

On the eve of the bankruptcy ruling

Detroit workers denounce attack on pensions, moves to sell DIA art

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On the eve of US Judge Steven Rhodes' ruling in the Detroit bankruptcy case, workers and youth in Hamtramck, a working class enclave surrounded by Detroit, spoke out against the attack on city worker pensions and plans to sell off the priceless artworks housed at the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA). The Socialist Equality Party is holding a public meeting in Hamtramck today to explain the February 15, 2014 Workers Inquiry into the Attack on the DIA and the Bankruptcy of Detroit. (See "Meetings" at detroitinquiry.org.)

The judge's decision comes just days after the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) joined a legal action, together with major banks and bond insurance companies, seeking to force the city to squeeze as much money out of the DIA as possible, thereby gaining the "greatest return on the city's assets" for major creditors. (See: "The unions and the Detroit bankruptcy".)

Charlotte, who runs a small photography studio and was out shopping for groceries, told the WSWS, "They need to leave the DIA alone! When I was a kid I enjoyed it, and now my kids enjoy the DIA."

"The city isn't broke. That's a lie. They're trying to sell the art to feed the rich and keep the poor down. They're trying to take the pensions to pay off the banks.

"They should leave peoples' pensions alone," Charlotte's companion Charles added. "I lost my job when Chrysler closed down the Lynch Road plant in the 1990s. The UAW told me to give up my job. All the money you put into your union dues, it might as well go to the corporation."

Retired Chrysler worker Joseph Gregory told the

WSWS, "The poor man isn't going to benefit from this bankruptcy. They should keep the art not sell it. It's part of our history, the history of Detroit."

Referring to the threat to pensions, he added, "It's crazy that they want to take away city workers' pensions. You work all those years and there's nothing left for you. They nickel and dime you and take away everything.

"After I moved here from Dayton, Ohio in 1965 I got a job a Chrysler's Dodge Main plant. They were giving jobs away then. You could walk down any street and get a job. What are the younger people going to do now? There are no jobs. And if they get one they are working for low wages.

"In the 1960s the union stood together and kept what you had. Now the UAW and other unions are giving away everything. I have to pay higher co-pays when I see the doctor and I have no dental or optical benefits. The union gave up everything we worked for."

Joseph explained that after he was laid off from Dodge Main he was transferred Dodge Truck where he worked for 34 years until he retired in 1999. "I'm lucky I got my pension and Social Security. Some guys died six months after leaving the job. That's what the companies want so they don't have to pay benefits," Joseph told the WSWS.

If the bankruptcy goes forward as expected, the pensions of city workers will face massive reductions. Detroit residents and workers strongly denounced such moves, which will see constitutionally protected pensions slashed. The city's emergency manager is offering less than 20 cents for every dollar owed to workers to cover the unfunded portion of their pensions.

Hamtramck, once home to massive factories employing tens of thousands of workers, came under emergency management this summer, when Governor Rick Snyder appointed Cathy Square to “fix” the city’s finances. The closure of the Dodge Main plant in 1980, and of the American Axle plant in 2008 following a bitter strike, have had a devastating effect on the economy of the city of 26,000 residents.

In comments foreshadowing major cuts to services in Hamtramck, Square, in a conversation with *M Live*, pointed to Pontiac, Michigan, where fire protection and other city services have been fully disbanded and privatized, as an example of successful emergency management. “I learned in Pontiac that you get in and get out. We’re finishing up in Pontiac...We never wasted a day,” Square said.

An officer in the Hamtramck Fire Department told a WSWS team that about half of his team of 26 firefighters are being paid by the federal government through a FEMA grant, because the city can no longer cover their salaries. Current employees have also seen their pensions “frozen” and wages and benefits cut by 18 percent.

Commenting on the threat to Detroit pensions, he said, “How can they take what we earned? That’s the reason I took my job, because it had a pension!

“I don’t understand, to tell the truth. If you put in your time, you deserve to be taken care of in old age. We’re already seeing people die a few years out from retirement, and I know that cutting the pensions in half isn’t going to help.”

“They don’t want the workers to unite.”

Joe, a disabled machine operator, told the WSWS, “Hamtramck has been in bankruptcy for years. The fire department has been cut way down, and the ambulances have been privatized.

“My brother hurt his eye badly, and they said he was fine and would not take him to the hospital. It turned out there was serious eye damage, which should have been treated right away.”

Describing his own situation, Joe said, “I used to get \$140 per month for food, now it’s only \$80. I am forced to rely on charity food programs, and I barely find enough to eat every month.”

Mark, a long-time Hamtramck resident, told the WSWS about his family’s struggle to purchase enough food in the midst of cutbacks to food assistance. “My

wife and I are feeding four people off of two people’s food stamps,” Mark said.

“Now that they cut food aid, people are running out of food. People are struggling to stretch out the money they have, and finding churches, family and friends who can offer support.”

Harun, a young auto parts store worker and pre-med student, told the WSWS about his experiences with health services in Detroit, describing a scenario which is familiar to many working class families.

“Obamacare is only going to make things worse. He said it would lead to affordable health care but it won’t. It’s all for the insurance companies and hospitals.

“I got a collapsed lung from college wrestling. My trip to the Detroit Medical Center cost \$9,000 for the ambulance and emergency medicines, and then another \$11,000 for the MRI,” Harun told the WSWS.

“Then they kicked me out, even though I had a 65 percent collapsed lung, because my insurance wouldn’t pay for the expenses. They woke me up at 6am, gave me some jello and told me to go home. A doctor later told me I shouldn’t even have been walking with my lung like that,” Harun said.

Referring to the Detroit bankruptcy, he said, “The DIA is one of the few things left in Detroit and they want to take it away. When I was younger we went on school trips to the art museum. They are talking about getting billions from the DIA.”

Workers also spoke to the WSWS about the breakdown of Detroit’s transportation system and the absence of any dignified employment opportunities for job seekers in the city. “The buses in Detroit are very slow and they pack everybody in,” Frances said. “If they get in an accident, everybody is going to get hurt.

“How are you supposed to work when they don’t have any jobs? People need that money, and they can’t even get it because no one will hire them,” Frances said.



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