

“We’ve got to bail out the fat cats so they can remain fat cats”

Detroit water workers denounce demands for concessions

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Workers from the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD) voted on a contract Tuesday that would open the door to privatization and mass layoffs as well as the elimination of basic job protections and benefits. The attack on DWSD workers occurs as tens of thousands of working class and poor households are facing the shut off of water service.

The attacks on workers are part of the overall plan to bankrupt the city of Detroit under unelected manager Kevyn Orr on behalf of the banks and corporations. Orr has the direct support of Republican Governor Rick Snyder and Democratic President Barack Obama who insist that workers pay with their pensions, health benefits, and jobs for the bankruptcy that they did not create. It is estimated that 81 percent of the workers at the DWSD will lose their jobs under the current schemes.

The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 207 called for the vote. Whatever their misgivings about the contract, the fact that the Local 207 leadership, which includes several pseudo-left figures, brought this before workers for a vote is a damning indictment. The contract, which would run through 2018, would transform many workers into “at will” employees who could be fired at any time. In actuality it is only a holding contract, which would maintain a low-paid, yet highly skilled workforce, long enough for an incoming private management firm to replace them with a new “flexible” workforce, who would have no medical or retirement benefits.

Members of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) talked to workers on their way to vote at the AFSCME headquarters in downtown Detroit. They handed out

copies of the Detroit Workers Newsletter and the recent statement “For a political struggle by Detroit workers against Orr’s bankruptcy plan”, which outlined a program for water workers to fight concessions, privatization and mass layoffs. Above all, this required, SEP members explained, the independent mobilization of the working class in opposition to the trade unions, the Democratic politicians and the bankers’ dictatorship they defend.

A veteran worker said, “The unions were appointed to act as a buffer, but they’ve been selling us out.” Regarding the attacks on workers’ pensions, he said, “The stuff they’re doing to us now, they’re going to do to everyone else. The city government is appointed by the bank and corporations. In a few years there won’t even be downtown Detroit, it will be Gilbertville (in reference to Dan Gilbert of Quicken Loans, the richest man in Detroit). He’s hiring his own private security.”

Another worker expressed opposition to the policy of water shutoffs being carried out by the city. “Workers are not billionaires. If big business paid their bills we would not have to shut water off at all, it could be free.”

Another DWSD worker said of the contract, “We’ve got to bail out the fat cats so they can remain fat cats. It’s terrible, it’s wrong. It’s because of the powers that be and it’s because of greed.” When asked about the possibility of a strike, he remarked, “We’re about to have a demonstration again. I’m tired of it. The only thing I can do is leave Detroit and find something else to do. They’re going to pretty much do what they’re going to do, I just wanted to have my voice heard.”

Trallis Bailey, a retired city worker, told WSWs about the recent vote organized by the bankruptcy court

to back the pension cuts. (See: “Officials hail anti-democratic vote in Detroit to sanction attack on pension rights”)The vote, I don’t think was fair. They said retirees owed \$25 million to the city. The retirees, they say, voted with the creditors. We bailed out General Motors and the banks and now they say I owe \$10,000 for the claw-back (from annuity retirees’ savings accounts). When am I supposed to pay that off? My pension is going to be cut in half. It’s going to be just the haves and have-nots.”

Anita Harrell, a DWSD worker told the WSWS, “We’re kind of getting raked over the coals. You worked 30 years and you keep doing it just for that paycheck. I’m about to lose a car because I can’t afford to keep it anymore. Some of these things take the joy out of work. I might just move, and I was born and raised here, and I don’t want to do that.”

With regard to the 2012 DWSD strike led by then-AFSCME Local 207 President John Riehl, Anita said, “That 2012 strike wasn’t organized. I don’t see where they’re protecting us because we keep losing.”

Another DWSD worker spoke briefly to our reporters saying, “My feeling is the city is declaring bankruptcy, why can’t we? We haven’t seen raises in 8 years. We gave up 10 percent and we haven’t seen a penny of that. Why should we keep our belts tight and the rest of the city is getting restored. I’d like to see some of that money trickle down to us.”

A team of WSWS reporters also went to the Detroit Wastewater Treatment Plant to speak to workers there about the contract vote. A veteran worker said he was voting no. “It reminds me of the conditions that exist in the retail industry,” he said, “It is ‘at will’ employment. You can be let go without cause.”

Mike, a worker with 18 years at the water department, said he was voting against the contract. “It is really just a formality to vote. In my division there has been a total collapse. Management can get away with anything they want. I don’t even know what my job classification is right now. Everything is up in the air. They basically do what they want to do. They have cut us down to bare bones already.”

Mike said that the traditions of a working class struggle had been abandoned by the unions. “To win you would need a unified workforce that would take strike action, but who would have faith in the yahoos we have had running the labor movement for decades?”



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