

Detroit water and sewage workers speak out against cuts

A reporting team
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As word spread about the dramatic cuts threatened at the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department, workers reacted angrily, and several spoke to reporters for the *World Socialist Web Site*.

One worker at the wastewater treatment plant said of the department cuts: “They want to have less people doing more work for less money. The result is there will be more pollution and more violations. They don’t know how to run these valves. When it rains, we open up channels for the runoff. Otherwise the untreated water would pollute the Detroit River and Lake St. Clair.”

Another sewerage department worker said, “We haven’t heard anything from the union. I think we should fight this. Back when Kwame Kilpatrick was mayor [2001-2008], they tried to cut jobs. But they were forced to rescind it because this is a 24-hour facility that has to be continuously manned. We have been dealing with the same problems for years: equipment failures, understaffing.

“Some people may think they’re going to get reduced water rates because of the job cuts. But we’re not responsible for the water rate spike, and I can’t believe we’re contributing the deficit in the city.”

Water and sewer rates must be based on cost of service and the department receives no subsidies from property taxes.

A worker in the solid waste department stated, “If you eliminate jobs in my department, the smell from the plant would be so bad we would not be able to stand here and have a conversation. We make sure that the solids are broken down as the waste goes downstream and if this process was automated and something happened, it would be a disaster. Our department, just like most departments, is already short of staff. I don’t see that the union has done anything to

defend our interests and there is certainly a need to. We have already taken cuts and now they are talking about eliminating positions. There is but so much we can take.”

John, who has worked at the plant for 16 years in the incineration department, explained that his job is to burn the sludge and they are already understaffed. About 20-25 percent of the staff works overtime to make up for the shortfall. Speaking about the role of AFSCME Local 207, he commented, “In my view, the unions are disengaged from the lives of the everyday rank-and-file workers. There is a definite disconnect.”

Another worker with 12 years in the plant commented: “We’re already shorthanded. I operate a boiler. I don’t know how they could cut that. We should have 10 people in my department, but we only have 6. There’s a lot of equipment that’s not used like it should.

“What good is the union when the consent agreement is allowing supervisors to do whatever they want? We’re not hearing anything. Whatever they’re doing it’s behind closed doors.”

Tony spoke on the concessions they have already given up: “They are cutting how much vacation time we can accumulate...how much sick time. What they’re asking is ridiculous. Our copay for medical is going up. They are asking us to do more work. All of us are working overtime—16-hour shifts, three to four times a week.”

Kevin Bryan participated in a picket outside the City-County Building in downtown Detroit against city cutbacks on August 2, before the August 8 announcement for cuts at DWSD. He said: “We represent a large proportion of city workers because we are at the water department. We have more manpower than any other part of the city. You see the streets

around here, black, no lights due to cuts. I am here to voice my concern as a person, but there is power in numbers.”



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