

Detroit workers speak on city's bankruptcy

Zac Corrigan
22 July 2013

On July 18, Detroit's state-appointed Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr and Michigan Governor Rick Snyder sent the city of Detroit into the largest municipal bankruptcy in US history. The bankruptcy filing is the prelude to an intensified assault on the working class, including slashing pensions and health benefits, privatizing services and selling off city assets.

D'Artagnan Collier, the Socialist Equality Party's candidate for mayor of Detroit, and an SEP campaign team spoke to workers at the Rosa Parks Bus Terminal and at a labor picnic hosted by the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees union on Belle Isle.

John, a local welder, told the campaign team at Rosa Parks bus terminal that instead of bankruptcy, "they should open up all the books and show us where all the money has been going all this time. The governor brought his hatchet man [Orr] to sell the city's assets, and he gets paid hundreds of thousands of dollars to do it."

John was incensed at the attack on retirees, saying, "My mother draws my [deceased] father's pension; Orr wants to get his hands on those pensions."

John's wife Regina said she was concerned about the implications of bankruptcy for Detroit's public transportation. "The bus service is already terrible. And it's gotten worse since Orr was appointed. Buses are always late, and sometimes they don't come at all. The killing part is that you've got working people who depend on them.

"I had to change my work schedule to be able to catch the bus," Regina added. "I get up at 4 a.m. to be at work by 8 a.m. I could drive from home to work in a car in 13 minutes."

Daryl, who works for Clean Downtown maintaining Detroit's sidewalks and bus stations, at first said of the bankruptcy, "I try not to get mixed up in that because it doesn't concern me. I just take care of myself and do

what I got to do. I'll get by." When the campaign team explained that the bankruptcy threatened cuts in city services like public lighting and public transportation, as well as the continued sell-off of city departments and properties to wealthy investors, Daryl spoke out sharply against the capitalist system.

"You know what, the rich have a way of controlling everything. They have the power to make people get some low-paying job or else go to jail. They cut everything and then lock us up. We may not be physically in chains, but it still feels like slavery."

Daryl added, "I used to work for Mike Ilitch [the owner of Little Caesars Pizza, the Detroit Red Wings and the Detroit Tigers sports teams], at Comerica Park, as a volunteer for \$15 a day. I had to take that job because I had been in jail, and my house was burned down by arsonists. But then he actually shorted me! They would pay less than \$15 each day. Ilitch makes a killing and can't even pay his workers. I made him a thousand hot dogs in a day, and he got \$4 for each one of them."

Daryl agreed that D'Artagnan Collier's demand to throw out the emergency manager and create a government of workers was "a really good campaign. But will the people stand up and do it? That's the question."

James, a restaurant worker, said that Orr's move to throw the city into bankruptcy was "a bunch of bull," adding, "You're supposed to help the people, not tear up the city."

The SEP campaigners explained that Kevyn Orr was a representative of the rich, even though he is portrayed by the media as an impartial arbiter of the city's finances. James said, "If all the working people in the city could get over their differences, and come together, all colors, they could take care of this place" in their own interest. He asked what it would take to "get people moving."

James was interested to learn about the evicted tenants of nearby Griswold apartments, who have drafted an open letter calling on the workers of Detroit to defend them, and which the WSWS team was helping distribute. James took several copies of the letter to hand out to others.

Kim Fulton, who works at the Marriott hotel, said she was saddened by the announcement of bankruptcy. She expressed sympathy for the 20,000 retired city workers who stand to lose their pensions and health care, saying, “A lot of people who worked their whole lives, the retirees, they already did their part, and now it looks like this [bankruptcy] is going to affect them the most.”

Kim said she wants to do something to help them, but “our contract [at Marriott] is so messed up. We actually have a strike ban clause in it.” She said she would attend the next Collier campaign meeting.

Carlos, a market butcher, expressed indignation at the ongoing eviction of retirees from downtown, and the sell-off of Detroit’s assets. “I watch the news like crazy—CNN, all of those news reports—and I keep hearing how there’s no money. That’s what they’re telling us here in Detroit, too, no money. But then I hear that they’re giving these rich guys like [Quicken Loans CEO] Dan Gilbert hundreds of millions in tax breaks, letting them buy everything up, and kicking these folks [the Griswold residents] down the street.”

Carlos said he wanted to come to the SEP meeting on August 4th at Wayne State University. “I want to learn how I can help to fight for these people, because this is happening everywhere. People need to have meetings and figure out how to stop this. I have to take 3 buses just to get to work. And they are cutting routes all the time. I don’t know how they expect people to live, to do anything.”

At Belle Isle, Collier asked Ken Atkins, a municipal worker, what he thought about the emergency manager and the bankruptcy. “The government doesn’t give a damn about us,” Ken said. “They work for who? The fat cats. They think only about who’s kicking them money to the side.”

When campaigners said that the working class needed its own political party, separate from both the Democrats and the Republicans, Ken said “Well, we are the majority of the population. We’ve got to find out how to do it, how to come together as a force. Right now we are being dictated to, to a point that is really

sad. When you’ve got a huge police presence and a public curfew on the Fourth of July [as Detroit had], that’s martial law. They can tell you when you can and cannot be out of your house. It used to be a government of the people, by the people, for the people. But not anymore.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact