City threatens to fire striking Detroit sewerage workers

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The Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD) has sent notices to 34 workers informing them that they have been suspended without pay and face termination for walking off the job Sunday morning. The job action by the skeleton crew initiated a walkout by hundreds of workers at the city's wastewater treatment plant, which is now in its fourth day.

City officials are seeking to intimidate striking workers who have taken a courageous stand against Mayor David Bing's efforts to wipe out 82 percent of the jobs at the water department and destroy workplace protections, wages and benefits. The sweeping concession demands—which will cut an estimated $139 million in annual labor costs—are aimed at paving the way for the privatization the water department.

Strikers have defied the threatened firings, a back-to-work order by a federal judge and strikebreaking efforts by their parent union, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Council 25.

On Tuesday, rank-and-file workers shouted down AFSCME President Al Garrett who showed up at the picket line with the court injunction, telling the workers that they would be fired if they continued to strike and the union would do nothing to defend them. Garrett was denounced as a "back-stabber" and "sellout."

At the same time, the Bing administration is stepping up repression against the strikers. Detroit police have deployed dozens of police cars and a prisoner bus near the plant in preparation for mass arrests.

On Tuesday, vehicles driven by security guards and strikebreakers struck two workers on the picket line. This included one veteran worker, Anthony Steele, who was dragged by a security car. He was hospitalized because of injuries.

DWSD Director Sue McCormick sent a certified letter to the 34 workers informing them they had until Friday to request a hearing or they would be fired by October 10, according to a statement from the department. The workers were accused of "threatening public safety."

One of the victimized workers, with 12 years at the plant, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "They are trying to make an example out of us. Hundreds of people are striking but we've been singled out.

"Supervisors are on the roof spying on us and taking pictures to see who is on the picket line and who is crossing it. They've scared some of the new guys into reporting for work, but we have to take a stand. Nobody can take a 20 percent pay cut that has to raise a family. The city got an injunction because they don't want to negotiate or give us a new contract. They've already sent in police reinforcements."

Referring to the efforts by AFSCME Council 25 to force the strikers back to work, the worker said, "Al Garrett has sold us out. He is in cahoots with the city. We should have been on strike a long time ago, but Garrett kept shooting us down and kept us from striking. Then when we voted for a strike he said he had our back. That was a lie."

Kevin, a recently hired worker, said, "We're very angry about working conditions, and that's why we went out. Some of the people come in making $13.50 an hour to do very dangerous work. The strike very much had the character of a wildcat action. Personally, I feel emotionally strained from every thing that is happening. I have been on the picket line for the past 20 hours explaining to some of my brothers who crossed the picket line that they have to fight. It is very much like the Civil War—brother against brother. Personally, I do not trust some of the union officials and am disgusted by what AFSCME 25 is doing."

The strike has already revealed the bipartisan line-up against the working class. Behind the Democratic administration of Mayor David Bing stand Michigan's Republican Governor Rick Snyder and the Obama administration. Detroit has been a focal point of Obama's anti-working class policies, from the deep wage cuts imposed on GM and Chrysler workers in the auto bailout in

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2009, to the shutdown of scores of public schools and their transformation into for-profit charters, to the wiping out thousands of public-sector jobs.

The city's water department, which provides service to four million metro Detroit residents, is considered highly profitable. The Bing administration has been put in power to sell off publicly owned assets to big investors, including the Carlyle Group, the politically connected private equity firm that is eyeing the water department.

US District Judge Sean Cox—who oversees the DWSD under a federal oversight agreement—has already ruled that the city is free to abrogate labor agreements and impose sweeping concessions on workers. Within hours of the walkout, Cox issued an injunction threatening workers with massive fines and arrest if they did not return to work. Mayor Bing immediately praised the judge—a Republican appointed by George W. Bush to the federal bench.

Throughout the city there is widespread support for the strike. Teachers, firefighters, sanitation and transit workers all face the same attacks. At a nearby station, firefighters said they fully supported the strikers. Bing has shut down many fire stations and attacked firefighters' wages and benefits, making their jobs even more perilous.

AFSCME Local 207, which is led by an ostensibly "left" faction headed by President John Riehl, has no strategy to mobilize the working class against the Bing administration. Riehl has not even called out all of the water department members of his own local, let alone made an appeal for action by all city workers.

Instead, Local 207 has promoted claims that workers can defend themselves through the courts and by pressuring the Democratic Party. In a thoroughly complacent statement, Local 207 claimed that "Democrats cannot afford to be seen busting a strike" because they need "labor's support to turn out the vote" in the 2012 elections.

At the same time, Local 207 and its supporters in the pseudo-left group By Any Means Necessary (BAMN) have promoted racial politics in order to curry favor with the black political establishment, which has for decades run the city on behalf of the auto companies and the banks. By presenting the issue as defending the assets of "black Detroit" against suburban "outsiders," Local 207 is promoting the same tactics long used by big business and its political servants to divide and weaken the working class.

The strategy of Local 207 has left striking workers vulnerable to victimization. In a further note of callousness, Local 207 attorney Shanta Driver claimed suspended workers could get their jobs back through appeals to management and the courts. In the meantime, she told the victimized workers to file for unemployment.

The chief concern of AFSCME Local 207 officials is to defend their own institutional interests. As part of his oversight of the water department, Judge Cox has sent full-time union officials such as Riehl back into the wastewater treatment plant and sought to eliminate the automatic deduction of union dues from workers' paychecks.

Far from waging the type of struggle necessary to beat back the attacks on public workers, Local 207 officials are seeking merely to reverse the measures affecting the union apparatus and using workers to gain the ear of federal and city authorities.

In a leaflet, Local 207 wrote: "After only two days of our strike, Judge Cox, Mayor Bing, the Board, and Council 25 are floating the idea of meeting with our union officials tomorrow (Tuesday) to start to figure out how to resolve our strike. If large numbers of our own members cross the picket lines tomorrow, then that meeting will never occur.

"But if we stay strong and stay out, then for the first time in nearly four decades, the federal court which has overseen the operations of the sewage plant since the 1970s will have to hear what the workers have to say and will have to meet with our union. In all the nearly 40 years that our plant has been controlled by the federal courts, those courts have never had to hear what the workers have to say and have never had to negotiate with our union."

Workers have not walked out and faced down threats of firings, arrest and police violence so that union officials can obtain a "seat at the table" while workers' jobs and living standards are being ripped up. They have taken this stand for the whole working class, and that is why they have provoked the coordinated response of the state and the union bureaucracy.

To take forward this struggle, rank-and-file workers have to take the conduct of the strike out of the hands of the Local 207 leadership, reject the orientation to the Democratic Party, and appeal directly to workers throughout Detroit and the metropolitan area to develop an industrial and political counter-offensive to defend jobs and vital social services.

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