

Hearings for victimized Detroit sewerage strikers

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Thirty-four sewerage workers who were victimized in the aftermath of a five-day strike at the Detroit Wastewater Treatment Plant had individual hearings before department officials on Friday, where they were made to sign agreements to return to work after receiving five-day suspensions and extended probation periods.

The previous day, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 207 officially ended the strike by 450 operations, maintenance and custodial personnel at the plant, having isolated the strike and led it into a blind alley. The union leadership cynically declared the strike a “victory,” despite the fact that the strikers were forced back to work on the city’s terms, having gained nothing from their job action.

The union essentially abandoned all of the workers who had initiated the walkout last Sunday, with the union’s authorization, and who now face punitive action and the looming threat of termination over the course of two-to-three-year probation periods.

The AFSCME leadership never challenged the plans of Mayor David Bing, a Democrat, to eliminate 81 percent of the jobs of Local 207 members in the water and sewerage department, impose a 10 percent pay cut, and sell off the department’s operations to private investors. Local 207 isolated the strike, despite broad support in the metro Detroit working class, refusing to broaden the struggle to other city workers who face similar attacks.

AFSCME Council 25 and the United Auto Workers (UAW) were openly hostile to the strike. Council 25 responded to a federal court order declaring the strike illegal by telling the workers to end the walkout and making clear it would not defend them if they were arrested or fired. The UAW, which bargains for

professional workers at the wastewater plant, scabbed on the AFSCME strikers, ordering its members to cross the strikers’ picket lines and report to work.

Under the terms of the agreement forced on the victimized strikers, once they are back on the job they will be placed in the “last chance” category, meaning they can be fired as a result of a single disciplinary infraction.

“That could mean that if you’re late once, or punch out early, or even try to discuss a direct order with management, you could be fired immediately,” said one of the victimized workers.

“Last chance is usually reserved for people who have engaged in repeated violations,” said another worker. “Anything that happens from this point on to the end of the 24-month probation period, you’re immediately fired. There is no discussion and no grievances can be filed,” he added.

At least four workers who did not punch out before walking out on strike last Sunday will be in the “last-chance” category for three years instead of two, the worker said.

The workers were called individually to meet with Susan McCormick, the director of the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department, together with two officials from AFSCME. “They wanted reassurance that we would never do this again,” said the worker.

Beyond the 34 workers who received suspensions, all workers who participated in the strike will receive an “oral reprimand.” Four more such warnings will lead to their termination.

Under the terms of the now-expired union contract, such disciplinary action stays on workers’ records for 14 months. But according to new contract terms being pushed by the city, disciplinary action will stay on workers’ records for up to three years.

Supervisors who called in sick in support of the strike are also facing retaliation. One supervisor told the *World Socialist Web Site* that he was told to check with the water department's human resources department to see if he was cleared to return to work in the aftermath of the strike.

Prior to the scheduled meetings with the water department, Local 207 leaders sought to get the workers to downplay the role of local officials in the strike. A worker told the WSWS that Sue Ryan, a shop steward, met them in front of the water board building prior to the hearings.

"She tried to talk to me, but I didn't want to speak to her. She was outside coaching people on what to say with regard to what the local told them before the strike," said the victimized worker.

"We were misled," he added. "The local leadership and [Local 207 attorney] Shanta Driver said we were covered under the terms of our old contract if we went on strike."

"You can't even call it a wildcat strike. It was just a fiasco," he added.

Workers disagreed with the union's attempt to present the strike as a victory. "How can they call this a victory?" said one worker. "The city hasn't agreed to rescind the proposal to lay off 81 percent of the workers in our local."

"The local officials are declaring this a victory even though nobody has even seen a contract," he added.

"I will tell you one thing for certain. The strike has made me more aware of what is taking place in this city and all over. I will be following things a lot more closely now," he said.

Over the course of the week's events, other workers drew similar conclusions.

"It is the same thing year after year. We need a new system, a paradigm shift. Bing, Snyder and Obama—they could care less. I didn't realize it until the strike," said another worker.

Asked about Obama's attacks on auto workers in the forced bankruptcy of General Motors and Chrysler, she said, "We were all very disappointed with Obama. My dad worked at Ford for over 30 years. None of us were happy with what happened.

"We have worked our whole lives. But Obama did not work out. This will be a tough election for me. I have voted Democrat in every election since I was old

enough to vote. I won't vote for them again this time."



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