

AFSCME regional, local leaders betray Detroit water workers strike

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4 October 2012

The leadership of American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Local 207 has brought the strike of hundreds of Detroit Water and Sewerage Workers to an ignominious dead end. The betrayal has left dozens of workers facing the threat of termination, and has strengthened the hand of the administration of Mayor David Bing as it prepares a new wave of attacks on the jobs, wages and pensions of thousands of city workers.

The majority of striking workers returned to work Wednesday after the three-day walkout involving some 450 operation, maintenance and custodial workers at the Detroit Wastewater Treatment Plant. For days, the workers defied a back-to-work order by a federal judge, the threat of mass arrests and police violence and the open strikebreaking by AFSCME Council 25 and the United Auto Workers.

On Tuesday, workers shouted down AFSCME Council 25 President Al Garrett, who showed up on the picket line with the judge's injunction 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 union executive, who made \$178,000 last year, has long been a stooge of Democratic administrations in Detroit, blocking any struggle against mass layoffs and attacks on city workers' living standards.

The workers took a courageous stand against the Bing administration's plans to eliminate 82 percent of the jobs at the water department and privatize operations. But after three days, workers returned to work in a vote of no confidence in the Local 207 leadership, which left the struggle isolated to the treatment plant and did not even call out all 950 members of the local throughout the water department.

City officials have issued letters of termination to 34 workers who walked out on Sunday morning, accusing them of "gross misconduct, which endangered public health and safety by abandoning your job..." The workers—members of Crew 5 and Crew 3—have been suspended without pay pending termination effective October 10.

From the beginning, Local 207 President John Riehl and

union attorney Shanta Driver, a leader of the pseudo-left group By Any Means Necessary, downplayed the threat of victimization and state repression. Instead, they claimed workers could rely on the courts to protect them. They even argued that Mayor Bing would never crack down on strikers because the Democrats would not risk undermining "labor support" in an election year.

The Local 207 leadership had no intention of waging a serious struggle against Bing and the financial and corporate interests he defends. Instead, facing a determined rank-and-file, which was already angered at the repeated betrayals of AFSCME, the local officials called the strike as a stunt, aimed at letting off steam and trying to maintain credibility among workers.

The major aim of the local leaders was to use workers to pressure the federal courts, which have legal oversight over labor relations, to "listen to the union" and protect the institutional interests of the union executives. In 2011, Federal Judge Sean Cox stripped away many of their perks, including excused hours for "union work" for local officials. This forced Riehl and others to have to return to work at the treatment plant.

As workers on the picket line angrily confronted Riehl and other local officials over their disastrous strategy, Driver told workers, "For 40 years, a judge has been dictating. After two days on strike, the judge has invited us in to talk. There's a lot of overreacting here. If they didn't think they had a problem, they wouldn't invite us in."

Another victimized worker who attacked the local leadership for misleading him was told a by shop steward, "Stop complaining, you're a grown man."

Driver in particular has deep connections to the Democratic Party establishment in Detroit. Her law firm, Scheff, Washington & Driver, have made a lucrative business of representing the union bureaucracy and various Democratic-controlled bodies, including the former school board. Driver has made a career of presenting the effort to maintain the Detroit political establishment's control of business contracts, city assets and other perks as a "civil

rights struggle” against racism.

By Wednesday morning, several of the fired workers were denouncing the Local 207 leadership for setting them up for victimization. Amber, a worker with 14 years service, said, “We were used as pawns. You don’t strike alone. Our union says you’re protected under the old contract—but that contract doesn’t exist anymore. I wasn’t on the list of the 80 percent of the workers who the mayor was cutting, but I went on strike for all of us.”

Last week, workers at the plant voted 162 to 90 to strike. However, the workers who voted at the wastewater treatment plant constitute only about a quarter of the local’s total members. Moreover, because the union had no intention of sparking a revolt against the rest of the city unions, it did nothing to mobilize the thousands of other city workers—firefighters, transit and sanitation workers, teachers and others—who are facing the same attack by the Bing administration.

The union reportedly told workers that there was a plan to walk out on Monday. However, on Sunday they told the 34 workers on Crew 5 that they should walk out immediately because a federal judge was preparing to grant the water department an injunction against a strike. Workers approached the shop steward on the Sunday shift and asked if they were putting their jobs on the line by walking out.

According to Amber, “The steward said she had Shanta Driver on the phone who said we couldn’t be fired because we were protected by the contract. We thought that everyone would be striking with us but it wasn’t the case.”

Tony, another victimized worker with 12 years, said, “We went on strike against outsourcing, and we still want to fight that. But we were led the wrong way. None of us had ever been on strike before, and we trusted the union president and especially the so-called lawyers.

“We were used as pawns. We’re not waiting on Al Garrett either—he’s just as crooked. I think the local leaders were pissed that they had to come back to work in the plant. Once you’ve been betrayed you learn to investigate and look into things instead of just acting and reacting. I walked out not just for me—I’ll be retiring soon—but for the next generation. For this fight we are going to need new leadership.”

Appealing for support from city workers, another worker added, “If they can do it to us, they can come after you. So we’re asking the public to please help us get our jobs back.”

Antonio, a victimized worker with five years of service, echoed this, saying, “If they do this to us, they’ll do it to any other worker. Anybody should have the right to stand up for what they believe in without being treated like a criminal.”

“They don’t care about the workers; they just care about making money.”

Another fired worker added, “They say we were

endangering the public by striking. But if they cut out 80 percent of the jobs here what will that do the safety of the water and the public that drinks it?”

In an effort to cover its tracks, Local 207 has claimed that the strike will continue—even though the vast majority of workers have returned to work—until there is an agreement from management for amnesty for all of the 34 fired workers and no further retaliation against any other strikers.

In a statement, the Local 207 Executive Board said, “The power of our strike cannot be measured by numbers alone, but in what it represents to hundreds of thousands of people who understand that the striking members are heroes. Unless our members are all returned to work, there is no deal, and the strike is still on.”

The Local 207 leadership and its supporters intend to follow up this fiasco with more toothless protests, oriented, as the statement said, to seeking the “support of Detroit’s Black community and the surrounding communities of Michigan, including unions and churches.”

The fight to defend the 34 fired water workers and to mobilize the working class against the attacks on Bing, Governor Snyder and the Obama administration is only possible by rejecting the politics of these pseudo-left defenders of the status quo. The betrayal of this strike is inextricably bound up with their alliance with Democratic Party and the trade union apparatus, and their complete hostility to the political independence of the working class and the fight for socialism.

The 34 fired workers are guilty of nothing—except fighting to defend their jobs and living standards, and for opposing the destruction of public services. They deserve the full support of all city workers and the entire working class. The fight to regain their jobs, with no retribution, is only possible by mobilizing the industrial and political strength of all workers.



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