

Detroit water workers go on strike

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Workers at the Detroit Department of Water and Sewerage walked off the job Sunday morning. The strikers, 950 members of American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 207, are resisting massive attacks, including a proposal to eliminate 81 percent of jobs over the next five years, a 10 percent pay cut and cuts to pensions and health benefits.

Based on a proposal by EMA Inc., a private consulting firm, the city has announced plans to reduce total employment at the water department from 1,978 employees to 374 over the next five years. In addition to other cuts, the plan calls for outsourcing 361 positions to low-cost contract workers in so-called noncore positions such as billing and maintenance. The plan also calls for reducing job classifications from 257 to 31.

The attack on water workers is part of a broad offensive against all city workers in Detroit. Using emergency powers granted under terms of a recently signed consent agreement with the Republican-controlled state government, the administration of Detroit Democratic Mayor David Bing has imposed across-the-board 10 percent cuts in health benefits and pensions and hundreds of layoffs.

The strike by Detroit water workers gives voice to the growing anger and spirit of resistance in the working class to the offensive by big business against jobs, wages, working conditions and social services. In a strike authorization vote last week, the Detroit water workers gave overwhelming support to a walkout. The strike was initially set for Monday morning, but workers insisted on walking out Sunday morning instead, 24 hours ahead of the scheduled start.

The walkout takes place in defiance of Michigan law, which bans public employee strikes. The walkout places workers in a direct confrontation with the Bing administration in Detroit, the administration of Michigan Republican Governor Rick Snyder, and the Obama administration. The Democrats no less than the Republicans are carrying out a program of savage austerity, eliminating the jobs of public workers while decimating health benefits, wages and pensions.

In contrast to the militant determination of water workers, the AFSCME Local 207 leadership has advanced no perspective for mobilizing the power of the working class in Detroit against the Bing administration. While Local 207 says it expects an

attempt by the Bing administration to obtain a court injunction against the strike, it has not said whether it plans to defy such an injunction.

Local 207, with less than 10 percent of the city workforce, is the only unit that has struck. Other city worker unions, including other bargaining units in the water department itself, such as supervisory, labor and office workers, are continuing to work while Local 207 members face the threat of injunction and fines alone.

Local 207 President John Riehl told the WSWs that obtaining an injunction could take days. He would not say what the union would do if faced with a court order. Riehl said he hoped the walkout would draw national attention like the Chicago teachers strike and force Mayor Bing to settle before it became an embarrassment to Obama's reelection campaign.

The lack of serious plans for expanding the strike indicates that for Riehl and AFSCME, the strike is a maneuver, aimed at letting workers vent some of their anger while union officials prepare to cut a deal with the Bing administration to implement cuts.

According to Riehl, the main demand of the union is for the removal of Republican Federal Judge Sean Cox from the supervision of the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department. Cox was appointed by the US Environmental Protection Agency to supervise the department following a lawsuit charging the city with violating the federal Clean Water Act for discharging too much pollution into the Detroit River.

The focus on Cox, who is white, is part of an attempt by the leadership of Local 207 to divert attention from the basic political and class issues raised by the strike by focusing on the question of race. Instead of seeking to mobilize all workers in a common fight against the attacks on their jobs and living standards, Local 207 officials—aided by the pseudo-left group “By Any Means Necessary” (BAMN)—are presenting the primary issue as that of local control of the water department, pitting predominantly black Detroit against “white outsiders” from the suburbs.

This reactionary position divides the working class and lends credence to the black Democratic politicians like Mayor Bing and President Obama, who defend the interests of the corporate and financial elite just as viciously as their white big business counterparts.

The Socialist Equality Party calls for the defiance of all court injunctions against the strike. In order for the struggle to be successful, it must be broadened to encompass all sections of public-sector workers, teachers, auto workers and students both in Detroit and the suburbs. It must become the basis of a broad industrial and political counteroffensive by the working class, black, white, immigrant and native born, to defend the social rights of the working class.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to Detroit water workers Sunday on the picket line at the Detroit wastewater treatment plant on Jefferson Avenue. Charles Remesz said, "I have been here 17 years and I only make \$15.10 an hour. They want to cut 10 percent off base wages plus 20 percent on health care.

"Today they got together all of crew 5 and they voted to go out. They wanted to go out today instead of waiting until Monday because we expect they will get an injunction to order us back to work. We want to make sure we make an impact."

Nicole Seicer said, "They want to contract out 100 percent.

"The main issue for me is health care. I can't afford to have my health care go up and my wages to go down. We don't even have cost of living any more. They are making it too expensive to go to the hospital."

She added, "It is an attack on everybody, black, white and brown. We have a multiplicity of races out here. Everyone is on the chopping block."

Another worker said, "Most people start at \$13.10 per hour. We used to get a \$0.10 raise every six months, but they've stopped that and frozen promotions too.

"We have a lot of broken things. The equipment only lasts four to seven years because of the environment inside. There is poor ventilation, ash and sludge all builds up everywhere. We have respirators, but it's not enough. They even said they removed the asbestos inside when they hired a company to get rid of it a few years back, but we still find it. On top of that, we have rats the size of small monkeys.

"Even though everything is breaking and we have minimum equipment, we keep it running with minimum violations. If this plant doesn't run properly, if there aren't enough qualified people here, the plant will start affecting the environment. Waste will build up. As soon as we get wet weather, the supervisors inside there now won't be able to keep the plant running. And this is the first level for sewage treatment for four million people."

L. Stewart told the WSWS, "I have cancelled doctor visits because of all the co-pays we have. We work hard in there with all types of chemicals. We don't know what is getting into our lungs.

"Look at what (Mayor) Bing did to his business and his people. Do you think he is going to do any different for the city of Detroit? You are frightened for your job because they fire

you for every little thing you do."

Al Franklin said, "We're striking because we're being laid off for contractors. They want to privatize sewage. Every city worker is as mad as we are. The city tries to tell us lies ten times and they think we'll believe it. It's legalized slavery.

"Everything in Detroit is up for sale. They'll make up a story about why it needs to be privatized and then sell it. In the meantime, we have to live check to check and beg for overtime."

Aurelia Morgan said the strike had to be expanded. "Everybody needs to act collectively to shut down the city. If you eliminate our jobs you are going to put everyone below the poverty line.

"I would prefer to fight for my job rather than hand over my job. Why would you take our skilled people and replace them with contractors? We have some of the best water in the nation. What kind of water will we have when we are not here?

"It is an insult to say it is a racial issue. It is a business issue."

Troy Sutton said, "They refuse to do an environmental study of the plant when there are all kinds of chemicals that affect workers. Retirees die two or three years after leaving this place.

"You can see the writing on the wall. They are bringing in fiber optics, tearing up roads in order to contract everything out."

Another worker, Malcolm Garrett, said, "They were giving tetanus shots. Now they don't do that anymore. As far as they are concerned, you are just here. They don't care about workers in the plant. They don't fix many things. We have a situation where elevators don't work and we have to walk up six flights of stairs. The air conditioning doesn't work and we have people being written up if they do anything to try to cool off."



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