

Union capitulation deals blow to Detroit sewerage workers

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On Thursday evening, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 207 formally called off the five-day strike of sewerage workers at the Detroit Wastewater Treatment Plant, having engineered a collapse of the walkout without any gains for the workers.

The union leaders cynically described as a “victory” their acceptance of the victimization of 34 rank-and-file workers who last Sunday, with the union’s authorization, initiated the walkout. These workers have been suspended without pay for five days, costing each of them hundreds of dollars, and have been put on probation for 24 months. During this period, a single disciplinary action by management will result in their being fired, setting up militant workers for dismissal on virtually any pretext.

The supposed “victory” hailed by the union officials has nothing to do with halting the plans of the water department and the city administration of Democratic Mayor David Bing to eliminate 81 percent of the water and sewerage workers, impose a 10 percent pay cut, and sell off the operations to private investors. The Local 207 leadership never challenged these policies. They deliberately isolated the wastewater plant strikers, failing even to call the majority of Local 207 workers in the water and sewerage department out on strike.

The supposed “victory,” according to a statement posted on the AFSCME Local 207 web site, consisted mainly of an agreement signed by management to “stop stonewalling and refusing to discuss union rights and job security and any of the other subjects covered by Judge Cox’s November order in bargaining.” In other words, management conceded nothing other than an empty promise to bargain with the union.

The reference to “union rights” and the court order issued last November by Federal Judge Sean Cox points to the real concerns of the Local 207 officials, which have nothing to do with the concerns of rank-and-file workers. In that ruling, the judge—the same one who issued a strikebreaking court order on Monday—separated out Local 207 contract negotiations from those of the rest of the city unions, barred any restrictions on the right of the water and sewerage department to outsource jobs, and required full-time Local 207 officials to go back to

work in return for their pay.

Cox has oversight over the city water and sewerage department under a federal court order that has been in effect since 1978. He has used his powers to enforce the draconian attacks on water department workers ordered by Bing and Michigan Governor Rick Snyder, a Republican. These are part of an assault on all city workers and city services to be imposed under an emergency “consent decree” agreed to by the city and the state. The decree allows city officials to rip up union contracts and impose mass layoffs and wage and benefit cuts.

The local union, headed by President John Riehl and Secretary-Treasurer Michael Mulholland, saw the strike from the outset as a maneuver, in which the workers would be used to pressure the judge and city and state officials for terms more favorable to maintaining the perks, salaries and institutional interests of the union apparatus. Issues of concern to the union include reinstating the ability of full-time officials to get paid without working at water department sites, and minimizing the impact of outsourcing and privatization on the income flow to the union executives from members’ dues payments.

In the end, the union is prepared to help impose wage and benefit cuts and speedup on the workers in order to secure a better deal for itself.

It is assisted by pseudo-left groups in Detroit, most directly the pro-Democratic Party organization called By Any Means Necessary (BAMN), whose specialty is promoting racial politics to divide the working class. By presenting the sewerage workers’ struggle as that of “black Detroit” against the “white suburbs,” BAMN worked to keep the workers tied to a section of the black Democratic Party establishment in Detroit, as well as the Obama election campaign nationally.

Local 207 lawyer Shanta Driver, a long-time leader of BAMN who has been integrated into the Democratic Party machine in Detroit, expressed the narrow and selfish interests of the union, declaring, “For thirty-five years, our union and the workers of Detroit have been excluded from participation in the lawsuit that will determine the future of Detroit’s water supply.”

The 34 victimized workers are all part of Crew 5, the wastewaters plant’s weekend skeleton team. On Sunday, these workers walked out on strike at the instigation of local union

officials, after being informed that the city intended to issue an injunction against an expected strike on Monday.

Some of the victimized workers told the *World Socialist Web Site* that Driver and Local 207 President Riehl assured them at the time that they could not be fired for walking out and were protected under the terms of the contract. Any such assurance would be a lie, since the workers have been without a contract for months and there are state laws banning public worker strikes.

On Monday, the rest of the 450 maintenance, operations and custodial workers at the wastewater plant walked out. But this was only half of the membership of Local 207, which covers other water treatment facilities throughout the city. That morning, Judge Cox issued a temporary restraining order declaring the strike illegal.

On Tuesday, workers shouted down AFSCME Council 25 President Al Garrett, who showed up on the picket line with Cox's restraining order and told workers they would be fired if they continued to strike. Garrett made clear that the union would not defend the striking workers.

The United Auto Workers, which bargains for professional workers at the wastewater plant, scabbed on the striking AFSCME workers, ordering UAW members to cross the picket line.

On Wednesday, Riehl arrived at the picket line with letters from the water department suspending the members of Crew 5 and threatening them with termination. He and Driver complacently dismissed the danger of workers being victimized and losing their jobs. Several of the suspended workers angrily confronted Riehl, accusing him of misleading them and using them as pawns.

Left isolated by the union leadership and facing termination, most of the workers at the wastewater plant returned to work on Wednesday.

The Crew 5 workers who launched the strike and all those who joined them took a courageous stand not only in their own behalf, but in behalf of all workers in Detroit. However, Local 207 never intended to wage a serious fight against the city administration. It opposed any effort to broaden the struggle and mobilize other sections of city workers, as well as auto workers, young people, students and the unemployed. It never broke ranks with AFSCME Council 25, the UAW and the rest of the union apparatus in Detroit, which was openly hostile to the strike.

One of the victimized workers told the WSWS on Thursday, "From now on, I won't be so quick to trust my union. I'm very skeptical of them at this point. We didn't have as many union members on strike as we should have. I would have handled that differently. I would have really wanted to have everybody out there."

The betrayal carried out by the union leadership is a serious blow to the water and sewerage workers and all sections of the working class in Detroit and Michigan. The city and state will

cite the fate of the wastewater plant strikers in an effort to intimidate other sections of workers from resisting their attacks. In this, they will be joined by the unions themselves.

It is necessary for all workers to draw the lessons of this debacle. Underlying the union's backstabbing and cowardice is a definite political perspective, centered on support for the Democratic Party and defense of the existing capitalist framework.

The unions, from AFSCME Local 207 and its fake-left leadership to AFSCME Council 25, the UAW, the Detroit Federation of Teachers and the AFL-CIO, promote the ruling class fiction that "there is no money" for jobs, wages, schools, pensions and social services. Meanwhile, countless billions in public funds are handed over to the banks and corporations, and the corporate CEOs and financial speculators are allowed to steal and plunder with impunity.

The Socialist Equality Party warned the sewerage workers from the beginning of the strike of the treachery of the union officials. The SEP fought for the struggle to be broadened to encompass the widest possible sections of working people, based on a complete rejection of wage cuts, concessions, layoffs and privatization.

The SEP urged the workers to form a rank-and-file committee to take the conduct of the strike out of the hands of Riehl and company, and for workers throughout Metro Detroit to establish support committees to defend the strikers and develop a mass movement of the working class against both big-business parties.

We explained that such a fight-back could succeed only if it was based on a socialist perspective, including the nationalization of the banks and corporations under the democratic control of the working class and the expropriation of the ill-gotten wealth of the financial oligarchs.

The answer to the betrayal of the sewerage workers' strike is to take up the fight to build a new leadership in the working class based on these socialist and revolutionary policies. That means making the decision to join and build the Socialist Equality Party.



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