

Detroit water workers denounce shutoffs

Jerry White
6 August 2014

Workers at the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD) voted overwhelmingly to reject concessions being demanded by the city's emergency manager in a vote taken July 29 (see: "Detroit water workers reject concession demands"). The agreement, which would run through 2018, would give management a free hand to increase outsourcing, destroy the jobs of current workers and move to the privatization of the third largest municipally owned water system in the nation.

The vote took place as the DWSD has shut off water service to nearly 20,000 households since March for failing to pay their bills. The brutal policy is part of Detroit Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr's bankruptcy restructuring plans, which calls for the elimination of essential services, including water, electricity and fire protections, to whole areas of the city deemed too poor for investment. The water department is seeking to remove bad debts from its books in order to become more attractive to private investors.

The leadership of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Local 207 is peddling the claim that Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan, who has been given control of day-to-day operations of the water department, will negotiate a "fair agreement" and treat low-income families more humanely. In reality, the Democratic mayor is a corporate "turnaround specialist" who intends to impose the demands of Wall Street, which include wiping out 80 percent of the workforce.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with two veteran water department workers who expressed anger over the attack on city workers and the brutal shutoff policy.

Ryan said, "The largest debtors, the state of Michigan and corporations like GM and Chrysler, are not having their water shut off. Big money doesn't get shut off, it's the small people. It's like, 'Who cares about them'? The city is treated like a Third World nation to exploit

freely. How do you shut off the water people need to live, and leave the corporations that can definitely make payments alone? If you are a crook it's no problem.

"From the standpoint of a capitalist perspective, who wouldn't want the water department? They figure they can triple the water bills and people will have to pay it. It's like liquid gold. A municipally owned utility is not run for profit and the rates are kept in check. Big business is not stupid they know there is money in this. If you contract my job out and pay that guy far less—where does that money go? It goes into somebody's pocket. You can't do that with a city worker.

"Privatization has been a long-term process and they are finally getting their people in place to put it together. They have a bunch of 'yes men' and all their hard work is coming to bear fruit. There are bottling plants up and down the river and Detroit has some of the best water in the world.

"The leaders of Local 207 have a theory that it is easier to take over an existing entity rather than create one. I don't necessarily agree with that. You need to start a movement of working people to fight this. The Democrats don't love us; the unions don't love us—both would like us to believe they have our best interests at heart, but obviously they don't."

Another veteran worker, Tyler, said, "When we went on strike in 2012 the city got a court order saying we couldn't strike because it would cause a health crisis. But they cut off water to people with babies, the elderly and the sick. They are causing a health crisis by shutting those people off. It should be illegal.

"Judge Rhodes considers this bankruptcy his baby. He's lobbied legislators to work out a Grand Bargain. He complained that the water shutoffs were interfering with the bankruptcy. He wasn't concerned about the people.

"They are shutting off thousands of households and

don't have any idea who can really pay. When it comes to businesses that owe millions you have proof they can pay, but they are not turning them off. The Ilitches, Chrysler, GM; they are contesting their bills. Folks with \$100 or \$200 water bills are getting shutoff. It's money and power stepping on have-nots.

"Orr gave Duggan the power to run the water department, but it's the same game with a different face. In a perfect world the government represents everybody. Wall Street runs the government. Their hands pull the president's strings." Commenting on the fact that the water department spends more than half of its revenue for debt service, Tyler said, "If I were in charge, Wall Street wouldn't get a goddamn penny; it's outrageous."

Describing the city's concession demands, he said, "It was a horrible contract offer. One of things they promote is that we are getting a 10 percent pay 'raise.' But this is only what they stole from us. The rest of the contract only provides a two percent raise—even less than the other contracts AFSCME got. This is retaliation because we did not approve last contract.

"Also they are setting up new classifications. If you qualify for the new classification you will get the 10 percent 'restoration' if you don't you get anything. These workers will be 'at will employees' who could lose their job at any time.

"We used to have 90-day probation to see if you fit with a new position after a promotion. If you didn't you were allowed to go back to the old position. Now it's a one-year probation and if you don't make it you're subject to discharge. Now getting a promotion does not look positive.

"This is all part of DWSD Director Sue McCormick's plan to dismantle the water department. They want to get the same work out of fewer employees. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) requires certain staffing levels and the city is doing the exact opposite. The federal government is not standing up for what they ordered.

"They want to get rid of whoever they don't like. They want to set up all new types of pay scales and won't let anyone know what they are. That way they can cut everybody's pay. It will set up the system for privatization because people will be sick of it and leave. We are already short of personnel.

"Folks have forgotten about big labor strikes in the

1960s and 1970s. People fought and died for everything we got. If you are not willing to fight they will take it all. They are taking and taking at every turn, even if you vote something down they make you vote again and take it anyway. I was on the picket line when AFSCME Council President Al Garrett came down with the court order in his hand telling us to go back to work or we would lose our jobs."



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact