Inquiry gains momentum among workers

Detroiters denounce the widening social divide

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Campaigning at an auto factory and Detroit's farmer's market over the weekend, supporters of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) found strong interest and warm support for the February 15 Workers Inquiry into the Attack on the DIA and the Bankruptcy of Detroit.

Campaigners distributed a fresh appeal to workers at Chrysler's Warren Truck plant on Friday and at Eastern Market on Saturday. It denounces the decision by Judge Steven Rhodes, which first acknowledged the bad faith efforts of the conspirators who filed the bankruptcy and then endorsed it. "We say not so fast!" reads the statement. "It is time to hold a counter-trial to name the names, bring the facts to light and hold them accountable before the working people."

A campaign team, including members of the IYSSE at Wayne State University and other schools, distributed the call for the workers inquiry to hundreds of workers during the shift change Friday afternoon at Chrysler's Warren Truck plant in suburban Detroit.

Larry Porter, the chairman of the Inquiry, spoke on a bullhorn urging workers to attend the February 15 event. In his remarks he pointed to several key facts that the Inquiry has already brought out, including how attorneys from Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr's former law firm, Jones Day, had drafted a blueprint on how politicians could use the bankruptcy courts to override state constitutions and gut pensions.

Referring to the precedent-setting character of the bankruptcy judge's ruling, Robert, a newly hired worker, told the WSWS, "Cities and lawyers around the country are licking their chops after this ruling. They act like our pensions are a gift—not our money—and they want to steal it."

Many workers are beginning to recognize the bankruptcy as an assault on the entire working population. After 14 years at Chrysler one worker replied, "What is happening to the pensioners with the city of Detroit is horrible. And it is going to affect us, because they are going to slash our pensions. A lot of people wouldn't even look at this job if they didn't know what they are going to get at the end of it. They don't even have dental anymore for the retirees and the vision benefits are terrible. They have cut everything."

Gordon, also from Chrysler, added, "What is happening to the workers in Detroit is scandalous. They are trying to take away everything they can get a hold of—the pensions and the art from the DIA.

"They are claiming that the pensions are underfunded, but I don't believe they are that underfunded. It is wrong that they are planning to pay the bankers 85 cents on the dollar and the pensioners just 10 cents. Nobody gets 85 cents on the dollar in a bankruptcy."

On Saturday, at Eastern Market, a Ford worker with 25 years at the giant Rouge complex, "the home of it all," as he called it, stopped when he heard campaigners discussing the looting of the city by billionaire Dan Gilbert. "He wants us to pay for the stadium," interjected the Ford worker, Dave Cox, referring to plans to subsidize a new hockey stadium for Gilbert's co-billionaire Mike Ilitch.

The SEP statement on the Inquiry quotes Gilbert bragging about the unprecedented opportunity to profit from the suffering of the working class in Detroit. "For probably the first time in Western civilization," said Gilbert, "large parcels of vacant, pristine land that have

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paved streets, utilities of all sorts—everything at affordable prices."

Dave's attitude was typical—indignant, and angry. "On my back… We are paying for their stadium, and they are billionaires. It makes me ill!"

"They say the rich get richer," the autoworker continued. "But you could revise that today and say the CROOKS get richer. Criminals control everything in our society.

"These are the same sons-of-bitches who get a pin on their chest because they donate something to the poor people. This is our money that he stole from us, and his little donation justifies stealing from the poor. Look, this is not Robin Hood stealing from the rich. He is living in a 10,000-square-foot mansion that we paid for. It is terrible!

"The rich people are feeding the poor people chicken feed, and they are eating it because it is the only thing they get."

Lenore Jackson works at the Detroit Water Department. When she heard campaigners describing the struggle of low-income tenants who are fighting eviction from the Griswold Street apartments, she came over smiling and saying, "I want to hear this. They did that to my son."

Her son is disabled and requires dialysis treatments three times a week. He had a Section 8 housing subsidy and was living in a building near the medical center. Wealthy developers seized it and forced the residents out. Lenore's son lost his home and government support. She said, "Now he's in a house way out on Evergreen Road, sharing the rent. It is unsafe, and it's hard for him to get to his treatments."

The emergency manager has floated the proposal to sell the water department to private investors, forcing out older workers and replaced them with low-paid younger workers. "They can hire them at anything," said Lenore, "and pay them no pension.

"I want to know what's happening," she added about the Workers Inquiry. "We have the right to know, and the news only tells you what they want you to know."

The campaign became a running conversation as political questions are becoming more prominent in the thinking of workers.

Kim Knight spoke about the criminality of the banks in the mortgage business and its devastating impact on entire neighborhoods and regions. She bought a house in 2005, and, like so many others, after paying exorbitant sums in a desperate effort to keep it, lost everything in 2009. The bank would not work with her, then after foreclosing, sold it for $23,000.

"I paid over $40,000.00 over two years to keep up with the interest, but I was always behind. They set it up that way. All my neighbors were ruined—a truck driver, a welder, a nurse—good hard-working people, and they all lost everything.

"Keegan (her son) was six when I lost the house, and I couldn't get on my feet again until a few months ago." She explained the wide impact. "My neighbor was in computers, making $23 an hour on the late shift. The company opened a facility in India. They told him that if he trained everybody, he could keep his job and move to days.

"One Friday night they called him at home and told him not to come in. He lost his house. His wife divorced him. They really destroyed people's lives. These were good people. When the trucker lost his job after 17 years, he had a nervous breakdown and died within a year."

Her companion, Russ Banks had been laid off from the steel mill at Zug Island in 2008. Before leaving he told the campaigners both would definitely come to the inquiry.

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