

Growing anger among Detroit workers against attack on pensions, services

Usman Clemens
27 July 2013

Opposition is mounting among Detroit workers to the drive by the city's emergency manager Kevyn Orr and Michigan governor Rick Snyder to use the city's bankruptcy to slash social services and rip up workers' pensions.

On July 18, Orr and Snyder sent the city of Detroit into the largest municipal bankruptcy in US history, seeking to use the bankruptcy courts to slash workers' pensions and health benefits, privatize services, and sell off city assets, including the artwork of the Detroit Institute of Arts.

Detroit firefighters have formed an organization called the Public Safety Workers Action Group (PSWAG) to reach out to working people around the city and explain the connection between budget-cutting and the undermining of safety for the city's residents. This week the organization held demonstrations at fire stations across Detroit, where the WSWS spoke to firefighters.

Keith, a firefighter for 24 years spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* Friday at a demonstration outside of Engine 1 downtown. "When I looked at those huge crowds that came out in Egypt and also saw the protests in countries like Greece, I said to one of my co-workers, it is only a matter of time; It's going to come here," he said. "There is going to be a revolution and it will be televised."

Darcell, another firefighter at Engine 1, added, "at this point, a strike is exactly what needs to happen. Not just the firefighters, but the transportation and utility workers; that's the only way. If we got ten thousand workers with picket signs to strike, when that happens, that's when you get action."

He said the attack being carried out against the Detroit working class was setting a precedent for municipal workers throughout the country. "We're like

the litmus test," he said, "the petri dish. Every major city across the country, there will be a wave of this."

Workers expressed deep mistrust of the claims by the political establishment and the media that there is "no money" to fund social programs. Marcel, a city resident and auto worker at Chrysler's Warren Stamping plant said, "They keep saying the city's broke but it's not; they have enough money for a stadium," referring to the plan by city officials to funnel \$286 million in public funds to build a new sports and entertainment district just north of downtown Detroit. "It's deliberate gentrification," he added.

Douglas, a firefighter at Engine 1, echoed these sentiments, saying, "Why is this being done? It's to take money from the working people and give it to the wealthy. Just down the block from here, they are giving Mike Ilitch close to \$250 million dollars to build a new stadium. It's the working people that will do the building but the owners will get all the money."

"It's all about money," Darcell added. "There's no money for the have-nots. But there is always money for the haves; they see us as the enemy."

Many workers placed the attack on Detroit residents in context of the broader assault on social services. Gregory, who spoke to the WSWS downtown earlier this week, noted that food stamps had been cut out of the latest farm bill in preparation for the program's gutting. "Kids and mothers have to eat!"

Rebecca, another worker the WSWS met downtown said, "You're not supposed to take food away from people. The rich have no sympathy for the poor. They'll take in a stray dog before they help a poor person. To them, dogs are worth more than people. And it isn't a white or black issue, it's a green issue—a money issue."

"Since elementary school, every school my daughter

has been to has closed,” said Leontyne, a city resident. “She went to two elementary schools, two middle schools, and now two high schools. We like her teachers, and when the parents ask them if they’re going to come back, they say ‘I hope so, but I don’t know’ because they keep firing teachers.”

“All the kids have to find another school location to go to school,” added Rebecca. “It’s happening all over the country.”

Keith spoke about the effects of the deterioration of Detroit on the firefighters and the fire department. “Firefighters have been hit very hard. Many of the stations have been closed down. Death rates due to response time have doubled because of station closures. There used to be a station right down the street from here on Alexandrine and Cass and it was closed down.”

He continued, “We are located downtown and will often be sent from here to cover a fire in the east side or southwest areas,” up to 15 minutes away. “There is basically no area where we are not asked to go, leaving downtown Detroit stranded. In fact, there was a kitchen fire around here awhile ago and no one was at the station to respond to it.”

Rebecca summed up the sentiments of a growing number of Detroit workers when she concluded, “I support a general strike,” adding that “It’s not about getting what we want—it’s about getting what we need to survive! We’ve worked all our lives, and we just want to live a half-way decent life.”



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact