

Detroit City plumber denounces bankruptcy

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The WSWS interviewed Steve Paraski, a disabled master plumber with the city of Detroit, about his views of the bankruptcy of Detroit. This is the third in a series of interviews the WSWS has conducted with Detroit city retirees. The first and second interview can be seen [here](#).

Steve made it clear from the very beginning that he opposed the bankruptcy: “The bankruptcy is a crime. I bought the pamphlet you have and gave it to someone and told them to pass it on. Where is the outrage?”

“You need to look at it in the totality of this being planned years ago. [Emergency Manager Kevyn] Orr is looking to dump the liabilities and get someone to take over the water department. I think he is working in the interests of his friends at Jones Day.

“This debate about the Water Department has been going on for decades. They claim the Detroit Water Department is losing money, but they are planning for the city to get \$47 million per year for the lease of the infrastructure. How can this be losing money?”

“I think the whole thing was a setup. The funding was withheld by the state of Michigan and by the federal government to accelerate the situation in Detroit and push it to the precipice. They wanted to use the Chapter 9 to abrogate the pension obligations to municipalities and that’s exactly what they’re doing. I feel like I’m being robbed and cheated.”

Steve worked for the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department for over 20 years. Like many city workers, his job often involved long hours of work to keep the city going.

“I worked everywhere from the water plants with the 120 inch mains pumping out, to a 5/8th inch lead service that was put in in 1830.

“I would punch in Monday morning and I wouldn’t punch out till a week later,” stated Steve, explaining that he had to work on a water main break after a DTE Energy contractor bored a hole through a main. “300

feet of the road collapsed. I had to go out there on Friday afternoon about 5 o’clock.”

Steve stated that on another occasion he was hospitalized from chlorine gas poisoning.

“I was doing a repair on the chlorine injection pit, where the chlorine is injected into the raw water tunnel. The original piping was installed in the ’30s, when it was built. The pipe had rusted away. I had smelled chlorine before, but this time it was much worse. As soon as we lit the torch we had a huge flare. About an hour-and-a-half later, the other guy started showing the effects of it.

“We were taken to the hospital from 6 in the evening to 4 in morning. They spent about four to five hours just trying to figure out what to do with us. The last case of chlorine gas poisoning was World War I. When we inhaled the gas, it turned into a liquid in our lungs. It ended up burning our sinuses. I have damage in the right side of my sinus to this day. Three weeks after this incident we were hocking up yellow chunks of stuff from our lungs. My girlfriend was beating on my back to knock it out. Believe it or not, we got one day off for that.”

Steve began working for the DWSD in the 1980s and was injured several times due to the hazardous conditions he regularly encountered.

“I got injured on the job after a trench collapsed on me. I got hit with 3,500 pounds of dirt. When I came back to work they gave me a week off without pay for going into an ‘unsafe hole.’

“They told me it was my fault, but I didn’t have any control over it really. The hole has to be boarded and boxed and sloped. When we go to these repairs, we try to do them as expeditiously as possible. So, you make a judgment call. Is the hole safe enough? This one obviously wasn’t. After that, this guy, the assistant superintendent, started following me around.

“When the accident happened, the risk management

people told me that they actually should have taken me off of work two injuries ago.”

Steve said there was a huge change in the working conditions because of the layoffs carried out by Coleman Young. “When I started working in the 1980s there were seven plumbers. When I left in 2000, there were only two of us left.”

Steve said he went from making \$100,000 a year to only receiving \$611 a week, a reduction of two-thirds of his previous pay.

“They tried to give me a job for minimum wage and release themselves from any liability on my injury. A lot of times I’ll get a headache that is worse than any kind of migraine you could ever think of. My doctor told me I have all the symptoms of brain cancer. But it’s from the stenosis, the fluids not moving around in my veins.

“I had an MRI two years ago that showed I have degenerative changes in vertebrae C5. I have a severe injury to my upper spinal cord. So far, I have lost an inch-and-a-half in height as a result of the accident.”

Steve said that in the last year, as the city was going through the Consent Agreement and later the bankruptcy, his benefits were reduced significantly. In June or July, around the time the emergency manager, Kevyn Orr, filed for bankruptcy, the city informed him that bankruptcy allowed the city to eliminate his workman’s compensation.

“They stopped paying me by disputing the medical records that my doctor had been submitting. For 6-7 years my doctor was submitting the same records every month. Then they disputed it and then it stopped. As a result, my medical bills are piling up. My doctor hasn’t been paid since 2011 because the city is saying that we haven’t submitted the right records. It isn’t just me that they’ve done this to. They’ve done it to everybody that’s on workers comp.

“Presently, I take morphine because of the pain. I wake up all night. My hands go numb and burn. Yesterday I cut the tip of my finger and I didn’t feel it because my hand was so numb.

“I can’t get a job because no one will hire me. I’m considered a PT retiree—‘permanently totaled.’

“As a plumber, our wages were 20-30 percent less than the union scale, but we did it because we had the pension and benefits, which was part of the job. This is the part of what you were guaranteed when you signed

up. That’s what you were going to get. And now you’re taken away because you have a bunch of slick lawyers coming in? People made the sacrifice so that they could have the pensions.

“This town used to be beautiful,” continued Steve. “There used to be 100,000 auto workers living in Detroit alone. Then they started shutting down the factories. You had all the industries, all the skilled labor, all the shops and now it’s all gone.

“I’m worried about the breakdown of society. I’m worried about my kids. What the hell is going to happen to them? What is this world going to be like in five or ten years?

“It’s a crime what Orr and Snyder are doing, and these MFs are going to get away with it too. If I did something like this I’d be in federal prison and they’d throw away the key.

“AFSCME doesn’t give a shit either. In their monthly newsletter there’s a tiny little paragraph on what’s happening in Detroit, on what’s being done to their own members.

“No aid for Detroit, that’s what Obama said. But they just gave a billion or two to the Ukraine for some episode that they manufactured. They give them two billion dollars but they won’t give a thing to this city which was once the fourth largest city in the US.”



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