

# Detroit water department workers angry at layoff plans

Our reporters  
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Last week, the *Detroit News* revealed a plan to eliminate more than 40 percent of the jobs at the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD) over the next few months. The department, which is being targeted by Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr, will be reduced from 1,800 workers to less than 1,000 and leased out to a new Great Lakes Water and Sewer Authority.

A WSWS reporting team went to the Waste Water Treatment Plant in southwest Detroit, one of the largest in the US, with the statement issued by Lawrence Porter, chairman of the Workers Inquiry into the Bankruptcy of Detroit and the Attack on the DIA & Pensions. Titled, “Defend Detroit water workers’ jobs,” the statement made an appeal to water workers to attend the upcoming Detroit Workers Inquiry on February 15.

City officials and the corporate media have been subjecting Detroiters to an intensifying propaganda campaign on the so-called “plan of adjustment,” which Orr is set to release soon. A “grand bargain,” involving money from the state and private foundations is allegedly being used to “save” pensions and prevent the selloff of the artwork of the Detroit Institute of Arts, the media claims. In reality, the deal is aimed at securing the support of the trade unions for the restructuring plan, by providing city unions with a half-billion dollar retiree health care trust.

The announced layoffs in the water department are just the beginning of job cuts that will be part of the adjustment plan, which is designed to pay off the financial predators responsible for the economic state of the city. Workers at the wastewater treatment facility expressed their anger and disgust at the plan.

One veteran worker expressed his concern over the cuts, “How are you going to cut 700 jobs and have

quality water?”

Nate, a water department worker with 28 years said about the proposed layoffs, “It’s robbery. From 2010 to now it has really ramped up.

“They have the nonunion workers reclassified. They are trying to get the workers with high seniority to retire. Needless to say the morale is down. There will be understaffing. They are going to be tearing up the equipment. It costs a pretty penny to service them.”

“The director lied,” he continued. “All Sue McCormick [DWSD director] is interested in is getting the money. This is a cash cow. There has been a fight over it for years. It is all dirty. They are not looking out for the ratepayers. The quality of the water is getting ready to go down. The workforce is being dumbed down. This is serious business. They don’t have to do things this way. It is designed to fail.”

A wastewater treatment plant operator said, “It is the idiots in charge of the asylum. The chickens will come home to roost. If their mission is to have a demoralized workforce—mission accomplished. They have cut too much to have a quality product.

“With the demands of these plants, the skill sets are not up to par. Take working in the lab. It takes years to be good at that. To say you are going to get two weeks training to be an operator—that’s ridiculous. It takes years to get good at this.”

Another worker added, “They are using every means available to get rid of people. They are not letting anything slide, now.”

An engineer expressed his concern about the fate of pensions in the Detroit bankruptcy. “We are hearing pensions are underfunded, but we are getting different numbers,” he said. “What is the real number? \$500 million is what the trustees say, but Orr says the number is \$3.5 billion. Something is wrong.

“The pensions are 80 percent or more funded. The police and fire pensions are more than 90 percent funded. Ours is 87 percent. Even in the worst-case scenario that is a cut of 15 percent. I think Orr is going to propose 10 cents on the dollar. That can’t be justified.

“No one is opening the books for public audit. You ask anyone, they will tell you the same thing, we need to see the numbers.”

One of the workers who registered for the Inquiry told the WSWS about the huge transformations in the city over the last few decades. “I had a friend who had so many different factory jobs in the auto plants. He would get pissed off about something at a plant and quit. He would get a job at another plant right away. There were just so many jobs around. Those days are long gone.”



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