Unions pose as critics as they collaborate with Detroit emergency manager

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Under conditions of mounting popular outrage against the restructuring of Detroit by the corporate-financial elite, the union bureaucracy and their pseudo-left affiliates staged a series of stunts this week to provide a political cover for their role as active participants in the bankruptcy process. This included a "Democracy Summit," sponsored by the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Council 25, a preliminary legal challenge to the emergency manager law, and a small rally downtown.

The primary concern of the unions is to block the emergence of a conscious political opposition by the working class to the bankruptcy and ensure that a portion of the spoils from the looting of Detroit goes into the pockets of the union executives. Their rhetorical and symbolic opposition to the state's undemocratic emergency manager law stands in flagrant contradiction to the actual record of the bureaucracies, which have collaborated with Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr to impose the dictates of the big banks and bondholders.

Last weekend, AFSCME and 13 other Detroit unions signed a deal with Orr, dropping any legal challenges to the bankruptcy and sanctioning deep cuts to city worker pensions, jobs, and health benefits. The Coalition of Detroit Unions, led by AFSCME, is now committed to ramming this sellout deal through its membership.

The union-affiliated retiree committees, moreover, have already agreed to 4.5 percent cuts to pensions, the elimination of cost of living adjustments and claw back of 15.5 percent from retiree annuity funds. These concessions are only the latest offered up by the unions, which have imposed repeated wage freezes and cuts on the city workers in recent years.

Announcing the deal, AFSCME official Ed McNeil said, "The unions are critical partners in the effort to bring our city back…We know operationally what needs to be done to save money and improve services. This agreement in principle offers an opportunity for the unions to provide regular input and guidance to city management." For their part, the bankruptcy court federal mediators hailed, "the very productive and constructive role that AFSCME Council 25 and its International played in the success of the negotiations."

As a reward for this deal, the unions are being handed a half-billion-dollar retiree health care trust fund and will retain some level of influence over the multi-billion-dollar pension investment fund.

On Tuesday, AFSCME Council 25 held a "Democracy Summit" in downtown Detroit. The event served as a forum for the union bureaucracy and various liberal and pseudo-left forces to posture as opponents of the emergency law, PA436. In an effort to conceal the role of the Democratic Party and the class interests behind the bankruptcy, various speakers sought to frame the issue as white Republican politicians attacking the rights of "black" Detroit.

A panel of religious leaders, described by AFSCME's Catherine Philips as "anointed ministers who are also activists," gave extended remarks, and called for a united front of the unions and the churches while playing the race card at every turn. Reverend Ed Rowe—who is white—declared that "this is an issue of white racism, it's not just about money, but mainly about race." Reverend Bill Kellerman similarly denounced the imposition of emergency managers as "a targeted spiritual assault against black cities."

On Wednesday, a team of attorneys—including those present at the "Democracy Summit"—presented arguments at the federal courthouse in downtown Detroit, in the case of *Phillips v Snyder*. The lawyers,

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led by Herbert Sanders, argued that the emergency manager law PA436 illegally targets Michigan's black population in violation of the 13th Amendment and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

The suit, which was initially blocked by the bankruptcy filing in July 2013, was allowed to proceed by US Bankruptcy Judge Steven Rhodes and is now going forward nearly six months after the Chapter 9 filing was approved. Rhodes is well aware that the case will likely remain tied up in the courts for an extended time and be resolved long after the restructuring of Detroit has taken place.

The state's emergency manager law certainly violates the most basic democratic rights by establishing a virtual dictator, which usurps local governments and has the power to tear up labor agreements, sell off public assets and impose the demands of the banks. The lawsuit, however, is a smokescreen aimed at promoting illusions that the capitalist courts will defend the rights of workers and that the trade unions are really fighting against the bankruptcy.

Many of the same forces that held the Democracy Summit staged a rally in downtown Detroit's Hart Plaza on Thursday. Billed as a May Day "International Workers Day" event, it began with a prayer breakfast sponsored by United Auto Workers Local 600.

The supposedly left-wing rally, attended by leading members of the pro-Stalinist Workers World Party (WWP), was replete with American and US Marine Corps flags. Reverend Rowe once again denounced the role of "white racism" while a large banner called on attendees to oppose the "racist" and "union-busting" emergency manager law.

These forces promote the political poison of racial politics to keep African American workers in Detroit politically subordinated to the corrupt Democratic Party establishment that has overseen the attacks on the working class and impoverishment of the city for decades. At the same time, they want to divide and weaken the working class and prevent a common fight by black and white workers.

They are seeking, furthermore, to promote the fallacy that the bankruptcy is a Republican plot, thereby concealing the central role of the Democrats and the Obama administration, which explicitly intervened in the bankruptcy court on behalf of Orr and is using Detroit as a model for a nationwide attack on public employee pensions and health care. Above all, they are frightened of the prospect of the development of any independent, organized opposition from below.

As demonstrated by the case of Lincoln Park, a downriver Detroit suburb with a majority white population, the destruction of democratic forms of rule is by no means confined to black communities. Michigan Governor Rick Snyder is now targeting the city, which has been ravaged by deindustrialization like Detroit, for a possible emergency manager and bankruptcy filing.

The corporate and political elite is determined to extend the financial dictatorship in Detroit long after Orr's term expires in late September. Whatever posturing they make about defending democracy, the unions will be more than willing to sanction such an arrangement as long as they can provide "regular input and guidance to city management" and be paid for it.

This week's public relations efforts were aimed at patching up the tattered credibility of the labor bureaucracy. A genuine struggle against the bankruptcy and the financial dictatorship in Detroit requires breaking with the pro-business organizations and developing an independent industrial and political movement of the working class to fight both big business parties and the capitalist system they defend. The Socialist Equality Party is the only leadership fighting for this program in the working class.

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