

Detroit firefighters, city workers speak out on bankruptcy decision

Our reporters

16 December 2013

Detroit fire firefighters and workers at the city's giant sewerage treatment plant spoke out last week on the December 3 decision by US Judge Steven Rhodes to sanction the bankruptcy and give a green light to the attack on pensions and benefits nationwide.

One firefighter, rejecting the claim, constantly repeated by the capitalist media, that "there is no money," told the WSWS, "They're paying millions to Jones Day. We can't possibly be broke. I think it was orchestrated from the beginning by wealthy people who control the state and the city. Why else would they hire a bankruptcy lawyer," he said, referring to Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr, a former Jones Day law partner, "except if they wanted to file for bankruptcy?"

Another firefighter noted that in the summary of his ruling, "Judge Rhodes even acknowledged it was a conspiracy. It had been planned for years by Snyder and Jones Day, and Orr rushed the filing to get it through," before several lawsuits could be filed to stop it, he said.

When the WSWS team pointed out that the plans to "revitalize" downtown Detroit are being implemented by and serve the interests of the ultra-wealthy, the firefighter responded, "Those adjustable rate mortgages caused the collapse, and now the Dan Gilberts of the world come in and started buying up everything for cheap," he said, referring to the billionaire Quicken Loans CEO and real estate developer. "The rich have just gotten richer off the crash they caused."

The WSWS reporter pointed out that the Obama administration has actively supported the moves to throw Detroit into bankruptcy, prompting the firefighter to comment on the use of racial and identity politics by the political establishment. "They used race for years to divide people. The peasant doesn't care what color the king is, he still cannot hunt on the land."

Pointing to the history of bitter class struggles in the city, he added, "Just like when Ford used to send out his goons against workers, that's what we have right now."

Asked about the impact of deindustrialization on the city of Detroit, the firefighter said, "The corporations sent our jobs to other countries, and now our kids are supposed to die fighting the country where the father's job went."

He then explained the attack on firefighters and other city workers, including retirees who are losing their city-paid health benefits and being forced to purchase private insurance on Obama's health care exchanges or dumped onto Medicare. "They're trying to give us \$100 dollars per month to replace our health benefits. It might as well be a massive pay cut," said the firefighter.

"Thirty-five percent of the fire companies are shut down. All the recreation centers have been forced to close except for two or three in the entire city. Now they're going to sell the Department of Water and Sewerage, too," he said.

"This kind of stuff has been going on for a long time. Like the clothing factory fire back in the early 1900s," he said referring to the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York City, which killed 146 garment workers. "They wouldn't give the workers more exits and space to work. They basically barricaded them inside the factory," the firefighter said.

Near the end of the discussion, the fireman referred to the importance of historical knowledge in guiding the struggles of the present, saying, "I like my history. Everything is cyclical, and if you don't know your history, you're doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past."

The WSWS also spoke to a worker at the sewerage

treatment plant on the city's southwest side last week. Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr has already initiated moves to "regionalize" the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD), a step which would remove the department from city ownership and pave the way for privatization. During testimony in the bankruptcy hearing, a consultant hired by the state to review Detroit's finances, investment banker Kenneth Buckfire, said that private equities were very interested in the DWSD, provided they are able to crank up the rates once they have taken over operations from the city.

James, a veteran water and sewerage worker, said, "They're taking money from our pensions but that money should be taken from the banks. The banks are getting rich off the swap deals they pushed on the city.

"When we worked for the city we accepted lower pay because we were counting on the benefits, including pensions. Instead of taking from us what about the businesses that got all the tax cuts. Why not stop that?"

"Detroit used to be the center of the auto industry. How many plants have left the city? They moved from city to city looking for the lowest tax rates. They say they are creating jobs but they are cutting jobs. First they moved out of the state and then out of the country. Look at places like Flint. They are ghost towns now.

"Here in the Water and Sewerage Department they want to outsource most of our jobs," James said.

"Everyone around the world should have a job but no one should be working for Third World wages. Instead of those workers getting higher pay they are bringing the poverty wages here. They want cheap labor and to be able to pollute all they want too, James said.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact