

Detroit emergency manager holds stage-managed “public” meeting

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Detroit emergency manager Kevyn Orr held an ostensibly public meeting Monday night, one of the requirements of his appointment under Public Act 436, which mandates he present his plan to Detroiters and allow residents to air grievances and ask questions. In practice, the gathering was an arena for Orr to more clearly lay out his plan for austerity measures across the city.

Calling the meeting “public” turns the reality of what happened on its head. Held at the Wayne State University Law School, the lecture hall where Orr spoke only had a capacity of approximately 250, with 50-100 of those reserved for city officials, press and whoever else in Detroit’s establishment wanted to attend. Only about 150 outside people were allowed in and the meeting only lasted one hour.

The meeting was rescheduled after the cancellation of widely advertised meetings at the Greater Grace Temple and Martin Luther King High School the week before. Although Orr’s spokesman Bill Nowling denied these had been officially scheduled, it is likely that Orr, anticipating widespread opposition, wanted a much smaller venue to limit the numbers who could attend.

Attendees at the meeting had to go through a gauntlet of at least 25 police officers—from Detroit, Wayne State and a Michigan State Police bomb squad—and a likely equal amount of undercover cops. Squad cars and vans lined the streets, and meeting goers had to pass through metal detectors. After the auditorium was full, police forcibly barred the rest of the crowd from the meeting.

As police pushed people out of the building, Reuters reporter Steve Neavling was shoved to the ground as he was recording video of the physical removal of another reporter. Neavling said, “I wanted to make sure it was done in a civil manner ... and the guy literally throws me

through the door.”

Inside the lecture hall, the atmosphere was even more repressive. Officers and Orr’s personal security stood at every entrance. Unsolicited comments from the crowd were prohibited. One woman attempted to make a statement about the anti-democratic nature of Orr’s position and was removed within twenty seconds. In response, Orr’s chief-of-staff stated, “[If there are] any outbursts, you will be removed because this is going to be an orderly meeting.”

Orr’s presentation largely echoed the plan he issued at the beginning of May. Using the specter of bankruptcy, Orr renewed his calls for attacking the working class of Detroit, including a “restructuring” of health care and pensions of city workers, the dismantling of services and selloff of public assets. While Orr didn’t mention any particular asset by name, his previous report explicitly targeted public transportation, lighting and the water system for either partial or full privatization.

“I have a very powerful statute. I have a more powerful Chapter 9. ... I’m going to accomplish this job. That is going to happen.” Like a Mafia hit man he added the threat, “Now look I’m a trial attorney. I can cut somebody’s throat and leave them to bleed out in the gutter with the best of them.” Playing the good cop-bad cop routine, he went on to suggest that he preferred a consensual agreement with city unions, pension trust funds and other creditors, which he will be meeting with this Friday.

His plan, Orr said, “will require painful sacrifices from all interested parties.” In fact while some bondholders might lose a portion of their investments, many of which are insured, it will be the working class that bears the brunt of the pain. Orr’s mandate is to make sure the biggest banks that inveigled the city in

billions of dollars of debt are fully paid.

Revealing his aristocratic contempt for any semblance of democracy, Orr went out of his way to praise the billionaire CEOs of Quicken Loans and Little Caesar's Pizza, Dan Gilbert and Mike Ilitch. Both are overseeing the "restructuring" of city, which envisions closing whole neighborhoods deemed too poor to rebuild and evicting of low-income residents from downtown and midtown Detroit to make way for the expansion of upscale housing and shopping districts.

"All great cities have patrons who come to their assistance in times of need," he said, pointing to the oil and steel tycoons Rockefeller and Carnegie. Both are well known not just for their philanthropic gestures but ordering the bloody repression of striking steelworkers in 1892 and miners in 1914.

The composition of the audience and the questions asked also spoke to nature of the meeting. Few workers were in attendance. The crowd consisted largely of loyal opposition groups tied to the unions and the black Democratic Party political establishment in Detroit. These included Al Sharpton's National Action Network and the Moratorium Now!, a group associated with the pseudo-left Workers World Party. The chief concern of the corrupt elements of the trade unions and "civil rights" establishment is that the emergency manager is cutting them out of any share of the privatization of city services and the selloff of public assets.

Opposed to mobilizing the working class against the financial dictatorship in Detroit, during the question period representatives of these groups made pro forma protests, while basically appealing to Orr to work with them. While questions were pre-screened to prevent any genuine opposition, significantly, Orr allowed attorney Jerry Goldberg, a leader in the Moratorium Now! group, to speak and denounce the "racist, predatory lending policy of the banks."

Orr responded, "Thank you Jerry. When we met two and a half months ago, you expressed those same sentiments," adding that Goldberg should look into the class action federal lawsuit against predatory lending. Orr's fraternal comment reveals the intimate connection he has established with the so-called oppositionists inside and within the orbit of the unions and Democratic Party. Having taken their measure—and handed over the appropriate incentives to buy them

off—he is proceeding with ruthless determination to attack the working class of Detroit.

This only underscores the fundamental truth, explained by the Socialist Equality Party's candidate for mayor of Detroit, D'Artagnan Collier, that the bankers' dictatorship in Detroit can only be defeated through the independent political mobilization of the working class.



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