

Detroit firefighters call for defense of the DIA

Thomas Gaist
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Detroit firefighters have responded with enthusiasm to last week's "Defend the DIA!" mass demonstration organized by the Socialist Equality Party.

On Wednesday, a WSWS reporting team visited several fire stations around the city to discuss the significance of the demonstration and how the struggle against the emergency manager and the bankruptcy court can be taken forward. Firefighters spoke out strongly against wage cuts, the attack on pensions, and the erosion of fire safety in Detroit under the de facto financial dictatorship headed by Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr.

Among several themes, firefighters discussed the social crisis in the city, the US, and global society and the intensifying conflict between the capitalist class and working class. The firefighters spoke passionately about the need to defend the rights of the working class in particular, the right to culture.

Dominic said, "They're tearing down houses when they could rehab them. [Billionaire real estate developer] Dan Gilbert is working with the banks to loot the city. The only way this is going to stop is through civil war."

Discussing the decay of the city, particularly the closing down of factories and deep cuts in education that began in the 1980s, he said, "When I got into 10th grade, programs were already being defunded. My dad is a Ford worker. I remember one factory after another closing."

Dominic also spoke out against the use of racial politics to divide the working class. "This is the same playbook they've been using for centuries: dividing and conquering the working class along racial lines. It's about class, not race. Orr, Obama and Bing all belong to the privileged class. They're messing up our society. Until we come together to fight back, nothing is going to change."

Phil, a newer firefighter, spoke about the protest

against the attack on the DIA and the stripping of workers' pensions, saying, "This is just the beginning. I saw the protest on TV. The more protests the better. They want people to start dying earlier so they don't have to pay the pension. It's like they work you to death and then they yell out: 'Next!'"

Paul, a veteran firefighter with more than two decades of service, commented on the state of class relations in the United States, saying, "They don't care about our opinion. The ones who have the money make the rules. We are really just slaves of the system."

"I was looking at the Forbes 400. How could you ever justify this? They have more money than whole countries, and people are starving. I lost 10 percent of my salary in June even though I've just been promoted. I don't even have the worst of it though. There are people out here trying to get by on \$12,000 a year."

"Compared with the wealthy, the working class is by far the vast majority of the population. Lots of people are discontented but they are scared, they get conditioned to accept it."

He noted that the unions had done nothing to fight and had come back with concession after concession. "We pay these people to represent us but they don't. The bosses and the union reps," he said, "bombard us with lies, because it is against their interests for us to know the truth. We find ourselves just hoping to exist."

Pointing to the impact of budget cuts on public safety, he said, "The fire company I am it is closed, it's been browned out."

Paul spoke movingly about the profound impact of institutions like the DIA on young people. "Walking through the DIA, you can't replicate that. That feeling is where inspiration comes from. Human potential is unlimited. The potential of any child in the inner city is unlimited. It is indicative of the society in which we live that they want to take the art away from the people."

Eric, a young firefighter, raised the recent cuts to the wages of the firefighters, saying, “They just took more of our pay away. Everybody’s got to take a hit, but the corporations are cashing in. We are the lowest paid fire department in the country, lower than New Orleans.”

He pointed out that the ruling class has political reasons for looting the art at the DIA, which went beyond just making billions. “It seems like they are taking away this art to strip meaning from the people. I was impressed to see the outcome of the DIA demo,” he said.

Matt also discussed the bankruptcy and the historical implications of the crisis with the WSWS reporters. “The bankruptcy is immoral and illegal. Yet, it’s going to continue until there is an all-out revolution.

“Every day I see a wrong, and nothing happens. Conditions are almost identical to the Great Depression today. Until you take a broom and sweep away all the politicians on a global scale, we won’t live in a free society. The entire world working class needs to unify as a single force but that is a great battle.

“I’m big into science, and my wife is an art teacher. If you get rid of the culture, you lose your identity and where you came from.”



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