

Detroit mayor outlines bipartisan assault on city workers

Shannon Jones
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In his Wednesday State of the City address, Detroit Democratic Mayor Dave Bing outlined a bipartisan plan for “aggressively downsizing” services to deal with the city’s budget deficit. In the course of his speech he indicated that his administration has been in behind-the-scenes discussions for months with Michigan Republican Governor Rick Snyder over proposals to slash hundreds of millions in spending.

Bing announced that he and Governor Snyder had agreed that the appointment by the state of an Emergency Manager was not necessary in order to eliminate Detroit’s \$197 million budget deficit. Instead Bing said he would work together with state officials to impose brutal concessions on city workers and implement sweeping cuts in services.

The city is reportedly running short of cash and faces a \$50 million shortfall by the end of May. Last month the Bing administration began implementing the layoff of 1,000 city workers, the initial phase of his plan to reduce the deficit. Among the jobs being targeted are those of bus drivers and mechanics in a public transportation system that is already on the brink of collapse. Recent public hearings on the cuts erupted in angry opposition, with riders denouncing plans for the elimination of all 24-hour service, reduction of weekend service and the cutting of bus routes.

Bing’s speech follows Snyder’s appointment late last year of a 10-member review board to examine Detroit’s finances and make a recommendation on the appointment of an Emergency Manager. Under Michigan’s Public Act 4 enacted last year, state appointed Emergency Managers were given expanded powers to remove elected officials, void union contracts, sell city assets and impose cuts.

As a means of diverting opposition to the massive budget cuts, the Bing administration joined with the Detroit City Council, union officials and heads of major churches to mount a public campaign against the

appointment of an Emergency Manager. Attempts were made to present the discussion over the EM law in racial terms, as predominately black Detroit against white politicians in the state capital.

However, the political representatives of big business, Democratic and Republican, black as well as white, are in agreement that huge attacks must be carried out against city workers in Detroit along with cuts in services. In fact, last year Bing hinted his desire that Snyder appoint him as an EM over Detroit. Three of the four currently serving EMs in Michigan are Democrats.

Bing has indicated that while opposing the appointment of an EM he is open to a consent agreement legally mandating specific levels of cuts. A consent agreement would allow Detroit officials to assume many of the powers of an EM. A government policy expert quoted by the *Detroit News* said that if the conditions set in a consent agreement are not met, it could lead to the appointment of an Emergency Manager.

Bing’s speech exposed once again that the conflict between Detroit and Lansing over the appointment of an Emergency Manager was only a tactical skirmish. Both sides agree that massive attacks have to be carried out against the population of Detroit, only differing on the best way to impose them.

In the end Bing and Snyder agreed to work through the trade union bureaucracy. The unions have been complicit in this conspiracy from day one. While publicly attacking the emergency manager law and funding a petition campaign for its repeal, the American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees was engaged in closed-door discussions with the Bing administration over hundreds of millions in givebacks. A tentative deal reached last month between AFSCME locals and the city reportedly includes a 10 percent pay reduction and cuts in health care and pension benefits.

In the course of his speech, Bing boasted of the cuts

already implemented by his administration, noting that he had “reduced the number of employees from more than 13,400 to 10,800, and that number will continue to decrease as we restructure city operations.”

Members of the Detroit City Council criticized Bing’s speech for lacking enough specifics and not going far enough. The council has proposed even more drastic attacks on city workers, including 2,300 layoffs. Among those targeted are some 200 firefighters.

The ongoing cuts will further devastate Detroit, which, with a real unemployment rate near 50 percent, is already the poorest big city in America. Nearly 40 percent of Detroit residents and half of all children live in poverty.

Cuts have impacted all basic services including fire protection, schools, public libraries, bus transportation, even public lighting. The city is littered with abandoned homes and basic infrastructure is in an advanced state of disrepair.

Over the past decades the city has suffered a huge decline in population, falling from over 2 million in the 1950s to just 714,000 today. The recent census showed the city has suffered a 25 percent population loss since 2000.

In a chilling report to the city council earlier this week, Detroit Fire Commissioner Donald Austin said that because of underfunding and understaffing he wants to implement what he called a “less aggressive” approach to fighting fires, especially in vacant buildings.

Austin also called for expanding the number of stations subject to temporary closure, or brownouts. As a consequence of budget cuts, the Detroit Fire Department has adopted a policy of only partially staffing some fire stations and alternately shutting others. The brownouts have led to charges that delayed reaction time has been a factor in recent fire deaths.



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