

Detroit firefighters protesting bankruptcy discuss expanding fight against pension and budget cuts

Our reporters
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Scores of firefighters demonstrated in front of the federal courthouse in downtown Detroit yesterday to voice their anger over last week's bankruptcy filing by the city's emergency manager, which threatens to cut up to 90 percent from the pensions owed to city workers and retirees.

With the trade unions offering no way forward, fire fighters have formed an ad hoc organization called the Public Safety Workers Action Group (PSWAG), to reach out more broadly to working people around the city and explain the connection between budget cutting and the undermining of safety for the city's residents. PSWAG members have been holding a number of small demonstrations at fire stations across Detroit in recent days.

The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) and other public sector unions, including the Detroit Fire Fighters Association, have opposed any genuine mobilization of city workers against the emergency manager and the bankruptcy. Instead, they have sought to divert opposition behind appeals to the bankruptcy judge to "uphold the law" and respect Michigan's state constitution, which explicitly states that pensions are "contractual obligations," which cannot be reduced.

The dead end of such a perspective was displayed Wednesday when US Bankruptcy Judge Steven Rhodes ruled that any legal challenges brought by retirees in other courts would be put on hold and that he had "exclusive jurisdiction" to deliberate on the bankruptcy. Far from upholding the law, Michigan's Republican governor Rick Snyder and Detroit's Democratic mayor David Bing long ago conspired to throw the city into bankruptcy, precisely to circumvent the state constitution. This has now been sanctioned by the federal judge.

World Socialist Web Site spoke to PSWAG firefighters in front of the federal courthouse yesterday and discussed both the implications of the attack on workers in Detroit and the way forward. While they were picketing, federal marshals, agents of the Department of Homeland Security and Detroit police closely monitored the firefighters, well aware that their protest was only a small indication of the deep popular opposition to the financial dictatorship that has been imposed on Detroit.

A firefighter with 18 years said, "What they are doing is criminal. We're not asking for a handout, just the pensions we earned and we deserve. At the twelfth hour they are treating us as though we are creditors. This will set the template for the whole country. It's a lot larger than Detroit. It's all about big business and finance--they're saying we have to do with less, while they're making billions. We have to take a stand. We've been picketing every day because every stroke of the pen, every budget cut, has consequences for peoples' lives."

Phil, a firefighter with 14 years, said, "The conditions we already face are ridiculous. Our fire station is in a terrible state, with plumbing problems and raw sewage. The city has been cutting everywhere and we're not getting any young firefighters to replace those retiring. Last year we took a 10 percent wage cut as part of the consent agreement. I was hit two times because my promotion was revoked when my station was closed."

Phil described the decades-long decline of the industrial base of the city. "Back in the 1970s, we all expected to get into the General Motors plants, like Fisher Body, once we got out of high school. By the time I graduated in 1978, those avenues were closed and a lot of us had to go to the military. I was a Marine stationed in the Indian Ocean during the Iranian crisis in 1980.

"Today there is nothing for the young people. At the

same time guys that worked their asses off in the auto plants or for the city are seeing their pensions threatened. After working all these years, they're saying we're cutting your pension. It's a slap in the face. If it wasn't for the workers nothing in this city would operate. But all they care about is the wealthy. Look how they are building up downtown and not the neighborhoods where there are no lights and just vacant houses."

Another firefighter added, "We're not going to take this lying down. The rich just want all the money, even though they have so much they don't know what to do with it. They expect us to work and die. It's like they're going back to the days of Chicago meatpacking industry, where you were chewed up and tossed out."

Mark from Squad 2 commented on PSWAG: "We don't have a spokesman, we are just trying to be heard. Our message is that we know the city needs a form of relief. We know there has been stealing, pillaging public funds for years...We firemen are away from our families for 24 hours at a time. We are fighting fires, we are making rescues, we are working hard every day.

"I had two vertebrae breaks in my back two years ago. I did everything I could--blood, sweat, and tears--to get back on duty. I'm back on duty. I'm healthy. I'm good. But I may lose my health care, I may lose my pension. Why should we lose our health care? Why should I lose my pension? We have people getting \$225,000 for what? Just for being Chief of Police or an advisor to the Emergency Manager?

"Where can I go 20 years from now and actually work after I have been beat up almost every day in my career? Where can I go to work and put food on the table?"

Captain Robert Tucker said, "I've been on this job 25 years, and we have been taking nothing but monetary beatings. We have given concession after concession and we never complained.

"They are taking \$3.5 billion in pension money they are supposed to hold for us, but they have been using it. Now because you owe us and we won't forgive it, now it's a debt. And now that we became aware of it and filed a lawsuit, and asked for the money you owe us, then you pull an 11th hour Chapter 9 bankruptcy on us.

"Now we are down to the bone. All you got is marrow, and that's the lifeblood, the marrow. We work for little or nothing. Nobody is going to do what we do. I will brag on my department because I think we are the best in the city. We go in. We die for the city. I've had best friends who died on this job. And they are long forgotten by the establishment."

Brett, a firefighter with 12 years, noted, "Engine 57 was just shut down. It was one of the busiest stations on the west side. That means we have to travel further to get to a fire. That is not good when you are holding your breath in a smoke situation. This is killing people.

"The people making these decisions are only looking after their own interests. They are going to get an executive retirement after this. They never worry about the ramifications of their actions on others. I just heard the term 'corporate coup d'état.' That is exactly what has happened. We've allowed our government to be directly taken over by the corporations and the rich. They think the Constitution is nothing but a piece of antiquated paper."

The Socialist Equality Party is urging firefighters and other workers and young people around the city to form workplace, school and neighborhood committees--independent of the trade unions, the Democrats and the Republicans--to unite all workers and youth in the Detroit area. These committees should prepare the way for a general strike of the working class in Detroit to demand the removal of the emergency manager and a repudiation of the debts to the Wall Street banks.

Supporters of SEP mayoral candidate D'Artagnan Collier circulated his call to action among firefighters and urged them to attend his final campaign meeting on August 4 at Wayne State University to discuss a socialist strategy to fight the bankruptcy.

The World Socialist Web Site (WSWS) will continue to publish regular updates on the efforts of firefighters to defend their pensions and health benefits. We call on firefighters to use the WSWS to voice their concerns and as a forum to discuss the questions facing the working class in Detroit, the US and internationally. Firefighters are encouraged to print and discuss these articles in their workplaces and to send comments and updates to the WSWS.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact