

SEP and IYSSE teams campaign for February 15 meeting

Workers speak on Detroit bankruptcy inquiry

Tim Rivers
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Workers and young people responded strongly last week to the campaign for the upcoming Workers Inquiry on February 15 into the bankruptcy of Detroit and the threat to the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA). Members of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) took the campaign to Detroit-area auto factories, fire stations and the DIA itself.

As the inquiry approaches, some basic themes that have been developed in the World Socialist Web Site (WSWS) are finding a strong resonance among workers and young people in the region. In particular, the bankruptcy of Detroit and everything that goes with it are becoming more clearly identified as part of the general assault on the conditions and lives of the working population by a predatory and relentless ruling elite.

What is happening in Detroit is now recognized by many to be a test case for similar attacks being prepared in major cities throughout the country, and around the world.

Jeff Karrick and Angel Warren grew up in Detroit and came to the DIA as children. They spoke with us in the museum's Kresge Court. After we pointed out that the plan now being advanced by private foundations to remove the DIA from public ownership would further threaten the access of workers to the collections, Angel responded that the whole enterprise was "totally misrepresented in the media—surprise, surprise! I thought that was the point of private investors getting involved—to save the museum. What they were supposed to be doing was to protect the DIA and prevent the selling of art."

Jeff added, "If it becomes subject to whatever the management of that foundation or non-profit corporation decides, when times are tough in Detroit,

the city administration will come asking them to sell artworks to subsidize the city. If they do it once, it will never stop. 'How do we get money quick? Sell one of our priceless treasures ...'"

Both of them remember coming to the DIA as children and consider the museum an essential part of education for all young people. "If the museum is privately owned, it will be harder for people to view the art. When it is privately owned, the admission will be more like \$20.00. The average person working in Detroit will not be able to afford to come."

"This reminds me of the video game called Fable in which you become the monarch," said Angel. "One of the decisions you have to make is whether to invest money from your treasury to open the library up to everyone, or to set it up so that only rich people can use it."

Jeff told us, "They attack the working class under the guise that they have to make cutbacks or there will not be enough money to protect the country against [foreign] invaders."

Angel spoke about the ubiquitous "war on terror" as "a veil for what they are really trying to do." When she was a student in drama class, the budget was always being cut. "Who decided that sports was more important than art, and why?" she asked.

"Knowledge is power," Jeff said. "If they make it harder for the average worker to access art, they will not have the inspiration and insight to criticize the status quo."

"They filter what they want us to know," added Angel. "Historically, people told stories and recorded history through art when they could not read," she said. The museum is so important because the experience that visitors of all ages receive—from the wall texts, to all the different collections from different continents

and different centuries and special exhibitions—is unique and irreplaceable. “We need it now, especially,” she added, “because we do not know how to look at art as a whole. Most people would not know how to view and understand a particular art work without the context of the museum.”

Jeff talked about the relationship between art and the history of social protest and class struggle. He said, “Some of the nudity depicted in artwork here was forbidden at the time. That is how people would tell stories to challenge authority. We cannot afford to lose this,” he continued. “Look at the impact on children. I remember the DIA from my trips here as a child. That is why I wanted to bring you,” he said, turning to his companion.

They talked about how Detroit is being watched and discussed by people everywhere.

“There is a Simpsons game app for the android and iPhone that jokes about Detroit. Everybody’s talking about it, saying things like, ‘At least we are not bankrupt like Detroit,’ or referring to it as ‘little Beirut.’”

We met Crystal outside the Ford Michigan Assembly plant in Wayne, Michigan, where the CMax and Focus models are assembled. She hired in two years ago, and is on the C-crew of new hires who work for \$14.00 and \$15.00 per hour without pensions or full medical benefits. Her husband works for the city of Detroit. She is angry and bewildered by the barrage of attacks directed against the working class from every direction.

“This is unfair for workers who have worked 20, 30 and 40 years in order to have a retirement, then to take their own money from them,” she said. “They are taking it from people who are retired and from those who are currently working.”

“Regardless of how in debt the city is, these people worked hard for their retirement. My husband is a Detroit police officer. The same people who are taking their pensions from them are the ones who promised to provide good pensions. They did not pay into social security, or save any money because they were promised good pensions. Now they have nothing to retire with.

“We have been discussing this same situation. A legacy worker at Ford with 10-plus years seniority is making \$30 per hour working right next to a new hire making \$14 or \$15, who is doing the same job—and

Ford Motor Company is making record profits in the billions of dollars.

Under this contract, the top pay we can receive is \$19.26. But once they reopen the contract, that could go up ... or it could go down.

“We are paying for the profits they are making. I don’t understand why politics are the way they are. They have caused so much chaos for the people in the plants and those working for the city of Detroit. People bought homes and cars and put up money for their children’s education. And now they are taking it all away from them. This is a slap in the face to all working people.

“I have a co-worker who was making \$30 per hour as a part-time employee five years ago. When he was hired full-time, they cut him down to \$15 per hour and he still does not have the benefits that he was working for.”

A Detroit firefighter spoke to the WSWS about the threatened attacks on city worker pensions.

“We’re the canary in the coal mine. Chicago is looking at pension cuts right now. They see bankruptcy as a way they can get out from under their pension debt. After 9/11 firefighters were heroes. How long did it take for us to become the enemy?”

“Pensions are something we earned. It is deferred income—wages and benefits.

“The union is telling us nothing. Every time we ask them something, they say they can’t comment on what is going on because we are in mediation.”

Another veteran firefighter told us, “America spends more than the next top ten countries combined on its military. We need to put the government back in the people’s hands. It is now run by the corporations, for the corporations.

“With the cuts that have been carried out our response time to fires has increased.” He opposed the threat to the Detroit Institute of Arts, adding, “I love the DIA. That exhibit they had on the history of animation was phenomenal. I don’t want to see any of that leave.”



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