

“It’s capitalism, not democracy”

Detroit sanitation workers denounce privatization

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An estimated 125 sanitation workers in Detroit are facing an uncertain future as plans to privatize garbage collection go ahead. City authorities announced last week that Rizzo Environmental Services and Advanced Disposal Inc. will take over solid waste collection starting next May.

Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr, whose special powers are being used to override City Charter protections against privatization of city services, is set to finalize city contracts with the private disposal firms before mid-December. The Department of Public Works (DPW) employees will lose their jobs as a result of the privatization and have been told that “qualified” workers could reapply for their jobs with the contracting firms. Many of the workers, already in their 50s, said they feared they would not be rehired.

If some were rehired, many workers felt, despite claims the new companies would pay comparable wages, they would face impossible working conditions and a sharp reduction in health care and pension benefits. Moreover many noted that private companies were out to make profit and would soon increase fees on city residents.

A reporting team from the WSWS spoke with sanitation workers Tuesday about the privatization of city services, the forced bankruptcy of Detroit and the threat to sell off artwork from the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA).

A worker with 28 years at the sanitation department denounced the efforts to slash city worker pensions. “Just like they ran a fraud with mortgages, the banks are doing the same thing with pensions. They want to get a hold of a whole lot of money.”

Referring to the privatization plans, he said, “The

paper says they’re going to pay us \$17 per hour after the privatization goes through, but after you’ve paid all the hidden fees and taxes and increased health care costs, you might get away with \$12 per hour. What’s more, Rizzo is not going to be able to handle the waste management.”

He responded strongly when asked about the plans to attack the DIA. “We’re an artistic family,” he said, “so we’re ticked off about them selling the art. My wife has a masters in music and my kids are musicians,” he said.

He continued, “This is a progression of 40 years of plotting against the workers. My wife got fired from Detroit Medical Center after 32 years. People in this city are oppressed and depressed. Those of us in the more oppressed neighborhoods know that [Quicken Loans CEO and real estate tycoon Dan] Gilbert and the rich run the city.

“It’s capitalism, not democracy. They’re always telling us about democracy, but they don’t teach us about the real system, capitalism,” Ray said.

Abby, a 51-year-old sanitation worker, said, “Working conditions are getting worse every year. We have more trucks broken down than ones that are actually running. They’re not spending money on this yard,” Abby said.

“They want to turn us into a cash machine. They already privatized the incinerator. They want to hand over all our equipment, and they’re going to make a lot of money. And, it seems likely our health benefits are going to be taken away under the new company. That’s assuming they give me a job, which they might not,” she continued.

Abby related the privatization of city services to the

attack on the DIA. “They said they wouldn’t sell the art and now they are doing it anyway. If the city tries to sell the art, we know they’ll be a long line of rich people wanting to buy it. They bailed out the auto companies and the banks, yet now there’s not even money for anything. Billionaires like Ilitch and Gilbert are going to run the city before a few more years have passed.”

John, another DPW worker, denounced the attacks on pensions and Kevyn Orr’s claim that Detroiters have been “lazy” and are to blame for the crisis. “I don’t like the privatization or the bankruptcy. We’re going to lose our benefits from the privatization, and we have families that depend upon those benefits. How can you afford to pay the emergency manager hundreds of thousands, and then say there’s no money?”

He continued, “People put in 30 years of service, then they turn around and throw us to the wolves when it’s over. They want to push the payments onto us—they think we’re living too long. Who are they to decide when we are supposed to die? We should enjoy the fruits of our labor after 30 years of service.

“Orr calls us lazy, but we work like dogs for the city, and for slave wages. Yet they think we don’t deserve anything,” John said.

Referring to the DIA, he said, “Everybody should have a right to see that art. Anybody that’s living, breathing and walking should be able to see it.”

The workers who spoke to the WSWs expressed no confidence in the unions, including the Teamsters, which has long negotiated concession contracts for DPW workers. “I told the union we should shut down the whole city but they won’t do anything,” one worker said, adding that the unions had done nothing as the city reduced the DPW workforce from 500 to a little more than 200 workers over the last two decades.

He agreed that the attacks were coming not only from the Republicans but Democrats like Mayor Bing and the Obama administration. “I’m angry at Obama too,” he said.

The workers responded enthusiastically to the Detroit Workers Inquiry into the attack on the DIA and the bankruptcy of Detroit (detroitinquiry.org), which is being sponsored by the Socialist Equality Party and being held on February 15, 2014.

Abby said she did not know that the Obama administration had intervened on behalf of the

bankruptcy filing by Kevyn Orr, with the Justice Department filing a brief to block a lawsuit by retirees. “Everything is being done behind the backs of workers,” she said, adding that an inquiry was a good idea because workers needed to have information if they were going to find a way to defend themselves.

A clique of ultra-wealthy individuals, politicians from both big business parties and bankruptcy attorneys led by Michigan Governor Rick Snyder have worked over the past two years to pave the way for a Chapter 9 filing in Detroit. The aim is to circumvent constitutional safeguards against the reduction of pensions owed to public workers and set a precedent for a similar attack in cities and states across the country.

The Socialist Equality Party intends to document and expose this conspiracy as part of its campaign to mobilize Detroit workers against the bankruptcy and the emergency manager.



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