

Workers Inquiry discussion focuses on political strategy to oppose Detroit bankruptcy

Our reporter
18 February 2014

The Workers Inquiry into the Bankruptcy of Detroit and the Attack on the DIA & Pensions was held on Saturday February 15 at Wayne State University. The WSWS published an initial report on the meeting here and will be posting the main reports in the coming days. Today we publish an article on the discussion at the hearing.

In addition to five main reports, the Workers Inquiry into the Bankruptcy of Detroit featured extensive discussion from participants.

Contributors from across the US and around the world, including SEP members from Australia and Germany, made statements to the Inquiry. These statements highlighted the national and international character of the social counterrevolution, with Detroit seen by the ruling class as a model for dismantling pensions and other workers' rights.

Comments and answers from panelists focused on the basic questions of political strategy in developing a working class movement against the bankruptcy and the attacks taking place on the working class worldwide.

Many of those who spoke expressed the desire to fight, a sentiment that is broadly shared by workers throughout the city. Speaking from the floor, Willie Griffin, vice president of the Griswold Apartment Tenants and a former auto worker, said: "I'm a senior citizen of the United States of America, and I want to know when and where can we get started with a march to our president in Washington, to let him know that we're fighting for the generations to come.

"This is a human right, and our rights are being taken away from us. We should be able to stand for what we believe in and not let our rights be taken from us."

The Inquiry chairman, Lawrence Porter, addressed this question. "Brother Griffin," he said, "raised the question about preparing for a march. And we certainly agree with the sentiment of struggle. In fact, the feeling among more workers in Detroit who are facing massive cuts, including Water Department workers, bus drivers, firefighters, is a sentiment of struggle."

Porter noted that the unions have worked to suppress opposition and enforce cuts. "People are looking for a way to oppose what's happening," he said. "However, the main issue that we face is: who is our enemy, and who is our friend?"

Responding to Griffin and another contributor who called for the removal of Michigan Governor Rick Snyder as a solution to the problem, Porter continued, "The position that it's just Governor Snyder is not true. It's not just the Republicans. Indeed, it's a policy that's being carried out by both the Democrats and the Republicans."

Porter noted how many workers were unaware that President Barack Obama had supported the bankruptcy filing. The role of many so-called "left" forces was to conceal the role of the Democratic Party in imposing the attack on the working class.

"The most important issue to understand," Porter said, "is that all of these forces are representatives of capitalism. It's the banks and corporations that are saying: 'Pensions have to go—this money should be in my pocket.' So the real fight here is the fight against the entire economic and political system."

Diane spoke about the assault on workers living conditions and the siphoning of the city's wealth into the pockets of the rich. "I come here today to say that Detroit is being used as a model to take over the whole world. Everything that has happened in Detroit is an intentional act. They want our water, they're taking the pensions from us by design. We must educate other people, because people don't understand how these diabolical demons are taking their life from them.

"There are thousands of people who are losing their homes in the City of Detroit," Diane continued. "People are coming into Detroit and taking people's homes for a penny on the dollar." Addressing the panel, she asked: "We are talking about how we can bring Detroit back, how we can create jobs. But the bottom line is, Detroit was once one of the richest cities in the United States. Where did that money

go?”

Responding, Jerry White said, “That’s a good question. If the auto companies made \$15 billion this year, over the last century we’re talking about trillions of dollars in socially produced wealth. Under capitalism, that wealth is channeled into the hands of the private owners of industries and the banks.”

“They control all levers of government” White added. “They facilitate the use of the bankruptcy laws against the working class. The Democratic Party since the late 60s and 70s has repudiated any connection with liberal reformism, and that’s bound up with the crisis of American capitalism itself.

“Everywhere, the Democrats just as much as the Republicans, are closing schools, and slashing wages,” White said. “One of the fundamental reasons why the unions promote the Democratic Party is because the Democrats are more likely to embrace the unions to use them to attack the working class. That wealth that is produced by the working people has to be utilized for human needs, not the private enrichment of a few.”

Responding to a student’s question about promises that development projects by billionaires Dan Gilbert and Mike Ilitch would provide jobs for youth, an SEP supporter said: “The Detroit bankruptcy is being promoted by the rich and their media mouthpieces as the only avenue to improve the lives of workers and young people. They repeat as often as they can that Detroit is a city where young people can come to find new industries and jobs, such as at Quicken Loans, and build their fortunes. What has come out is that these young people are working in miserable conditions, long hours on commission and with constant threat of dismissal. These workers also live in what is called company housing, where their rent is going right back to their employers, who own the land.”

Explaining the international significance of the Detroit bankruptcy and the international significance of the Inquiry, SEP National Secretary (Australia) Nick Beams said, “Last Monday, the Toyota Motor Company announced it was closing its Australian manufacturing operations following earlier shutdown decisions by both Ford and General Motors. There will no longer be a car industry in Australia.

“We see the same line up of forces there as we do in this city,” Beams added. “The banks and major corporations give their orders, their flunkies, the capitalist politicians carry them out, working in the closest collaboration with the unions to suppress any independent struggle by the workers.”

Christoph Dreier, a leading member from the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG, Socialist Equality Party) in Germany, also addressed the Inquiry, saying, “You are

showing a perspective to fight back independently of the trade unions and the Democratic Party and all their pseudo-Left defenders.”

“The Ruhr area is one of the poorest areas in Germany,” he added, “It was the industrial center of the postwar period. Like Detroit it was hit by deindustrialization. General Motors is now closing one of the last auto plants in that area. The city of Bochum, where the plant is located, launched a huge campaign under the title, ‘This is not Detroit.’ They paid some artist to show that the closure of the plants won’t lead to the similar poverty of Detroit.

“We explained in an article that quite the opposite is true,” Dreier said. “The attacks in the Ruhr area are very similar to the attacks in Detroit, and the trade unions are playing the same disastrous role. But today the workers of Detroit started to fight back, independently from the unions and the bureaucracy. And from now on workers of the Ruhr area can proudly say, ‘This is Detroit!’”

Jake, an SEP member from California, spoke on the use of municipal bankruptcies—such as those of Stockton, Vallejo, and San Bernardino—to redistribute wealth from the working class to the rich.

“The situation in California, like in Detroit, is a reflection of the broader, historical crisis of capitalism. The response of the bourgeoisie has been open class warfare, in the form of a social counterrevolution aimed at the complete destruction of the gains of the working class. The response of the international working class must, therefore, be a conscious struggle for international socialism. The role of the Socialist Equality Party is to provide the historically necessary revolutionary leadership of the working class in their struggle for power,” Jake said.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact