

“Emergency Town Hall meeting” in Detroit promotes Obama

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On March 2 an “Emergency Town Hall meeting” was held in Detroit, co-sponsored by the Al Sharpton-affiliated National Action Network, a section of the trade union bureaucracy and the Workers World Party. Advertised under the heading, “Defend Detroit city worker pensions & services—Make the Banks Pay!” the meeting was ostensibly a response to the restructuring plan released by Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr on February 21, which contains savage cuts to city worker pensions.

The assembly, however, had nothing to do with a genuine mobilization of the working class. On the contrary it was a forum for Democratic Party politicians, the trade unions and their pseudo-left supporters to peddle the lie that the Obama administration could be relied upon to defend the people of Detroit.

A key speaker was Democratic US Representative John Conyers, one of the longest standing congressmen in the US House of Representatives, who disposes of enormous money and influence in Washington. Conyers told the audience, “This issue needs to be taken to the White House,” adding, “I’m going back to tomorrow to talk to the president of the United States about what we are doing here and how the federal government can help us.”

JoAnn Watson, a stalwart of Detroit’s Democratic political establishment who spent a decade on City Council, blamed the bankruptcy on the “lawless, ruthless Republicans” and demanded that the audience “take it straight to the White House,” saying, “we can’t keep this as a Michigan issue.”

This was echoed by Frank Westbrook of Amalgamated Transit Union Local 26 who said, “We got to march on the White House” and American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) official Ed McNeil who insisted, “we have to take it to the streets.”

This is pure posturing. Every speaker is well aware that the Obama administration has repeatedly rejected any

bailout for the city while working closely with former Mayor Bing and other local Democrats as they conspired with Snyder to throw the city into bankruptcy. Last year, attorneys from Obama’s Justice Department filed a legal motion on behalf of Orr to quash legal challenges from retirees to the bankruptcy.

Far from aiding workers in Detroit, the administration is explicitly using the city as a test case for the destruction of pensions for tens of millions of retired teachers, firefighters and other public employees across the country.

Invocations that Obama would rescue pensioners are aimed at blocking any independent political mobilization of the working class and maintaining the domination of the Democratic Party, which has overseen decades of attacks on the working class in Detroit.

Invariably, the speakers promoted racial politics, the stock-in-trade of the political establishment in Detroit and pseudo-left groups like the Workers World Party. “You can look at me and tell I’m from Africa,” Watson said during her speech. Another speaker attributed the social crisis in Detroit to “racist disinvestment” policies and “racist loans.”

Perhaps the most reactionary remarks came from Reverend Edwin Rowe, from the Central United Methodist Church, which hosted the event. He called the so-called grand bargain being crafted by Orr, the state government and wealthy foundations an act of “white-mail” and an instance of “economic exploitation that’s color coded.”

He referred to the leaflet being passed out by members of the Socialist Equality Party outside the meeting, which denounced efforts to label the bankruptcy as a “racist Republican takeover” as nothing more than effort to conceal the fact that the attacks being carried out were aimed at the entire working class—black, white and immigrant—and were being conducted by both big

business parties. Rowe said, “Some people in the parking lot will tell you this is not about race...but they are wrong.”

The population of Detroit has become so disgusted with the endless years of appeals to race peddled by the corrupt political and business establishment that the voters in the majority African American city chose a white mayor—Mike Duggan—in last year’s election.

Many of the local Democrats and corrupt businessmen that have ruled Detroit for years have been on the outs since the city came under emergency management. The demand for “home rule” and denunciations of the “white takeover” of the city are nothing more than an appeal to Snyder, Mayor Duggan, Judge Rhodes and Orr for a piece of the action of Detroit’s “revitalization” plan.

Reverend Rowe concluded with a reactionary attack on the Detroit Institute of Arts, promoting the barbaric notion that art and culture were not the concern of workers but only affluent, white suburbanites. “They didn’t talk about our pensions before we started messing with their art,” he said, suggesting that money from robbing the DIA from the people of Detroit would go to retiree pensions. “The fact is, if it’s between a mother struggling to raise four kids on a pension check, versus van Gogh, van Gogh will have to go,” Rowe said.

The unions have spread the lie that workers must choose between the DIA and their pensions, with AFSCME leader Ed McNeil notoriously declaring at previous occasion that “you can’t eat art.” In fact, the ruling class is determined to destroy pensions and strip workers and their families of the right to culture.

AFSCME and other unions have joined other major creditors to “monetize” the art not to protect pensions but the multi-billion dollar pension funds, which provide union executives with well-paid jobs and lucrative business opportunities. Far from defending the working class, the union bureaucracy is simply looking for their own cut of the spoils.

The groups that called the meeting have advanced a slate of reformist demands titled the “People’s Plan for Restructuring Toward a Sustainable Detroit” as an alternative to Kevyn Orr’s Plan of Adjustment. The “People’s Plan” includes policy proposals, some of which (such as increased enforcement of consumption taxes statewide) are reactionary on their face.

More importantly, the “People’s Plan” is based on appealing to Orr to implement its demands. This fact alone speaks volumes about the character of the meeting. The upper-middle class layers leading this project are

seeking a favorable accommodation with Orr and the corporate and financial elite. They are not interested in overturning capitalism and liberating the working class; instead they are positioning themselves to benefit from the historic crimes taking place under the euphemisms of “adjustment” and “restructuring.”

This includes the Workers World Party, a pro-Stalinist group, which after decades of promoting the Democratic Party and racial politics has found its way into the political establishment.

Far from organizing a genuine struggle to defend pensions and services, the “Emergency Town Hall meeting” was a filthy and dishonest affair aimed at preemptively stifling the emergence of an independent political movement among Detroit workers.

It is no coincidence that this event was held only weeks after the Socialist Equality Party held the February 15 Workers Inquiry in the Bankruptcy of Detroit and the Attack on the DIA & Pensions to expose the social, economic and political forces behind the bankruptcy and arm workers with a political perspective to fight.

The holding of such an inquiry, led by socialists and attended by retirees, low-income tenants facing eviction, city workers, college students and other young people, no doubt raised alarms among the powers-that-be. It also confirmed once again that the Socialist Equality Party is the only political force in Detroit fighting to mobilize the working class on the basis of a politically independent and socialist program to defend pensions, culture and every other social right of workers and youth.



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