file workers were somehow at fault for the present situation because they didn’t come to union meetings. “I try to get them to come to the meetings,” he said. “But they tell me: ‘Why should we? The union doesn’t do anything for us. And the mayor is going to do what he wants to do.’”

In a vote of no confidence in AFSCME, hundreds of workers have not paid their union dues since Bing nullified the contract and ended the practice of deducting dues payments from workers’ paychecks.

In the course of the discussion, former Socialist Equality Party mayoral candidate D’Artagnan Collier, who is a Detroit city worker, spoke from the floor. He explained that he had run against Bing during the primary elections at a time when AFSCME was endorsing the same mayor who is now attacking city workers. He said the AFSCME apparatus was only interested in restoring the dues check-off, not defending workers.

“These people don’t deserve a dime of our money,” Collier said, noting that the union leaders had betrayed workers time and time again. He called for the setting up of a rank-and-file committee, independent of the union, to take the conduct of the negotiations out of the hands of AFSCME and unite all workers in the Metro Detroit area to fight the attack on jobs and living standards.

As AFSCME officials tried to cut Collier off, he denounced the efforts to pit current workers against new-hires, saying, “Every worker deserves the same opportunity to provide a living to their families and their children. You are asking us to cut down our fellow workers, and I call on workers to reject these concessions.”

During and after the meeting, SEP supporters handed out a leaflet urging city workers to begin a campaign for a general strike to include teachers, auto workers and every section of the working class to fight layoffs and wage and benefit cuts.

It explained the role of Mayor Bing and the Democratic Party: “Like his Democratic Party predecessors before him, Bing is a representative of big business. The corporate elite has turned Detroit into an industrial wasteland, with half of its workers lacking a full-time job. The demands for further job cuts, concessions and cuts in social services are aimed at bolstering the profits of the big investors who hold the city’s bonds and loan obligations, and further reduce taxes on Bing’s corporate friends.”

The leaflet also took up the claim that Obama could be pressured to bail out Detroit. “Despite all the talk about the ‘candidate of change’ Obama has turned out to be nothing but a tool of Wall Street, demonstrating once again that the fundamental division in America is class, not race.”

It continued, “The working class must break with the two corporate-backed parties and build a mass political party to advance its own interests and demands. Such a party must fight for the unity of all workers—black, white and immigrant—and irreconcilably oppose capitalism, a system that sacrifices the interests of the vast majority of the population in order to enrich the few at the top.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to city workers attending the meeting. Gerald said, “I really feel that what they did to the teachers was terrible. How can you expect somebody to take \$250 out of every paycheck and still survive? I don’t think they will ever get it back.

“In our negotiations, Bing said he would let the city go into receivership if we do not take the cuts. The city cannot afford to pay us. I say, call his bluff.

“He wants city workers to take a 10 percent cut. Why not have people at the top take a 20 percent cut and let the city workers who are serving the city and the community keep our jobs and our wages? We are not sitting around in \$200,000 houses and \$60,000 cars and doing whatever we want. I do not see them struggling to pay bills.”

Another city worker said, “Bing shouldn’t be taking all that stuff from us. We took a 10 percent cut a few years ago. Why should we take another 10 percent? It won’t provide job security.

“We haven’t had a raise in a long time. Kwame took away a 10 percent cut and gave us 3 percent back,” she said, referring to former Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick. “Now they want to take everything.”

A member of AFSCME Local 207 from the water department with 13 years seniority told the WSWs, “It’s terrible. They want to take away everything. The rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. You have the same thing over and over again. You get sick of it.”

She spoke on the role of AFSCME, “Unfortunately, it seems the mayor does what he wants to do anyway. That is why it is so discouraging coming to union meetings. You see a lot of things that need to be changed, but they aren’t.”



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