Detroit workers denounce threat to impose emergency manager

Usman Clemens
13 March 2013

There is growing anger among workers and young people in Detroit over plans by Michigan's Republican governor, Rick Snyder, to appoint an emergency financial manager (EFM) over the city.

Under provisions of a new state law, emergency managers will be granted the right to rip up union contracts, cut services, sell city assets and privatize city operations. The law, which will take effect later this month, is largely the same as a previous law, Public Act 4, which Michigan voters repealed last November.

While the Democratic-controlled City Council has postured as opponents of the measure, council members and Mayor David Bing have implemented a series of brutal social spending cuts. Bing boasted in his annual State of the City address that he reduced overall spending from $1.4 billion in 2009 to $1.1 billion today, and cut city payrolls from 13,420 to 9,696 and outsourced the work of three city departments, including the city's Department of Health and Human Services.

Between 2006 and 2012 the number of workers in the city fire department was reduced from 1,700 to 1,000. In 2012, 15 fire stations were closed, one quarter of the total, while 6-8 stations were placed on rolling "brownouts" or temporary shutdowns. Bing also announced in February the closure of 51 of the city's parks and the rollback in operations at recreation centers by this spring. This will leave only 57 of the city's 300 parks open.

Campaigners from the Socialist Equality Party and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) campaigned in Detroit last weekend, distributing copies of a statement headlined " Fight the Bankers Dictatorship in Detroit ," which called for the mobilization of the working class against a new round of cuts.

World Socialist Web Site spoke with several workers who expressed overwhelming opposition to an emergency manager and more cuts in Detroit, already the poorest big city in America.

"They're trying to push the poor and workers out of the city. It's not a race question, it's a question of money," said Keitha, a waitress. She worked 15 years at the Renaissance Club before it closed and has had to take a lower paying job. The Democrats, she said, were no less to blame than the Republicans. "I look at all politicians the same."

Denise, a disabled worker raising four children, said, "I feel it is very wrong for an emergency financial manager to be brought in because the city can run things themselves. The problem is that Mayor Bing doesn't really care about what happens. There has been a big decline in all city services."

Denise continued, "When a manager comes in, they will cut people's pensions and retirement plans. How do they expect people to live? Besides that, how can they ask people to give back when they do not really have anything now? The conditions will lead to more robbing and death. This is what happens when people have no money and no job."

Some Detroiters see parallels between the imposition of an EFM and other cost-cutting measures that have been taken in the past. Elayne Petrucci, who teaches theatre at a charter school in Detroit, said, "Can you imagine getting Mitt Romney, or somebody like him, to be financial manager of Detroit?

"Today the corporations are sitting on the biggest bulk of income they have ever had in history. The truth is there is no demise of profit. The problem is all of it is going to the top. They are taking everything. The profit has to go back to the people. We need a government that is not controlled by the manufacturers and the big

© World Socialist Web Site

banks."

In addition to their thoughts about the emergency manager many Detroiters spoke about the rapidly deteriorating conditions in the city. Two students, Tyra Sharp and Dominique Douglas, who are also working, spoke about the lack of medical services.

Tyra said, "I came home in 2011 to find my mother on the floor. She had suffered from a stroke and heart attack. She died because the Emergency Medical Service (EMS) truck never showed up. Eventually I got a couple of friends to help me remove the body. It was a terrible experience."

In a city in which the number of ambulances covering an area of 139 square miles has been cut to 10 and 14, less than half of the fleet size in 2009, this kind of story is undoubtedly a common one. Dominique's experience was no less tragic. "We do not have health insurance. My mom suffered with heart problems and was taken to emergency. They stabilized her situation and sent her home when she really needed to have surgery because of blockages in her heart valves. My mom died two months after that."

Tyra continued on to talk about the rising cost of education. "The tuition costs are way too high and the only way the school will provide aid is if you have a child. This is really silly to me. I recently bought a house on the east side of Detroit and the property taxes are too high considering the value of the home. There are a number of vacant houses on our block and what happens is that people squat in them or they get burned down, which is why there are a lot of fires. I had to put bars on every window of my home. I feel like I am living in a prison in my own house!"

Gwen Lewis, who worked at the auto parts manufacturer Utica Trim for 33 years before retiring, said, "I am so disgusted with what is happening to us, I really cannot verbalize it. I have to pay $100.00 every time I go to the doctor. We used to have vision care. Now we have no vision care. I worked at the Utica Trim plant between 1974 and 2007," she concluded, saying the union plant—the United Auto Workers—did not fight against any of this.

Latoya, who works two jobs for a total of 70 hours a week and raises two children, also expressed disgust with the unions, "I used to believe in the unions until I had a job where I had to be in one. It was at the casino. They collected our dues and said they would stick up for us, but nothing ever happened. The contracts just keep getting worse and worse.

"The union would go into bargaining for days and weeks and come back every time with a worse contract. I used to be fan of the unions, but our union did not fight for us at all. The same thing happened to my aunt and uncle. She worked for Ameritech and they forced her into early retirement. The union did nothing. My uncle worked at Chrysler. They bring in new hires and pay them less and force the older workers into early retirement."

Latoya also spoke about cuts in the school system that have affected her children, "It has gotten to the point where parents have to provide everything for their children to go to school: copy paper, toilet tissue, soaps, donations, snacks, everything. All these things used to be provided by the school district. Now they do not provide any of it."

Another Detroiter, Yvonne, expressed disillusionment with the entire political system. "What can we do when the city council and the governor represent the same financial interests? As a kid, I always felt that something was not right, but I could never find out exactly what that was. I was looking, but you do not get much education in the public school system and colleges about how the system really works. I look at the situation today and wonder if they are just insulting our intelligence.

"The criminality of government is just so open. The election in 2000 was really a turning point for me. I began to understand that the Democrats and Republicans are serving the same interests. I am still searching. What do you do? You cannot just do nothing."

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site