

Retired Detroit bus mechanics denounce cuts to pensions and transportation services

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The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke with John and Robert, two retired Detroit Department of Transportation (DDOT) bus mechanics about the upcoming vote on the Plan of Adjustment proposed by Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr and the ongoing cuts to the city's bus service.

Under terms of the “grand bargain”—agreed between Orr, the state of Michigan, wealthy private foundations and city worker unions—retirees will take significant benefit cuts. General retirees will see a 4.5 percent cut to their pensions and the elimination of an annual 2.25 percent cost-of-living increase. In addition, some 5,000 retirees will be forced to pay back tens of thousands of dollars in so-called “claw-backs” of benefits they have already received. (See Detroit retirees denounce plan to raid city workers' savings accounts)

This is on top of huge cuts to retiree health care benefits, which are being largely eliminated and replaced with a miserly stipend for those retirees who do not qualify for Medicare.

WSWS: What are your thoughts about the vote on the Plan of Adjustment?

John: They've got it to where it does not make any difference how you vote because you're going to get burned anyway. What kind of collective bargaining is that? They say this is the proposal, you either vote yes or no on it, but either way you get your benefits cut.

If you play their game, you become a part of it. So if you vote and then sign it and send it back, then they say “well you played the game and you agreed to the terms. You agreed to this because you signed it.”

Who is representing us? Who is standing up for us?

Robert: The people of Michigan voted against having emergency managers, but Governor Rick Snyder says the laws don't pertain to him—he's the boss. And he appointed Orr, his old college buddy, and the two of

them are trying to wipe the retirees out and set a pattern for the rest of the country.

WSWS: The unions have gotten a payoff. They were given control of the retiree health care fund under a VEBA. That is why they are supporting this “grand bargain,” because they are getting their nests feathered.

John: They steal our money and then they say we'll give you some of it.

Robert: I know we went on strike when Coleman Young was in office. He offered us a small raise and AFSCME stayed on strike. We came back to work for less than what they offered us in the first place.

WSWS: What is the impact of the cuts in bus service going to be on Detroit workers?

Robert: They are farming out a whole bunch of work. I don't think other companies can do it as well as our workers because we've done it our whole lives. I worked there 31 years. There is no contractor who can tell me how to do my job.

John: You can go to the main center and see where our buses are at. They are lined up against the building because they need engines and transmissions. If they put an engine package in them those buses would be on the road right now making money. They did not want us to make the repairs: they wanted Detroit Diesel or some other company to do it. So after the warranty on the new buses ran out they just parked them.

Robert: Just our garage alone was pulling out 138 buses when I worked there. When I first started working at DOT there were something like 1,200 buses on the road. Since then the numbers dwindled.

WSWS: Detroit Mayor Duggan reported recently that there were 200 buses on the road. Even some drivers we have spoken to question if it is that many.

John: As the buses broke down they would just cut a route. Mechanics left and they never filled their spots.

As mechanics decrease, the buses decrease, the routes decrease.

A contract management company from New York came in and took over. They made the decision to cut the routes.

When I used to go to the main center, every stall had a bus and someone was working on it. You walk in there now, it looks like the building is empty and I see one or two buses in there and two to three mechanics walking around.

WSWS: Private bus companies used to run buses in cities before city governments took them over. So it was part of the expansion of workers' rights that people could get a bus to work even if it wasn't going to make the company money.

Robert: I saw a TV show about the history of bus service. The private companies would put buses on a line and they could cram them right up and if it was full and you were standing on the corner they just leave you there. If you did that with every coach then you could make a fortune. But they weren't serving the people. They were making money. They did not care about the poor person left on the street.

But it's not supposed to be profit-making. It's supposed to be a public service.



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