SEP candidate in Detroit speaks with workers about attack on pensions

Bryan Dyne
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Detroit Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr has made it clear one of the primary targets of his plan to "restructure" Detroit" will be the decimation of city workers' pensions. By insisting that pensions are no more than an "unsecured debt," Orr is seeking to circumvent legal protections for pensions spelled out in the Michigan's state constitution and Detroit's city charter so he can drastically reduce or eliminate pension payments altogether.

Orr, and the banks and big bondholders he represents, has been seeking to eliminate these supposed "legacy costs" for some time. This culminated in a meeting last Friday with Detroit's creditors and bond insurers where Orr said he would honor as little as 10 cents on every dollar owed to the pension trust funds that cover some 20,000 retired city workers.

Campaign teams for D'Artagnan Collier, the Socialist Equality Party candidate for Detroit mayor, went out over the weekend to speak to workers and young people about these attacks and to discuss a political strategy for the working class to fight back.

Ray was met at Eastern Market, the city's largest open-air market. He spoke in outrage against the emergency manager, saying, "We have no rights anymore. We used to have them but they are gone. [Orr] doesn't even take questions about his plan from the people.

"Look at the meeting last Friday. Why did they have it at the airport? Why not somewhere in the city? He doesn't want to face everyone who lives in the city. Orr will just say he is doing something and do it. That's why he's selling off the water, sewerage and lighting systems. That's why he's selling off Belle Isle. The banks have wanted to sell these off for years, but only now with an emergency manager can they do it.

"They're going to sell the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) and get private garbage men, which probably won't ever pick up the trash. Everything is going to be given away.

"What I don't get is this: every weekend, there is something going on like the Grand Prix or a music festival. Why not tax these? That's the real revenue problem. Private events for the rich the city doesn't tax.

"I've also heard on the news that the Griswold seniors and Cass Corridor residents are being evicted," Ray said, referring to the tenants at the Griswold and Henry Street Apartments being evicted so that landlords can renovate the buildings and charge higher rent, reportedly as high as $3,000 per month. Henry Street residents have been given until June 20 to leave, while the Griswold tenants, all of them seniors, have been given until March 2014.

"My sister used to live on Henry Street. How can they kick those people out? I was reading one resident just moved in a month ago and wasn't told everyone was being evicted. I doubt he was able to get his money back. Supposedly because of this, everyone was given two more months.

"With things like this, how do people live in the city anymore? You can't afford gas or electricity. I've started getting charged for water once a month. It's no wonder people are leaving Detroit. And it's not a white versus black thing. It's a rich thing. All the poor are leaving because they can't afford the city. It's not a race issue. It's a 'the rich want to take over' issue."

Deborah, a social worker for the state of Michigan, spoke to D'Artagnan Collier about the emergency manager's policies. "There is no more impulse from the Civil War, of our old traditions. I see what is happening in Detroit as like going back to medieval Europe. The clock is turning backwards instead of forwards. Everything is being controlled by people who want to go back to that time."

Collier explained that the attack on workers living standards went hand in hand with the destruction of fundamental democratic rights. "Here in Detroit," he began, "the ruling class is testing out financial

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dictatorship. In Boston, they just tested out martial law. What the ruling elite is afraid of is a movement by workers, and to stop that, they are prepared to enact a police state, with these two cities as models."

Deborah agreed, adding, "The news is so controlled too. You don't hear what's happening in Africa or Europe. The same things happening in Detroit happen there too, with governments cracking down on people who just want basic rights. The media also ignored what happened in Wisconsin in 2011. That's because they all obey Wall Street.

"I think Obama is worse than Bush in some ways. Bush may have started a lot, but Obama just keeps going. He's the one who is getting rid of our privacy. The Constitution isn't even relevant now.

"We're living in an Orwellian system. All the talk of terrorism is nonsense. The government just uses that as an excuse to crack down, militarize the local police forces and make SWAT teams more common. There are no more civil liberties. Boston was to increase repression."

Collier explained that while the ruling class was dangerous it was not invincible. "The only reason governments get away with this is because the working class hasn't been heard from yet," he said, detailing how the unions and political parties that claim to speak for the working class had blocked any challenge to the economic and political dictatorship of the banks. "When we move, as a class, with a politically sharpened program and perspective, the ruling elite won't be able to get away scot free anymore."

Steve was going to the DIA to enjoy it in light of the threats by the emergency manager to sell the artwork. "I'm not for the selling of the artwork. Art is not seen as important lately, which is a shame. People should have culture. The banks see the money signs on the paintings, but that's not the way it should be. I came here to enjoy it, and that's why the art should stay, so the people can enjoy it."

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