

An exchange with a local union president on the Detroit library closures

Shannon Jones
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Shannon Jones answers a letter by American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 1259 President Todd Kelly attacking a recent WSWs article on the Detroit library closures.

Dear Mr. Kelly:

The editorial board of the *World Socialist Web Site* asked that I reply to your recent e-mail in which you complain about our coverage of the proposed closure of up to six branches of the Detroit Public Library.

In particular you object to an October 20 article by WSWs reporter Lawrence Porter titled “Detroit library closings face angry opposition.” In that article the WSWs called attention to the protests organized by Detroit residents over the proposed shutdown of a half dozen branch libraries in the city. It published the comments of library patrons from all across Detroit who packed the recent meeting of the Detroit Library Commission.

In the course of the article Porter pointed to your public support—as president of AFSCME Local 1259, the bargaining agent for library personnel—for the proposed branch closures. He said your remarks at the commission meeting were “despicable.”

You say this characterization is unwarranted and an example of the supposed “yellow-bellied” journalism practiced by the WSWs. You defend your support for the branch closures, claiming it will help library employees who have been forced to take on extra work because of previous library closings. The additional closures, you say, are the “best” and most “realistic” solution to the budget crisis.

Your email only confirms Porter’s assessment of your role. Nowhere do you suggest the answer to understaffing is to demand the rehiring of the scores of library employees who have been laid off. Instead you side entirely with the political establishment and echo

their arguments, saying, “The revenues [of] the employer will not allow additional workers to be hired.”

The problem has never been the lack of financial resources, but the economic and political domination of society by a wealthy elite. Corporate America is awash with cash. After slashing thousands of jobs and slashing the wages of auto workers—with the assistance of the UAW—General Motors is reportedly sitting on a \$39.7 billion cash hoard. As the *Detroit News* recently noted, “The biggest question facing the Detroit-based carmaker is what to do with it all.”

The Metro Detroit area ranks ninth in the United States in the number of millionaires, with 89,100 according to a recent survey. A one percent wealth tax on these individuals would raise nearly \$10 billion, more than three times the entire budget of the city of Detroit.

In the clash between the interests of the working class and those of the wealthy elite, you squarely line up on the side of the corporate and financial establishment. The *World Socialist Web Site*, on the other hand, is proud to defend the interests of the working class.

You say you are “nobody’s tool” but the reality is AFSCME, the Detroit Federation of Teachers and the other city unions have been an essential “tool” of Mayor David Bing, Detroit Public Schools Emergency Financial Manager Roy Roberts and other officials who have decimated city services and public education.

The protests against the library closures, like the wave of anti-Wall Street protests around the country and the world, are symbolic of a growing movement of the working class against social inequality and endless budget cuts.

Everything you say is aimed at driving a wedge between library staff and the rest of the working class

in Detroit and the metropolitan area. All workers have a common interest in the fight against the cuts being carried out by both big business parties at every level of government—from Obama in Washington, to Snyder in Lansing, to Bing in Detroit. Despite your best efforts to sow divisions among workers, many library workers identify with and have expressed their solidarity with the fight against further closures.

Your e-mail expresses the complacency of the upper middle class managers who populate the trade union apparatus. You write, “Neighborhoods have endured school closures, grocery chains leaving for suburbs and numerous businesses taking flight. Why all of a sudden is the library such a deathknell?”

You go on to attack Detroit residents who spoke out against the library closures as “uninformed local activists.” You object in particular to the remarks of one resident who feared that more children might end up in prison if the libraries were closed. You declare, “If closing your library means your son is going to prison he was probably going there anyway.”

This passage sums up the contempt the trade union bureaucracy has for the working class. You reserve your venom not for the corporate executives and bought-and-paid politicians looting society but those fighting to defend the right of their children to have access to culture and knowledge!

Finally, you demand we “learn the facts” and retract our criticisms. The WSWS has no intention of retracting a word we have written on the library closures. We salute the residents of neighborhoods across Detroit who have rallied in defense of the Chase, Lincoln, Monteith, Chandler Park, Richard and Mark Twain Annex branches, and will do everything in our power to publicize their struggle and mobilize the working class behind them.

Your letter only underscores our warning that the unions are completely hostile to the interests of working people. The fight to defend public libraries and all vital social and cultural achievements requires a break with the unions and the building of new organizations of struggle to unite all sections of workers and young people against the profit system.

This is inseparable from a political break with both parties of Wall Street and the building of a mass political party of the working class, based on socialist policies, to break the stranglehold of the financial elite

and reorganize the economy to meet human needs, not private profit.

Shannon Jones

For the unedited text of Kelly’s email click here.



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