

“We have a war going on in our own country”

## Detroit meeting discusses city’s bankruptcy and police violence in Ferguson

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29 August 2014

On Wednesday about 60 workers, retirees, students and youth attended a public meeting at Wayne State University in Detroit, presented by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE). The meeting was titled “From Ferguson to Detroit: the class issues”.

IYSSE National Secretary Andre Damon and SEP Assistant National Secretary Lawrence Porter addressed the meeting. Each have reported for the *World Socialist Web Site* from Ferguson, Missouri, where the police murder of 18-year-old Michael Brown on August 9 sparked two weeks of protests. Popular opposition was met with violent repression by a highly militarized police force and the National Guard, under conditions of de facto martial law in the St. Louis suburb.

The meeting was held on the first day of the Fall semester at Wayne State and one day after the resumption of mass water shutoffs directed by Mayor Mike Duggan and Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr, who is overseeing the bankruptcy restructuring of the city.

Damon opened by recounting the facts of the police killing of Michael Brown, who was shot by Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson at least six times. Brown’s body was left bleeding in the street for hours before being taken away by police in a sport utility vehicle, Damon said. When residents assembled on the scene that day, and for several days and nights to follow, scores of heavily armed police pointed assault rifles, snipers menaced them from the tops of armored tank-like vehicles, attack dogs were brought out, and men, women and children were attacked with tear gas and rubber bullets. Over 50 people were arrested or detained, including several journalists.

Damon explained that the equipping of the local police forces throughout the country had been carried through federal programs overseen by the Department of Defense and Obama’s Department of Justice. Many people the WSWs spoke to in Ferguson drew connections between the military/police occupation there and the US military occupations and wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Damon said the “second prong” of the administration’s response to the protests was the deployment of Democratic

Party operatives Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson to the scene, who were assigned to put a stop to the protests and divide the working class by portraying the events solely in racial terms.

At Brown’s funeral Monday, Sharpton delivered a eulogy in which he slandered Ferguson’s African American working class population for causing “disturbances,” which he called “ghetto pity parties,” and insisted that residents “respect the police.” Damon said many people the WSWs spoke to in Ferguson opposed Sharpton and Jackson, and had even confronted the two and told them to get out of town.

Damon placed the events in Ferguson in its broader political context, explaining that the destruction of democratic rights—including the militarization of the police, NSA spying, and the administration’s assertion that it had the right to assassinate US citizens—flowed from the deep social polarization in the US. The corporate and financial elite, which had enriched itself from the unrelenting attack on workers’ living standards, had no answer to the social crisis except for war overseas and state repression at home, Damon said.

That is why the working class had to develop an independent political movement—on the basis of a socialist program—to break the grip of the financial aristocracy and establish democratic control over economic and political life.

Lawrence Porter’s presentation drew connections between the social conditions in Ferguson and those in Detroit. Porter said that Ferguson, a suburb of St. Louis with a population of 21,000, suffered from high poverty and high unemployment. Like Detroit, he said, St. Louis had been devastated by the destruction of tens of thousands of auto industry and other manufacturing jobs. Unlike the response after the ghetto rebellions of the 1960s—when the ruling class implemented limited social reforms—today both political parties have nothing to offer except repression.

Porter explained that the militarization of the police was part of the destruction of democratic rights, which can also be seen with the imposition of an unelected financial dictator in Detroit. These measures, he said, were being carried out “in preparation for a social explosion” against conditions of poverty and misery, which are to be found all across the country.

Porter emphasized that the Obama administration fully supported the bankruptcy of Detroit and had rejected any Wall Street-style bailout for the city. Workers and youth, he said, needed to mobilize independently of the Democrats to oppose miserable social conditions, the militarization of society, and war.

After the presentations, a lively discussion period followed. Many attendees stayed in the lecture hall after the meeting to continue political discussion. Questions were asked about the nature of class and race in society, as well as how to fight for social rights and against war.

Ace, a veteran of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, is now studying philosophy at Wayne State. He asked how to “disseminate this information on a mass level, so that people would become conscious.” Damon explained the *World Socialist Web Site* was just such a tool and emphasized what was most needed was a historical and political perspective to understand the present situation and mobilize the working class against war and repression.

Ace and Dexter, a fast food worker, spoke to WSWs reporters. “The meeting addressed so many key social issues. There should have been thousands here to listen to this information. The truth has to be told, no matter how horrible. That’s what made this meeting top notch,” Ace said.

“This government has no way of solving any of the social problems. Since World War II, US capitalism has reaped the fruits of war, but now it’s in a decline. That’s why they are privatizing everything. They don’t even try to stop the growth of social inequality,” Ace said.

“It’s insane that the police have all this military equipment. We are the ones they are making war on. We are hurtling towards a police state. While we are living in fear of nuclear war, the rich think it’s all fun and games,” Dexter said.

“I liked what the speakers had to say about Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton, who paint the police killings just as a matter of black versus white. For one, they’re leaving out Hispanics and others. But more importantly, there is only one race: the human race. I saw a video of a mentally disturbed kid, the police just held him down and killed him. They’re attacking everybody, black and whites, homeless people, sick people, everybody,” Dexter said.

“The water shutoffs are inhumane and an act of premeditated abuse,” he added.

One student asked why race was not the fundamental issue, since most victims of police killings are black. WSWs writer Patrick Martin replied that in fact, the majority of those killed by the police are white. He continued, “The proportion of blacks killed by the police is higher per capita, which indicates that racism plays a factor. But what is decisive is class. The police state measures carried out in Ferguson will be used against the entire working class, black and white.”

Sheila Liddell attended with her son. She said their water had almost been cut off for a \$3,000 bill. “My son has terminal

kidney disease. I had to get a letter to keep them from cutting our water off. They don’t cut off the water from the rich. The rich use more resources, but they pay less taxes. How do they get away with that?

“There is no sense in voting because they control everything. What is the use of even going to college? There are homeless people who have a master’s degree. They tell us we have rights. But the rich have destroyed the middle class.”

Sheila said she was very interested in the discussion at the meeting, especially when the speakers explained the role of Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson. “I never knew that Sharpton said all those things,” she said. “Instead of Martin Luther King we have opportunists who just want to make a name for themselves.

“The police have mace and stun guns, but instead they use bullets. It is not just black people. It is against all who are poor. We have a war going on in our own country. We need housing jobs and education. A college education costs \$100,000, but we don’t have enough jobs.”

She concluded, “I think the police are being militarized because they know the poor are ready to stomp them down.”

Josh, a painter, said of the meeting, “The speakers did a good job of exposing the abuse of the population by the cops. The cops are basically a gang, they are never held accountable, and charges are never pressed. They don’t even go after the actual criminals. They are like a mafia out there, like a good ole boys club. The surveillance has completely destroyed our right to privacy. It’s not about protecting us, it’s about spying on us.”

Taylor, a Wayne State urban planning student, said, “The meeting was enlightening. The analysis of Ferguson was pretty spot on. We’ve seen the Justice and Defense Departments pouring resources in local police departments for decades. We’re talking massive transfers of tanks and assault rifles. It’s thoroughly disturbing stuff!”



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