

# Detroit Water and Sewerage Workers denounce contract

A WSWS reporting team  
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A Socialist Equality Party campaign team spoke to Detroit Department of Water and Sewerage workers Friday attending a contract ratification vote held at the offices of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees in downtown Detroit.

Workers strongly denounced the six-year sellout agreement. AFSCME Council 25 is attempting to ram through the contract in advance of Michigan's "right to work" law, which is set to take effect March 28. The aim of the contract, which imposes huge concessions, is to secure the income of the union apparatus by locking in place the automatic deduction of dues from workers' paychecks.

The proposed contract includes a pay freeze, permits the scheduling of 10-12 hour shifts, extends the probationary period for new hires from 90 days to one year and imposes higher worker contributions for health care and pensions. There is no job protection for workers who face the threat of privatization and the outsourcing of 81 percent of their jobs.

The agreement is not a real contract in any serious sense. The judge overseeing the water department or the newly appointed emergency manager over Detroit, Kevyn Orr, can reopen the agreement after July. If there is no agreement after 30 days of the contract being reopened, the judge or the emergency manager can impose their own terms.

On the same day as the AFSCME vote, Detroit teachers began voting on a contract containing similarly draconian terms. Throughout the state, unions are rushing to push through long-term contracts containing major concessions in order to secure their dues base.

The SEP campaign team members distributed a statement addressed to city workers and teachers, "Reject the concessions contracts! Mobilize against financial dictatorship in Detroit!" It calls on city

workers and teachers to vote down the contracts as the first step to launching a counteroffensive against the imposition of a financial dictatorship in Detroit through the installation of an emergency manager.

Scott, a worker with two-and-a-half years at the Water and Sewerage Department said of the contract, "It's garbage. They don't want to hear our proposals and they are not bargaining in good faith. They just say 'here it is.'"

He added, "[Former Mayor] Kwame Kilpatrick just went to jail for issuing no-bid contracts and [Water Department Director] Sue McCormick just gave out a \$50 million no-bid contract."

Another worker denounced the alliance of the unions, management and the emergency manager. "The union is just as bad as the company. Last October they sold us out," he said referring to the abortive strike at the Wastewater Treatment Plant last fall. "As for the emergency manager, he's like a tsar. He just gets rid of what he wants. They are looking to automate the plant to get rid of us.

"The whole process of the emergency manager is to take away workers' human rights. They are taking away the right to have a decent standard of living. That's against what the Founding Fathers wanted.

"[President of AFSCME Council 25] Al Garrett has been paid off. He hasn't done anything for us in 14 years. If the union did what they're supposed to do, they wouldn't be scared of us and try to keep us quiet."

Another worker, TJ, expressed his ambivalence: "I don't like that Local 207 is opposed to the contract because of this court business. Without a contract, the company can do what it wants." He added, however, "The contract is just cuts, which is what they want anyway."

SEP supporters explained that while leaders of

AFSCME Local 207 claimed to oppose the contract, they had no alternative to fight the cuts, instead telling workers to put their faith in the courts.

TJ also commented on the emergency manager. “There shouldn’t have ever been any emergency managers in any city in the state. What happens is the state keeps money from cities and then sends an emergency manager to fix it. Look at Highland Park. They can’t pay their police, fire fighters ... they have nothing. It’s not a slum, it’s desolation.

“And then [Detroit Mayor David] Bing comes along and says, ‘If auto workers have to suffer, city workers have to suffer.’ That’s total crap.”

Robert, a worker at the Wastewater Treatment Plant, said, “It stunk too bad for me. This is the first time they have offered us a contract in three years. I don’t like it that they can give me another 10 percent pay cut if they find they are not making enough money. They say we might have to start paying for another 20 percent health cut. The contract says they have the right to outsource. The only thing they offer is a \$700 signing bonus. They already took that away with the 10 percent pay cut.”

On the emergency manager’s plans to sell off city assets, Robert said, “I don’t think the water department has to be sold. I think management should be investigated instead. The water department is not broke. They are paying contractors \$40-\$50 an hour, but they don’t want to pay me \$19. How can Mayor Bing have over 100 people making over \$100,000 a year and say the city is broke? They should renegotiate the bondholders’ contracts.”

LK, another worker at the Wastewater Treatment Plant said, “There is no way I would vote for this. Why would I want to shoot myself? They want to take 5 percent to fund my own pension. They want to stick seniority to the side.

“I have 4 kids and I am making \$12.44 per hour with the pay cut. How do you expect me to survive? That living wage we are supposed to have in Detroit, where is it at? I call Detroit the poster child for the United States.”

He spoke about the emergency manager set to take office in Detroit. “I thought we were a democracy. To put him in with full authority and we don’t have a say is not right.

SEP campaigners explained that the fight against the cuts required the full independent mobilization of the

working class, which AFSCME and Local 207 oppose.

LK agreed with the call by the SEP for a struggle against the cuts. “They need the whole city to walk out, like in Europe. In fact, they should shut the whole nation down. But instead they get away with it. What is to stop them? In Illinois they are going to close more than 50 schools, then blame the teachers.

“I didn’t create these economic problems. I feel sorry for my kids. You have to go to Harvard to work at McDonalds? I am making less now than I did in the early 1990s. I used to think I was middle class, but not any more.”



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