

Democrats and Republicans conspire to impose cuts on Detroit workers

Socialist Equality Party
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With the city of Detroit facing a deficit of several hundred million dollars, local Democratic Party politicians, along with their allies in the unions and among middle-class “left” organizations, are engaged in a campaign to impose cuts on the working class.

Democrats and Republicans are currently engaged in a debate over the appointment of an emergency financial manager (EFM) to run the city. Michigan Republican Governor Rick Snyder and Secretary of State Andy Dillon, a Democrat, have initiated a full review of Detroit finances, the second step required under state law for the appointment of an emergency manager.

Michigan’s EFM law enacted earlier this year is thoroughly undemocratic. Emergency managers have the right to sideline elected officials. They can void collective bargaining agreements, impose budget cuts and sell city assets.

However, the campaign by sections of the Democratic Party establishment against a state takeover of Detroit has nothing in common with a defense of the rights of working people. Among those now posturing as opponents of an EFM are multi-millionaire Detroit Mayor David Bing and members of the Detroit City Council. Bing and the city council are themselves calling for massive attacks on the jobs, wages, pensions and health benefits of city workers.

Earlier this year, Bing proposed that Governor Snyder appoint him as an emergency manager to run the city. Bing has called for a 10 percent pay cut for city workers, 1,000 layoffs, and a “voluntary” reduction in benefits on the part of the city’s 22,000 retirees. The city council is calling for even more drastic attacks, including the layoff of 2,300 city workers. Discussions are currently under way for the dismissal of up to 110 firefighters.

More cuts will devastate a city whose social infrastructure is already in a state of near collapse. Bus service is sporadic and scores of schools, fire stations, libraries and recreation centers have been closed. Roads and public lighting are in a shambles.

The Democratic Party in Michigan has collaborated with the Snyder administration in imposing the EFM law. Three of the four currently serving EFMs in Michigan are Democrats. Overseeing the implementation of the EFM law is Dillon, former Democratic Party speaker of the Michigan House of Representatives. Dillon is currently helping draft legislation to allow the state to continue the emergency manager law in the event a petition drive seeking a popular referendum on the question gains the required 162,000 signatures.

As for the unions, the American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) and other city worker unions have begun talks with the city over concessions, underscoring their agreement that workers must pay for the budget crisis.

The current opposition of a section of the political establishment to the appointment of an emergency manager is based on a number of considerations. In the first place, city officials want to protect their own staff, salaries and expense accounts as well as maintain control of the lucrative process of awarding contracts. Those who benefit from the current carve-up of city contracts and payoffs similarly want to protect their turf. There are also concerns that the appointment of an unelected emergency manager could fuel social opposition to the cuts.

There is a large element of charade in the conflict between Detroit city officials and Governor Snyder. There are no doubt behind the scenes discussions taking place between Bing, Snyder, trade union

executives and other major players over the best means of carrying out the cuts. With the aid of the media, all involved are seeking to create an atmosphere of impending disaster and blackmail city workers, presenting as the only alternatives the acceptance of sweeping concessions or allowing Detroit go bankrupt or be taken over by an EFM, with even worse consequences for city employees.

A critical role is played by “left” supporters of the Democratic Party, whose principal aim is to ensure that mass opposition among Detroit-area workers does not find an independent expression, but instead remains bottled up within the confines of the political establishment.

At a news conference last week at Detroit’s Bethany Baptist Church, the Reverend Jesse Jackson, head of the Rainbow/PUSH coalition, as well as Democratic Congressman John Conyers, threatened protests and possible civil disobedience against the EFM law. They compared the dispute between Governor Snyder and Detroit officials over a state takeover to the voting rights battles in the South during the 1960s, calling for a US Justice Department investigation.

Also present were a number of middle-class pseudo-left groups, including the Workers World Party and BAMN (By Any Means Necessary). Both of these organizations promote racial politics as a means of dividing the working class and keeping it subordinated to the Democratic Party.

Workers World in a recent article claims that the EFM is directed against a “majority African-American city” and represents a racist attack on the “right to self-determination of the African-American people in Detroit.” (“Mass Struggle Launched to Defeat State Takeover of Detroit”) The article does not even mention Bing, the African-American mayor of Detroit who is overseeing the dismantling of city services.

There is a long history in Detroit of using the politics of race to promote a section of upper- middle class black elected officials who are just as hostile to the interests of the working class as their white counterparts. The aim is to divide workers along racial lines and pit the workers of the city against those in the suburbs who are facing similar attacks.

The Socialist Equality Party calls for the mass independent political mobilization of the entire working class against the budget cuts and concessions demands.

This is not just a Detroit question. The assault on public workers in the city is being used as a precedent for further attacks on working people across the United States and internationally.

Working people should not sacrifice a penny for a crisis created by Wall Street. To fight the cuts, working people need to construct new organizations of struggle independent of the Democratic Party and the unions. This includes rank-and-file workplace and neighborhood committees to oppose the attacks on jobs wages and social services.

To lead this fight, the working class needs to build a political party of its own, independent of the Democrats and Republicans, the twin parties of Wall Street. Economic life must be reorganized on the basis of a new principle—production to meet human need, not corporate profit. This raises the need for the public ownership of the banks and corporations under the democratic control of the working class.



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