

As savage cuts to pensions and benefits loom

Detroit Workers' Inquiry speaks to city retirees at club luncheon

Representatives of the Detroit Workers' Inquiry
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Representatives from the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the Detroit Workers' Inquiry spoke to Detroit City retirees Wednesday at a luncheon organized by a retirees' club at Baker's Keyboard Lounge jazz club.

"Social benefits must not be counterposed to the workers' right to culture; both are necessities as social rights that must be guaranteed to all," said Lawrence Porter, Chairman of the Workers' Inquiry. "We need both pensions and the Detroit Institute of Arts."

"The bankruptcy," Porter added, "is a conspiracy orchestrated by big business. The conspiracy was actively supported by large sections of the Democratic and Republic parties. President Obama and top officials from his administration have intervened in support of the bankruptcy.

"Andy Dillon, Michigan State Treasurer, is a leading Democrat, as is Orr, who worked on Obama's election campaign and was on his finance committee," Porter added. Porter also pointed to broader sections of Democrats who identified pensions as a problem that needed to be cut.

"Leading Democratic policymakers Paul Volcker and Richard Ravitch led the 2012 State Budget Crisis Task Force, which laid out a grand strategy targeting retiree benefits for massive cuts nationwide.

"Municipal workers and retirees are the last section of the working class to have guaranteed pensions, and the ruling class is determined to change that," Porter said.

"During recent months, the Democrats have, together with the Republicans, overseen severe cuts to unemployment benefits and food assistance. They are using Detroit as a model in this nationwide social counterrevolution. The day that Judge Rhodes ruled that pension cuts could go forward despite the protections in the state constitution, the Illinois legislature and the city

of Chicago legislature went into session immediately to cut the pensions of workers.

"Pensions were the hard-won gains of the struggles of the 1930s and the 1960s and '70s. Now they want to take everything back from the workers," Porter added.

Mary and Dorothy, retired Detroit city workers, spoke to the Detroit Workers' Inquiry representatives.

"This isn't about racism. It's about classism, the poor who are getting poorer and the rich who are getting richer. Snyder and Bing and Orr look like twins to me. I don't see color when I look at them," Mary said.

"You know, the carpetbaggers are in town," Mary said, referring to the virtual takeover of the city by billionaire investors such as Dan Gilbert and Mike Ilitch.

"When they get through sucking the lifeblood out of Detroit they are going to move on. And you know they don't pay any taxes.

"I live in Pontiac, and it's now a fully 'privatized city.' You don't even know you're in a city when you are there. Nothing is public. There is nothing downtown.

"If they get away with taking the pensions here, it's going to be a model that they will use in other cities. Just like when Reagan fired the Air Traffic Controllers and it became a model for breaking the unions nationwide. He saw that he could do that and get away with it.

"People come from all over the state to go to the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA). I used to walk through there and see Renoir. It is one of the most beautiful buildings in the city.

"All those big buildings downtown are getting bought up for nothing. And we know Dan Gilbert isn't paying taxes. That new arena also, for the Red Wings, they're not paying anything for it.

"You know, you mentioned Obama. I have to tell you that my nephew said to me when Obama came in 'We

were doing better before Obama.’ I said to myself why did he say that? He’s young and I dismissed it. But when you said he is a part of the whole system that began to make sense to me,” Mary said.

When the SEP and Workers’ Inquiry representatives noted that the city was decimated by systematic plant closings, Dorothy said that her father lost his job during the recession of the late 1950s and was told that if he wanted to keep it he would have to move to Trenton, New Jersey. “All of this has been in the making for 40 years. It even goes back all the way to 1958-59 with the Chrysler layoffs. My father got laid off from Dodge Main, my husband from Lynch Roads,” Dorothy said.

“The last jobs brought into the city were under Cavanagh. No jobs have been created in Detroit since 1964. The plant closings during the ‘80s and ‘90s really killed the city. They closed the big GM plant, the old Dodge Main plant, and many others, leading to huge layoffs,” Dorothy said.

“They’ve gotten rid of all the programs for the youth. There’s no place for youth to go, kids are on the street at the mercy of anybody.

“They also haven’t done anything for the neighborhoods for well over forty years. I remember when this was a proud city. There wasn’t any garbage in the street. Now the only place that’s clean is six blocks around where Gilbert and Ilich have invested,” she added.

“Prices are going way up. I used to get prescriptions for 20 dollars a month, now they are 60 dollars a month. I know people whose prescription costs have risen from 10 dollars to 375.

“And they have messed us up with hospitalization fees. You better not go to the hospital or you’re going to be in big trouble. There’s a huge co-pay for going into the hospital. For Blue Cross, you have to pay at least 20 percent. We end up with thousands of dollars in co-pays.

“Those that retired under 65 have no insurance. They took away our dental and vision, just like that. I’ve worked all these years, and its just like I’m nothing now. Pensions were supposed to be guaranteed,” Dorothy said.

Another retiree said that both she and her husband retired from the city. “You know, one of the things they are trying to do is to pit one section against the other, the police and fire against the other workers.

“My husband worked for the sanitation department, and as far as I am concerned his job was just as important as the police or fire department. Another friend of ours was a lineman for the lighting department. He would have to go

out in the middle of the night to fix a line or if a pole went down. All of the jobs kept the city running. You have to have people who collect the trash for the health of the city. The unions are pitting us against each other and using scare tactics.”

Another retiree, who chose to remain anonymous, spoke to the Workers’ Inquiry reporters. “The cuts are totally unfair. Our health care has been scavenged. I had Blue Cross for over 50 years, and now my plan is being stripped away. Co-pays to visit the doctor are way up, and so are prescription drug costs.”

“Our eyeglass coverage and dental insurance have been dropped completely. I worked in a very dangerous environment, overseeing 400 heroin addicts 7 days a week. It was often very scary work. I had people following me home, and I got a broken back while I worked for the city.

“I was also drafted into the Army and sent to Fort Hood, Texas for two years, to train with tank units preparing to be shipped to Germany. It was 42,000 soldiers getting ready for a war in Europe. We mustered up for the Cuban missile crisis, 40 trainloads, filled with tanks, trucks and people. We had to eat spaghetti for the next six weeks.

“I know I’m going to take at least a 26 percent cut. Then with the additional costs for health care and with the costs for my shoebox full of prescriptions, my budget is being crushed. It’s terrible, just horrible. People are going to be plunged into destitution,” he said.

“Our board only gets very limited information about what is going on,” he said, referring to the union-affiliated Detroit Retired City Employees Association. “We cannot believe anything written in the newspapers. What I do know is that many retirees basically won’t have any money once the cuts go through. For people who have big families, I simply don’t know how they will survive. I wouldn’t be able to survive if I weren’t married to my wife and able to take advantage of some of her pension,” he said.



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