

A conversation with a Detroit firefighter

Jerry White campaigns for May 12 meeting in Detroit

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As part the campaign to build for a public meeting Saturday on the crisis in Detroit and the 2012 elections, Socialist Equality Party presidential candidate Jerry White visited a fire station Tuesday near downtown Detroit. Firefighters on duty warmly welcomed the socialist candidate. They listened intently as White outlined the socialist answer to the attacks being carried out on jobs and social services in the city.

The Detroit Fire Department is targeted for massive cuts in the budget recently proposed by the administration of Detroit Mayor David Bing. The department is facing a 13 percent reduction in its budget and the possible layoff of 150 personnel.

The cuts are being carried under terms of a “consent agreement” reached by the city and the administration of Republican Governor Rick Snyder last month. The agreement stipulates deep cuts that must be implemented and empowers city officials to impose concessions on city worker unions. The proposed cuts in fire protection follow years of underfunding and understaffing, which have forced the department to institute rolling brownouts of entire fire companies. Brownouts are thought to have contributed to two fire deaths in January of this year.

Jerrold, a third generation firefighter, described the present conditions. “Since 2005 there have been at least six companies every day browned out. Usually it’s eight to ten. And the fire commissioner is now proposing doing six to eight closures and six to eight brownouts on top of that.

“This station used to have two rigs in it. Well they closed one engine and tell people they didn’t close the firehouse.

“Most times they run an engine and a truck together. They have two entirely different jobs. They are

supposed to arrive at a fire at the same time. So when they close the engine, which has all the hose on it, if the truck gets there first and the fire is too advanced and there are people trapped, they can’t do anything until an engine gets there.

“If the arriving engine is two or three minutes away, and its been proven that fire doubles every 30 seconds, by the time that engine gets there the people that could have been saved, now cannot be.”

“They are considering paying surrounding cities to come in and cover the outer parts of Detroit,” Jerrold added. “But the surrounding cities don’t have the budgets and the manpower to cover their own cities. If they come here, then their city is open. If we go there, then our city is open. Nobody has a surplus right now.”

The fire department suffers from lack of manpower even before the new round of cuts, explained Jerrold. “We haven’t hired in any sizable amount since 2006. When I started we had about 1,700 people. Now we have about 1,000. They say 10–20 percent of us are hurt right now, are off duty, because we are fighting so many fires per day. Some stations have 3, 4, 5 fires a day. It is barely mentioned in the press. EMS [Emergency Management Services] is even worse than police and fire. They have 16 rigs for the whole city, 160 square miles.”

Jerrold referred to the petition campaign launched by the unions to overturn Michigan’s Public Act 4, which granted expanded powers to state-appointed Emergency Managers to rip up contracts and impose spending cuts. Governor Snyder has threatened to appoint an Emergency Manager in Detroit if city officials fail to meet state imposed guidelines for budget reductions. The unions turned in far in excess of the 161,000 signatures required to put repeal of the measure on the ballot in November. However, the state board of

canvassers rejected the petitions based on a minor technicality, claiming the type-face was too small.

The campaign to overturn the Public Act 4 gained the support of Democratic politicians in Detroit, who sought to pose as defenders of the rights of working people.

Taking up this question White responded, “No doubt Snyder and his gang are trampling over the democratic rights of millions of people. But to claim that Bing and the City Council are somehow defenders of the working class in Detroit is an utter fraud. They just said, ‘We will do the cutting’. Then they presented it as a racial question, as though these black politicians speak for ordinary people in the city. They speak for the rich, black or white.

“These kind of cuts are happening everywhere, across the country and around the world,” White added. “The banks are coming in and are looting society. They are raising the retirement age; they are wiping out hundreds of thousands of public sector jobs. They control both parties—the Democrats and Republicans.

White explained how the trade unions served as an integral part of the corporate and political establishment, citing the role of the United Auto Workers in enforcing deep cuts. “The city unions are the same. They don’t want to conduct any fight. But workers have to fight. They have no choice.”

Jerrold explained that firefighters had not been given any specifics about further cuts. “Nothing is written in stone yet. The mayor’s got a proposal. The (fire) commissioner has a proposal. And the Governor’s committee has got final say over all of it. We know we are losing a lot of money. We don’t know if it will manifest itself in actual positions lost.

“What they are talking about now, they are going to completely close down two thirds of the departments in the entire city. For us—police, fire and EMS—we can’t strike. That’s the law in Michigan. We have binding arbitration.

“On July 1 we are taking a 10 percent pay cut. Everyone has been talking about it.

Jerrold pointed to the city’s declining population and dwindling financial resources, saying he felt some cuts would be inevitable.

White pointed out that while state and local officials claimed there was no money, corporations were flush

with cash. “There was an article about GM last year paying virtually no taxes. So a company that made \$6 or \$7 billion last year puts a gun to the head of the city and says, ‘If you don’t give us tax abatements we are out of here’. This is a city where trillions of dollars in profits were generated by the working class. And yet its been decimated. To claim there is no money is an outright lie. They found \$23 trillion to bail out Wall Street, hundreds of billions for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, but they say there is no money for basic human needs.

“Obama is saying the government will not be the hirer. In other words, only if a profit can be made will any one be hired. We reject that. We say a public works program should be launched to rebuild the cities, guarantee a decent standard of living, man the fire stations and schools. It is possible. But not when you have a government beholden to the interests of the banks, whether it is Romney, Snyder, Obama or Bing.

“With what they are doing now, people will die”, Jerrold responded. “Our fathers and grandfathers fought for certain basic rights. Now they are saying ‘wait until July 1 and we will get what we want.’”

For more information on the SEP campaign and to get involved, click here. Details of the Saturday meeting in Detroit can be found here.



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