SEP holds meeting of Detroit workers to oppose water shutoffs

WSWS reporting team
25 April 2014

The Socialist Equality Party held a meeting Wednesday evening near Wayne State University in Detroit to oppose the city's campaign of mass water shutoffs against residents who cannot afford their bills. Detroit city workers, students, retirees and others attended the event.

In his opening remarks, D'Artagnan Collier, a Detroit city worker who ran as the SEP candidate for Detroit mayor last year, condemned the order by Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr to shut off water to up to 3,000 households in the city per week. "It is critical that all sections of the working class come together against the brutal action," said Collier. He noted that as summer approached the threat to the health of city residents forced to live without water was "extreme."

Collier explained that there was mass hostility to the measures taken by Orr and the bankruptcy court to attack city worker pensions and sell off public assets, including the threatened privatization of the water and sewerage system. The trade unions, however, were not opposed to the bankruptcy and more than willing to sacrifice the needs of workers in order to pad the payrolls of the union executives. That is why, he said, the SEP was initiating the fight to mobilize the working class independently of the unions and the Democratic Party and the profit system they defend.

"We believe that utilities should be a basic social right guaranteed to all," Collier declared

Next to speak was Lawrence Porter, assistant national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party and chairman of the Workers Inquiry into the Bankruptcy of Detroit and the Attack on the DIA & Pensions held by the SEP last February. "What is taking place in Detroit is a social crime being carried out by a virtual dictatorship," he said. "This has enormous implications for the working class throughout the country and the world."

Porter explained that racial politics had long been used in Detroit to divide the working class and obscure the fundamental class issues. "One out of every six children in the US go hungry," said Porter. That is not a race issue—that is a question of poverty."

He said the drive to privatize water service was taking place throughout the country and posed a public health danger. "In Atlanta where the water was privatized, people became ill."

The Democrats, the Republicans and the unions were all united in their agreement with the Detroit bankruptcy filing and that workers had to accept massive cuts, Porter explained. "The working class must find a new way to fight, the old organizations and institutions have failed," he said.

In conclusion Porter urged those in attendance to register for the May Day meeting being held on May 4 by the International Committee of the Fourth International, the World Trotskyist Movement, against war and social inequality. "Along with the attacks on all our basic social rights and the growth of inequality we face the danger of war," said Porter. "The working class in every country has to stand up to express its opposition to the policies of the banks and corporations that are dragging mankind toward disaster."

After the opening remarks there were many questions and additional contributions from the floor. A retired city worker said he had spoken to workers repairing a broken water main last winter. "I said to them 'I see you out here fixing this main every winter, why don't you fix it right so you can quit coming out here?' They said they don't have the money to invest in the decaying infrastructure."

Another retired city worker explained that when he had first started working for the sanitation department they had three men on a truck. Later, under the

© World Socialist Web Site

administration of Coleman Young, that was reduced to one man. “They said this sacrifice would save money and save the city. What happened to those savings? Where has the money gone?” he wanted to know.

A resident of the Detroit enclave of Highland Park pointed out that water bills were so high that they were being put as liens against the property taxes on peoples’ homes. If this large bill is not paid the homes can be foreclosed on.

One worker asked how the working class could achieve its political independence.

A long time SEP member, Helen Halyard, said, “There is no short cut. We have to build a political movement of the working class. Nothing we have was given to us. They are now trying to turn conditions back to the beginning of the last century. A leadership must be built that will fight for the political mobilization of the working class in the struggle for socialism.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to several of those who attended the meeting.

A veteran city bus driver said, “It has never been like this. I have never heard of the water company doing things like that. It is bad enough people can’t pay their light and gas bills.”

He explained the cutbacks carried out by the city at the Department of Transportation. “Orr has caused a lot of chaos cutting city services. We don’t have the equipment we need to pick up people. They took our pay down from $17.31 to $15 and change. They are lowering our pay and going up on our co-pays and hospital visits. They have already cut deep, but they want more. If we don’t accept it when they say they are just going to impose it on us.”

Johanna, a retiree, said, “I think this was a very important meeting. It was very succinct and very informative—especially the parts where we learned about what was happening in other places, like Highland Park. We can see it’s not just happening in Detroit. It’s not just local, it’s not just state, it is not even just national—it’s international.”

Sekou Ujamaa, a concert promoter, said, “I think we should have a right to a certain standard of living—whether you’ve got a PhD or whether you’re working in the auto factory.

“Discussing the problems and becoming educated about them is important. Show them the facts and spread those facts around the world. And once you understand what’s going on the next step is to stop these things from happening.

“The powers-that-be are robbing the working class. They will not give up power without a struggle. We’re going to have to build a movement, build an army, really. Right now it’s an intellectual fight but once workers start demanding their rights it’s going to become a physical fight.”

Tyler, a young grocery worker said, “The meeting was very informative. It was inspiring to see so many people come out for a meeting like this.

“The comments at the end on Ukraine were really eye opening. I can see how this is not just about what is happening in Europe. They are using the war threat to divert the tensions growing among workers here in the US.

“I work for $11 an hour, doing the work of three people. At the end of the day I make $88 dollars, while the food I produce sells for over a $1,000. I’m taking home $300 a week, creating $7,900 for the store.

“After I pay rent, I have $60-80 to buy groceries every week. I am delinquent on my water bill as a result of being short at the end of each month. This party clearly has the right idea: water should be guaranteed to all, regardless of ability to pay. That would be at least one step toward a sane society.”

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site