

Detroit Workers Committee meeting discusses strategy to fight water shutoffs

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A group of workers, retirees and students attended a meeting of the Detroit Workers Committee (DWC) Thursday at Wayne State University to organize a fight against the ongoing plans of the city to shut off water of up to 150,000 households.

The Committee was formed by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), following the Workers Inquiry into the Detroit Bankruptcy held last February, which exposed the political and financial conspiracy to make the working class pay for the city's crisis. The water shutoffs are being carried out in order to increase revenues in preparation for the privatization of the water department, in coordination with the city's bankruptcy.

Lawrence Porter, Assistant National Secretary of the SEP began the meeting by characterizing the shutoff of a social service vital for civilization as "criminal." He added that the shutoffs were entirely in line with the ruling class's policies, which is seeking to make the working class pay for the crisis of capitalism.

He emphasized that nothing would be gained through appeals to the Obama Administration, which is carrying out a systematic attack on the social conditions of working people throughout the country. "The Obama Administration has done nothing to defend working people; just the opposite, it is leading the attack on the workers' wages, pensions and health benefits throughout the country, and fully supports the Detroit Bankruptcy," Porter said.

"There is no section of the political establishment that is against the attack on the working class and what is going on in this city," Porter added. "Instead of the War on Poverty it has become a War on the Impoverished."

He noted that the destruction of workers' social rights domestically is paralleled by the drive to war.

"We are now facing the threat of another world war," said Porter, citing the conflict with Russia over Ukraine and the US's military escalation in Iraq.

Porter's report was followed by remarks from Jerry White, the SEP's candidate for US president in 2012, who said that nothing could be gained from appeals to the powers that be, and that the working class had to organize politically to wage a struggle. "Nothing was ever given to the working class out of the kindness of the ruling class's heart. Gains have been wrenched from them through bitter class struggle."

These remarks were followed by a lively discussion and debate. Debra Miller, a retired auto worker whose pension was about to be cut, asked, "I put money into my pension every week I worked, so why is it being cut? Where did the money go? Why do they say there's no money if I put it there?"

Porter and White explained the backroom deals through which companies were underfunding pensions, with the full support of the union officials, who received kickbacks and management of the pension assets, such as the United Auto Workers' Voluntary Employee Benefit Association (VEBA). This reporter added that in California, public workers' pension systems have been deliberately underfunded by big business politicians for years, and that now state politicians are demanding that workers' pensions be cut to cover the gap. "This is taking place throughout the country."

The discussion then centered on what to do next. Justin, an unemployed associate professor, asked, "Who are the big businesses we need to target? Who do we say 'You have to collect from them before you collect from anyone else?'"

Warren Nickerson, a former Unemployment Agency worker added, "We need to give the powers that be a

headache,” but that it was difficult to get people to vote.

Andre Damon, the National Secretary of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, said “if most people don’t vote, it’s because they realize you can’t change anything by replacing one big-business politician with another. Millions of people realize that this system has failed. Just think about it: the biggest industrial city in the most powerful country in the world has people carrying around water in buckets as if this were Somalia. That’s what capitalism has in store for people.”

He contrasted the program of the DWC with that of the Detroit Water Brigade, a group allied with Congressman John Conyers, which calls for an “income based water-affordability plan.”

“Detroit already has an income-based water plan in place,” said Damon. “If you can’t afford water, you don’t get it. That’s how capitalism works. The question is getting rid of this obsolete and irrational system and replacing it with socialism, which means all social needs of all people are met, period.

“I’m sick and tired of voting for the lesser of two evils!” declared Ed, a retired bus mechanic. Debra added, pointing to workers and retirees in the room, “We want us to run the system. We could all do it.”

“Everyone I talk to agrees that the system is screwed up,” responded Sam, a retired city worker, “but where’s the mass movement? Earlier you showed pictures from the 1930s of tens of thousands marching down Woodward Ave. Is that what you’re looking for?”

“Absolutely!” came a chorus from the audience, “That’s what we need.” White and Porter explained that the objective situation was driving the working class to look towards socialism for a way out of the crisis. “Without a doubt this country will see a general strike,” said Porter, because more and more people are being faced with an impossible situation. “What is needed is to educate and organize broad layers of the working class, and that can’t be done through an appeal to the Democrats and banks.”

White stated that understanding the history of the current crisis was absolutely crucial. “There is no lack of anger and opposition to the bankruptcy. What workers lack is not determination but facts. What we represent ourselves, in this room, is the growing self-

consciousness of the working class.”

Porter added “People hate the system spontaneously, but how to fight it, how to replace it, doesn’t arise spontaneously. That requires study, which requires a party and a program to fight for. And that is what we’re building!”

The meeting ended with a unanimous vote to hold rallies outside the Detroit water plants in appeal to the water department workers, up to 80 percent of whom are threatened with layoffs. “We’re not going to congress with our hats in our hand, begging them to turn the water on. We’re going to the workers.” Porter concluded, “The way forward is through a united struggle by the working class.”



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