

A discussion with Detroit retirees

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The protesters, consisting overwhelmingly of Detroit city retirees, attended the April 1 demonstration to show their opposition to the draconian cuts in pension benefits outlined in the recently released Plan of Adjustment Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr submitted to the court.

Orr's plan calls for a 34 percent cut of the already inadequate pensions most retired city workers receive (averaging only \$18,000 a year). Ratcheting up the attacks, Orr has increased the cuts to the pensions of uniformed retirees—firefighters and police—from 10 percent to 14 percent, as a means of pressuring the unions to come to a quick agreement.

As a part of a team of reporters from the WSWWS, I spoke to several workers and retirees at the demonstration on how they saw the bankruptcy and what they thought should be done.

Workers spoke passionately about the degradation being inflicted on the population of Detroit. Carl Anderson, a retired Detroit Water Department worker, said, “We are people, human beings; we are not like a business and can pick up and go somewhere else. We can't do that. What we have to live on is what we have. A lot of us can't go out and get jobs again.”

“They are cutting pensions,” continued Carl, “cost of living benefits, health care—it has to stop somewhere. We have no place else to go but in the streets.”

Citing the role of the Obama administration, Carl said the federal government has become indifferent to the conditions facing working people. Carl, like other retired workers under 65 years old, had to go onto Obamacare as mandated by the healthcare cuts carried out by Orr on March 1. Those over 65 were placed onto Medicare after health care benefits were cut 85 percent.

Carl continued, “We are trying to attain health care to stay healthy. But, where do you go after this? You can't afford healthcare. You really can't afford to live after they cut your pension.”

“They are treating us like animals,” shouted Carl, getting noticeably angrier. “It's like in the 1800s and we are farm animals. Once you served your usefulness, what did they do to you? That's basically what we are headed for. They have no more use for you, so are you supposed to walk off and die?”

“That's not going to happen,” replied Carl to his own question. “We are going to stand up against this.”

Janice McKinley, a dental hygienist, was at the protest to express her solidarity with the retirees. She made her feelings

known about the emergency manager with a poster she brought to the protest consisting of an artist's drawing of Kevyn Orr. At the bottom it exclaimed in bold letters, “Detroit's Dictator.”

The reverse side of the poster had a message for the banks; “Instead of a reward, UBS and Bank of America should be in jail with Kwame.”

“UBS and Bank of America made swap deals with Kwame,” stated Janice referring to the former Detroit mayor presently in jail for perjury, extortion and receiving bribes. “He went to jail. Why are we going to reward them instead?”

Several people stopped to take a photo of Janice's poster. “I see they like my poster,” quipped Janice. “This is the point I am trying to get across—we are supposed to be a democracy,” she said. Raising her concerns about why there isn't more opposition she continued, “But it's not just Detroit and Michigan. My question is, why aren't other cities screaming about what is happening in Detroit?”

We then had a discussion on why there wasn't more opposition to the bankruptcy of Detroit and the role of the unions in suppressing any opposition. “You ask why there aren't larger demonstrations.” I replied. “It is because the unions don't want it. They have the resources but are terrified of a genuine movement of the working class. They are afraid they will lose control and it will encourage workers to believe in their strength. They also are part of the Democratic Party and are opposed to any opposition to them. The Democrats and Republicans support the bankruptcy. The last thing in the world the unions want is a massive movement of the working class.”

We also discussed the argument by the unions and Moratorium Now that the issues facing Detroit and the working class in general were basically racial.

“Are you aware that Obama supports the bankruptcy of Detroit?” I asked. “No,” she replied. I then reviewed some of the findings of the Workers Inquiry, including the support for cuts outlined in Obama's State Budget Task Force and the calls for austerity by the Obama administration.

“Obama made it clear that there would be no bailout for Detroit even though he bailed out the banks and the auto industry,” I explained.

Janice lamented the declining social conditions facing broad sections of the population under Obama. “What you see on the news is the criminalization of the victims,” she said. “Five thousand people were cut off welfare last year (In Michigan).

What are people supposed to do? How can they live without anything?”

“You know,” she continued, “My brother and I have had a lot of arguments about Obama because he really supports his policies,” and explained she had become critical of them.

I then explained that the issue was not race but class, and that black and white workers throughout the state had voted against the EM law in November 2012 and defeated it.

“The Workers Inquiry,” I explained, “uncovered that out of 83 counties in the state, 72 voted overwhelmingly against the EM law in November 2012. The vote against the law was as high in upstate Michigan, which is overwhelmingly white workers, as it was in Wayne County that included Detroit.”

The impact the racist views promoted by the unions, the black elite in the Democratic party and the pseudo-left was revealed in a discussion I had with Bill, a retired Water Department worker who is African American.

When I asked him what he thought of the bankruptcy and the policies of Orr he replied, “I think this is totally racist. I think it is primarily white Republicans who want to take everything they can from every black person they can in the state of Michigan. I think the governor is really like the segregator in chief. I think he is the face of the new Jim Crow in Michigan. Every black community, he goes after. Any place where there are black Democrats, he goes after them. Every place that is not strongly for the Republicans, he takes everything that he can away from them.”

I then asked him if he was aware that President Obama supported the bankruptcy of Detroit. Like Janice he was surprised. “No, I was not,” replied Bill. When I challenged the racial view he presented he became defensive. “I know there are some good white people,” added Bill. I’m speaking primarily of Snyder.”

LP: “Yes, I understand that, but what about Kevyn Orr? He is black.”

Bill: “Orr doesn’t count as a black person.”

I pointed once again to the vote throughout the state against the EM law and the fact that major sections of the Democratic Party supported the bankruptcy including former Detroit Mayor Dave Bing, who is African American, Andy Dillon, the former State Treasurer, who ran for the Democratic nomination for governor, and Kevyn Orr, who worked on Obama’s election campaign.

“They don’t count,” replied Bill. “They are sellouts.”

When I began to point to the fact that the Democrats have shifted to the right—they bailed out the banks and corporations but have opposed any social programs for the working class—he admitted it was true.

“Look,” I said, “the Democratic Party is controlled by big money too.”

“Absolutely,” said Bill.

“The real issue,” I replied, “is uniting the entire working class against these conditions.”

“What do you propose?” asked Bill.

I explained that I was a socialist and that what was required was a political and industrial struggle of the working class against the defenders of capital. “We must break from the illusions that the Democrats are going to come in and help us when they are attacking us just as the Republicans.”

When I mentioned the cuts to food stamps and unemployment benefits by Obama, the Democrats and Republicans, he said he heard about the cuts but wasn’t aware it was pushed by the Democrats.

On the issue of industrial struggle I asked why wasn’t there a call for a general strike. “That would change things, wouldn’t it?” I added. “Yes, I think so,” stated Bill.”

I then explained that the unions are afraid a mass movement would get out of their hands and pose a political struggle. “We don’t believe the only way forward is with the Democratic Party. We call for a break with the Democratic Party.”

“I don’t know about that,” replied Bill.

We then discussed the 1937 sit-down strike and the struggles of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and the role of the socialists. “You had workers speaking different languages. The auto companies openly promoted racism to divide the working class. How did they overcome those divisions?” I asked. He didn’t know. I pointed to the fact that the organizers were socialist and appealed to workers to unite as workers, not on the basis of race or ethnicity.

“This is what we need today. Workers like yourself must understand that we are in a battle against the capitalist system and must unite globally. Then we will make real strides.

“Look, they are coming after us and they are not going to stop here,” I added.

“I agree with that,” said Bill. “I agree. This is just getting started.”



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