Detroit firefighters speak on Workers Inquiry

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With less than a week before the Workers Inquiry into the Bankruptcy of Detroit and the Attack on the DIA & Pensions, the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with Detroit firefighters about the Inquiry.

Keith, a Detroit firefighter, and his wife Dianne, are both registered to attend. They spoke forcefully about the bankruptcy and the brutal cuts to social benefits being carried out by the federal government.

"In my opinion," Keith said, "there is no basic difference between the Democrats and Republicans, they are all the same and as far as I am concerned, they had designs to take over the city for a long time. They are using Detroit to set a precedent for what will be done all over the country.

"The government is cutting food stamps under conditions where there are 27 million people who need help. Close to half the population of this country needs some form of assistance because of low wages. They come and take more and more from the people while they are continuously bailing out the banks.

"We have to stop this! They want us to be good slaves, come to work and at the end what do we have to look forward to? They are cutting pensions, social security and medical insurance."

Dianne added, "I attended every day of the trial in Rhodes' court during the bankruptcy hearings. Many workers are oblivious to what is taking place because they do not have the time to follow things. They are working very hard just to make a living.

"It was clear to me from the hearings that Rhodes wanted to set a precedent. He admitted in court that Orr did not bargain in good faith but then went on to rule that pensions are not constitutionally protected. This will now become the model in city after city. The entire thing was planned from the very beginning.

"The bankruptcy courts are there to protect the banks, not the retirees. Rhodes said in court that he felt so sorry for the pensioners and also indicated that Snyder intentionally cut Detroit off from funds but then ruled in their favor anyway. Do they really believe that people are that stupid? Who are you kidding?

"From the very beginning, Orr was brought in proceed over the bankruptcy of the City. They came in to intentionally do just that. Orr's credential in law is bankruptcy. It is economic and political dictatorship."

"What they are doing is criminal. The banks, big corporations, the insurance companies, they are all criminals. DTE Energy is charging people hundreds of dollars that live on a fixed income, which they cannot possibly afford to pay. They then push people into stealing electricity to keep warm and they then lock them up in their jails when they break the law.

"The other day, I was listening to a news report where a privatized company who builds prisons said; we will come and build the jail as long as you guarantee over 90 percent occupancy! What has happened to this democracy? What does it say about our society?"

They concluded, "This is not a black and white issue, it is a class issue. We have to educate people."

Robert, a firefighter on the east side of Detroit, spoke about the Detroit bankruptcy and the demolition of large portions of the city. "I have been in the Fire Department 10 years. If they keep cutting our pay, I am going to have to leave.

"How much is enough if you are a billionaire? There is enough to go around, but they hoard it. The economy is bad and they have people who are willing to work for $10 an hour to feed their families.

"My dad worked for the city for 26 years. He worked all those years and they are messing with his pension and medical. He is 76-years-old. Where is he going to work? I say these guys who are retired worked for that. The bankruptcy is a ploy to get rid of the pensions."

Robert spoke to the WSWS about the deal to set up a

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Voluntary Employment Beneficiary Association (VEBA) trust fund controlled by the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) and other unions. “What is it, a trade off? We will give you $350 million, but you are signing away your bargaining rights. I wouldn’t doubt that they will try to get us to accept a 401(k). The unions are not really effective. They have the same aim as the politicians: to get their interests looked after.

“I have small children. I have to think about them too. It is at the point, is this job worth the risk? Ceilings fall, porches, I could be killed. Who will take care of my children? I don't want to have to make the choice, do I feed my kids or do I take my meds.

“We had a worker who was hit by falling concrete. He is paraplegic now. The city is talking about cutting his benefits. We knock 10 years off our lives inhaling stuff on the job. We have guys dying off from heart attacks, aneurisms. They are not much older than me.

“I remember one firefighter, an unusually big and strong man. He got into one of these chemical fires, and inhaled something bad—he was gone in six months.

“Downtown is getting to be only for the wealthy. Something is going on. They want all these old houses to burn down. I think the banks want them to burn. They want these areas cleared out. They can take it as a tax write-off. In the long run they want this as a city for the wealthy,” Robert concluded.

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