

Striking Detroit water workers defy federal judge, union officials

Jerry White
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Workers at the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD) waste treatment plant are continuing their strike despite a temporary restraining order issued by a federal judge Monday. The walkout, which began on Sunday, involves 950 workers at the facility on the southwest side of Detroit.

In addition to defying the federal judge, workers reportedly shouted down representatives from American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Council 25, including President Al Garrett, who ordered them to return to work and told them they would be fired if they continued the walkout.

The struggle pits city workers against the entire political establishment, from the Democratic administration of Detroit Mayor David Bing, to Republican Governor Rick Snyder, to the Obama White House.

The DWSD workers are fighting Bing's demands for the elimination of 82 percent of the department's workforce—from a total of 1,978 employees to 374—over the next five years. Another 361 workers would be outsourced to private contractors as part of a plan to slash an estimated \$139 million in annual labor costs.

The mayor is also seeking an overhaul of job titles, wages, health care and pension benefits. These measures are aimed at pushing out higher-paid senior workers and creating a low-wage workforce. In this way, Bing hopes to make the city-owned department more attractive to big investors in preparation for its wholesale privatization.

Judge Sean Cox, a Republican appointed to the federal bench by former President George W. Bush, who ordered workers back to work, is a committed opponent of the working class. He has presided as virtual dictator after being appointed personnel director over the water department as part of a federal oversight

agreement ostensibly reached to resolve a pollution lawsuit. In that capacity, Cox ordered the ripping up of job protections, seniority rights and work rules, and a vast expansion of outsourcing and subcontracting.

On Monday, Cox issued the three-page order saying unions, their members and any others acting in concert with them should not engage in the strike, interfere with employees entering the facilities, trespass, or commit “any acts of vandalism or destruction of property.”

City officials asked for the order. They claimed that if critical functions performed by union workers, including maintaining equipment at the Wastewater Treatment Plant, were not carried out, pollution would make the Detroit River “unsafe for human contact” and could “cause damage to aquatic species.”

In addition, DWSD Director Sue McCormick has threatened to fire striking workers, calling the walkout “illegal.”

In the face of the legal threats, the leadership of AFSCME Local 207, the bargaining agent for the striking workers, has offered no strategy to extend the strike. Instead, it has sought to sow illusions in the Democratic Party and, in particular, the corrupt black political establishment that has long run Detroit. (See the SEP statement, “Oppose the strikebreaking injunction! Defend the Detroit water and sewerage workers!”)

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to striking workers on the picket lines Monday. Lynn said, “I am out here because they want to take over and privatize the water department. They have people who have been here 20–30 years, and they want to get rid of them.

“They want to cut wages and pensions, and they have \$48 million to give to a company that doesn't know how to run a water company.”

Lynn agreed that the strike needed to be expanded, “I think everyone should show solidarity because everyone’s job is on the line. This fight is bigger than an individual. It is about the future, not just of our jobs, but of our children’s jobs, because where are they going to go?”

Burt, with 14 years at the Wastewater Treatment Plant, said, “We definitely need to extend the reach” of the strike.

“It is the first strike I have seen since I have been here. We wanted to have an element of surprise [by walking out Sunday]. We didn’t want to give them time to prepare.

“It’s kind of scary what the future holds. But you have to put a stop to it sometime. You have got to hit back. They don’t want to bargain. They say they can get anyone to replace you.”

Burt added, “They are not running any incineration. Apparently they stopped four trucks coming in last night.” Describing the work in the plant, he said, “It takes a special person to do this job. There is a lot of turnover. Some people can do it, others can’t.

“It is a dirty job. I have seen indescribable things in there. When you flush your toilet, that is where it goes. When things don’t work right we get some horrible spills. I have walked out there and been covered in shit on several occasions.

“It doesn’t pay that much. We haven’t had a raise in five years. We don’t want that much. We just want a fair wage in order to pay our bills. No one is getting rich on this job.

“I am selling my life away for \$18 an hour. I am working with ash and lime. I am burning my lungs out. I don’t know what the death rate is, but I imagine it shortens my life. I don’t know if I will make it to retirement.

“We are tied to the job. I have kids. If they don’t offer any benefits, why work here? When you are a kid, you don’t say, I want to be a sewerage plant operator when I grow up. Sometimes you have to take what you can get. It is hard out here. Even if you have a degree it is hard to get a job. I graduated from Wayne State University in 1996 but I could not find a job in my field.”

Another worker with 12 years of service said, “This struggle is about politics, not race. They want to hire

people in here at \$13.10 an hour just like in the auto plants. They force these new guys to go down in the holes with no protection for gas fumes. They want to privatize this place and make it a big source of profit for big investors.”

Another worker said, “We’ve shoveled enough crap to know that we are getting screwed. It’s like Romney said, no one is entitled to having food or a roof over our heads. And Obama hasn’t come back and answered that. There are going to be two classes—one very rich and one very poor.”

Don, a worker with two years at the plant, said, “This is just the tip of the iceberg. Those who control water control life. The billionaires want to control water too.

“The Detroit facility is one of the largest water treatment plants in the world. But they’ve held this place together with Band-Aids and duct tape. It’s been set up to fail so they can sell it off to private hands.

“Mayor Bing didn’t just meet Governor Snyder now. Bing was put into office to sell Detroit off. This is not a race issue. It’s a finance issue. Everybody has to have the right to a decent income. It doesn’t matter if you are white or black. Being ‘gainfully employed’ just doesn’t exist anymore. People don’t want to live from check to check. They want you to work 10 percent harder, but I say pay us 10 percent more instead of reducing our pay.

“They’re doing this everywhere, in the auto plants, at AT&T and the Department of Transportation. They want to get rid of your pensions and replace it with an unstable 401k. After retirement you’re going to have to get a job as a greeter at Wal-mart. Kids are finishing college and moving in with their parents instead of going out on their own. The wages are so low here some workers with bigger families qualify for food stamps.”



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