Turkey giveaway draws hundreds in southwest Detroit

WSWS reporting team
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Early Tuesday morning hundreds lined up in southwest Detroit for free turkeys distributed by a local business in advance of the Thanksgiving holiday. The scene, reminiscent of the soup or bread lines of the 1930s, speaks to the dire conditions facing wide sections of the working population in Detroit, the poorest big city in America.

The area of the city where the distribution took place, once a center of auto production, has been ravaged by wave after wave of plant closures. The distribution was held not far from the empty field where the General Motors Cadillac Assembly Plant once stood. The factory, which used to employ 6,000 workers, was shuttered in 1987 and torn down.

Recent cuts to the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), commonly know as food stamps, have compounded the social crisis in the city. Cuts to food stamps in the state of Michigan alone totaled $183 million for the fiscal 2013-2014 fiscal year, affecting 1.8 million people.

Even before the cuts hunger is an ever-present reality in Detroit where the child poverty rate stands at 60 percent, almost three times the national average.

Since the 2008 financial crash there has been an exponential growth in hardship and poverty in the city. A recently released report by the liberal think-tank Demos points to the disastrous social conditions in Detroit in the wake of 2008 as a primary factor behind the collapse in city revenue leading to the recent bankruptcy filing. “The number of employed Detroit residents fell by 53 percent from 2000 to 2012. But half of that decline occurred in the single year of 2008 as the Great Recession took hold,” the report notes.

A *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team spoke to workers, retirees and the unemployed at the turkey distribution. A spokesperson from Inland Waters Pollution Control (IWPC)—a company that specializes in municipal water infrastructure repair, which organized the event—said this was the fifth straight year the company had sponsored turkey giveaways. "The numbers have grown each year," he said, adding that people had begun lining up at 5:45 a.m. Tuesday morning.

John McCants, who is currently on disability, told the WSWS, “We need some assistance. The rich are making money hand over fist and they want more. The stock market is rising because they are cutting out services. The gas prices are going up like the stock market. Why is gas so high? They are just squeezing us.

“Now they have this hire and fire at will. The employer might have a bad day and fire two people. My son works two days here and two days there and he is going to school. Human Services won’t give him food stamps because he is a student. But, because he is a student and has to attend classes, he also can’t work at the employer’s demand whenever they want him. So that makes it hard.

John said he supported the idea of a workers inquiry into the bankruptcy of Detroit. “The people need to know all the facts. These city workers are in jeopardy. If what is happening to them isn’t horrible, I don’t know what is. They got sold a false dream of being able to retire with a pension.

“Detroit is not bankrupt. Look at all those rich people investing here. The money movers in the city of Detroit had this all planned out. They want to loot the art museum. But, if you do it you would go to jail.”

Tanya added, “I work two jobs and go to school. Getting a free turkey helps, because my money goes toward paying off that student loan.”

Frank Kandow, a retired barber said, "Democracy is

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gone in America. I guess eventually there is going to be another civil war. It's getting harder and harder for common people.

“I work at a food pantry. I'm picking up a frozen turkey here and then going back to a center to empty trucks and give out food to people. We are seeing a greater dependency every week.

“I follow world news and people are being conditioned in America to work for Third World wages. People are so desperate they are willing to do anything for buck.

“I grew up in Detroit and used to work at a General Motors wheel and axle plant that was closed. When the Cadillac and Fleetwood plants were open around here people had something. Now people, not just students but workers with families, are working at fast food restaurants for $7 an hour.

“I've watched entire neighborhoods deteriorate. When I first started working people weren't panhandling at liquor stores or gas stations—now it is a common condition; but no one talks about how this happened.

"These corporate forces were trying to break up the unification of workers back in the 1970s and 1980s; now we see the result of those efforts. When was the last time Ford put out applications for jobs? And if they do it’s for $14 an hour instead of $28.

“I had a friend who complained that young workers he was working with on the assembly line were making half of what he was. The UAW (United Auto Workers) shop steward told him to shut up and stop rocking the boat. What he was saying is you don't have the right to speak up or you'll lose your job. It's outrageous.”

Dante, an unemployed worker, said, “I do dry wall construction and I have been unemployed three years. It is hard to get a job now. The money being made on the stock market is not coming down to the people. The cuts to food stamps are going to cause a problem, especially for people who don’t have jobs.”

“They say the economy is getting better but its obvious that it's not when you look how long this line is,” said Gail, a retired Chrysler worker. "Sure there are jobs—if you want to work for $8 an hour. You look out here—it's the same as it was in the 1930s. When I left Chrysler I was making $23.95 an hour. Now it’s down to $14. I took the buyout and then they closed my plant Mack Engine.”

Howard Anderson, a truck driver on disability, commented, “I used to work at Dodge Main before it was shut and torn down. I took the buyout in 1979 during the first Chrysler bankruptcy when they started taking stuff from workers.

“Time is moving forward but the conditions of workers are going backwards. The cost of living is constantly rising but our money is not matching it. I remember standing on food lines like this in the 1960s when I was a little boy and my dad was laid off from the auto plant.

“We don't have unions any more. The UAW is just looking to see how much they can make off the worker. There should have been a fight when the City Council and (Detroit) Mayor Bing were taking everything away—we should have shut the whole city down.”

Referring to the bankruptcy and the threat of Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr to sell off the artwork at the Detroit Institute of Arts, Holley, a carpenter, declared, “That's ludicrous. That artwork was donated. It's not just for the people of Detroit people all over the world come to see the DIA. How can they take that away from us? Kevyn Orr has no scruples.

“People moved from the South to the North to live in the "D," the Motor City. They were uneducated and signed with an “X” to get their paychecks. But they worked hard and fought for what we got. Workers did so much for the city and now they want to take everything away.”

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