

Detroit water retiree speaks on health care, pension cuts

WSWS correspondents
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This is the second in a series of interviews the WSWS has conducted with Detroit city retirees. The first interview can be seen [here](#).

Representatives of the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) spoke to retired Detroit city worker Mushak Meah last week. The conversation was part of the SEP's effort to publicize and expose in detail the impact of looming pension cuts on the lives of retirees.

Meah's testimony highlighted the basic struggles facing poor and working people in Detroit in general and city retirees in particular. The household budgets of retirees are already crumbling under the impact of the cuts to health benefits, leaving thousands unable to pay for necessary medical care and continue supporting children and grandchildren.

As a result, retirees report surging psychological stress and anxiety, which often have lethal effects on seniors. Their bodies and minds strained to the breaking point by decades of intensive labor, retirees are particularly vulnerable amidst the social wreckage being produced by the bankruptcy and restructuring of Detroit, as Meah's comments illustrate.

Meah spoke about his long experience working for the city performing specialized tasks that are crucial to the upkeep and functioning of Detroit's water system.

"I worked as an electrical system control implementation supervisor. I worked on calibration of water meters and sewer meters for the communities, and monitoring of water and sewage usage of various cities, testing and repairing equipment, monitor motors and hydraulic controls.

"I had to go through 4 years of electronics training, and an additional 2 years of school for a water plant operator. I very seldom missed any days of work.

Going to work, taking care of my family, that was my whole business. I gave my blood and sweat for the city. I crawled around down in the sewer day after day," Meah said.

"They're stealing everything in Detroit. And they're not going to stop in Detroit. It's coming to everybody's neighborhood. Never have so many given up so much so a few can be so happy. It's like indentured servitude, where you work on the farm but never own it."

Meah told the SEP about his severe medical problems and the difficulties he faced in paying for adequate treatment based on his diminishing income.

"I have two types of bone disease, osteoporosis and Paget's," Meah said.

"We lost our medical coverage on the first of March. I had a previous treatment on March 5 2013, and have had to wait a whole year before I can have another, because my medical benefits were already limited.

"Since they announced the pension cuts. I've been having anxiety attacks. I'm trying not to cry everyday.

"With all my prescriptions and my \$2,000 deductible my budget is being destroyed. I don't have anything in life. I'm an old man, all I have is a car and I got that up for sale. My savings are getting burned up. I went from a 900 to a 700 to a 500 apartment.

"I pay \$567 out-of-pocket per month. Then I still have to pay for rent, lights, food, and car. I'm trying to liquidate everything I have just to keep our heads above water. I have to do side jobs to survive these days. They're killing me," Meah said.

Meah's son, who was present for the interview, interjected at one point, saying "I remember when I was about 12 years old, getting ready to go to a family vacation, when Dad got a page from a supervisor, and we had to go out to a job site. This happened all the

time. We have both sacrificed for the city, my Dad's life and my childhood."

Meah added, "The plant we went to was filling up with sewage, all that sewage was coming in, they wouldn't release me to go on my vacation. We had tickets, bags packed, and they wouldn't release me. Instead of being on vacation, we were wading knee deep in sewage. Those are the kind of sacrifices I have made.

"Getting up at three in the morning to deal with emergencies—my coworkers and I have thousands of stories like that," Meah said.

Speaking on the plans for takeover of the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department by a private entity, Meah noted that mass layoffs and the running of DWSD on a skeleton staff posed enormous dangers, saying, "There is no way possible that they can run the water department with 700 people as they are proposing. And the new people are being brought in at much lower pay. I used to get \$44 per hour, now they've cut it down to \$22 per hour.

"Now they don't have the people to handle the water main breaks. They're telling people, 'we'll get out there as soon as we can,'" Meah said.



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