

Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr: Detroit workers were “dumb, lazy, happy and rich”

By Eric London and Barry Grey
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In an interview with the *Wall Street Journal* published August 3, Detroit Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr gives vent to his contempt for working people and indicates the reactionary, pro-corporate agenda that underlies the bankruptcy of Detroit.

The article, under the headline “How Detroit Can Rise Again,” is a gushing endorsement of Orr and the financial parasites for whom he speaks.

A millionaire bankruptcy lawyer with close Wall Street connections, Orr has been granted dictatorial powers to oversee the stripping of public assets and gutting of workers’ pensions, health benefits and social services. With the bipartisan support of Republican Governor Rick Snyder and Democratic Mayor David Bing, he threw Detroit, a city of 700,000 people, into bankruptcy last month.

Orr intends to use the federal bankruptcy court as the medium for ripping up union contracts and overriding the Michigan Constitution, which guarantees the pension benefits of public employees, in order to slash the benefits of 21,000 retirees and 10,000 active city workers.

He has pledged to sell off the city’s garbage collection services to private investors as early as November, threatening the jobs of hundreds of city workers, and recently hired Christie’s auction house to appraise the world famous collection of the Detroit Institute of Arts for possible sale to help pay off the banks and big bondholders who hold the city’s debt.

Since the July 18 bankruptcy filing, media commentaries have proliferated on the theme of Detroit as a model for similar attacks on pensions, health benefits and social services in cities across the US. The Detroit bankruptcy, which is being coordinated with the Obama administration, marks a new stage in the assault on the living standards of the American and

international working class.

Meanwhile, the city, in collaboration with Orr, is planning to hand over \$285 million in public funds to billionaire Mike Ilitch to subsidize the building of a new hockey arena in mid-Detroit, part of a scheme to slash services in working class neighborhoods while transforming sections of the downtown area into a residential and commercial haven for the well-to-do. This provides an indication of how the bankruptcy of the city will be used to further enrich an array of bankers, real estate developers and corporate lawyers who are gathering like vultures over the financial corpse of the former world capital of auto production.

The *Journal* article presents these forces as agents of progress, who are obliged to fight a rearguard action against the dark forces of ignorance and sloth—that is, the working class. Orr, according to the author, Allaysia Finley, is a visionary “who exudes a contagious energy and optimism about the future,” and whose “strategy is to ‘put the key ingredients in place’” to “nurture growth” in Detroit, despite being “bullied” by the “labor class.”

The article calls the pockets of wealth created by “pioneer” entrepreneurs, whose employees “grow organic vegetables such as corn on nearby vacant lots,” as “the frontier of civilization in Detroit.” The author fails to note that many of the vacant lots are the result of decades of corporate downsizing and plunder, which have stripped Detroit of all but one of the dozens of auto plants that formerly provided hundreds of thousands of decent-paying jobs.

The elitist and profoundly anti-democratic outlook that pervades the article is summed up most succinctly by Orr himself, who tells the *Journal*, “For a long time the city was dumb, lazy, happy and rich.” The period of post-World War II economic growth, he complains,

“allowed us to have a covenant that held if you had an eighth grade education, you’ll get 30 years of a good job and a pension and great health care, but you don’t have to worry about what’s going to come.”

What is the bankers’ bagman saying? He clearly considers as absurd a situation where working people can expect to be able to obtain a secure job that provides a decent income and the minimal requirements of life, such as health care and retirement pay. Of course, even at the height of the post-war boom, workers had to struggle to provide decent conditions for their families and the possibility of a college education for their children. But Orr can barely contain his class venom when speaking of social conditions that were the products of massive and bloody struggles waged by previous generations of workers against the auto bosses and bankers.

This phenomenon—what other representatives of his class have called the “middle class worker”—is to be eradicated and the working class returned to its “proper” status as objects of unbridled exploitation, impoverished and without rights.

As Orr suggests in the interview, basic services such as public education, fire protection, garbage collection and public transportation are to be reduced, privatized or eliminated. “I prefer to think of it as ‘upgrading’ because some of those services are anachronistic,” he says.

The *Journal* article evinces the anti-democratic outlook that goes hand in hand with the class war program being spearheaded by Orr. “People say I’m a dictator,” Orr tells the newspaper. “I don’t appreciate that, but if I’m going to be one, I’m going to be benevolent.”

The *Journal* notes, “While Mr. Orr is optimistic, he acknowledges that there is ‘a risk element’ attached to ceding control back to the city’s duly elected leaders...”

In other words, it would be far better for cities (and, by extension, the entire country) to dispense with elections altogether and turn control over to “benevolent dictators” such as Orr, who can more efficiently implement the economic and social agenda of the corporations and banks.

The financial aristocracy for which the *Wall Street Journal* and Orr speak is well aware that its attempt to turn the clock back 100 years and wipe out all of the social gains of the working class will provoke growing

social opposition. The type of preparations that are being made to deal with this challenge are indicated in the interview.

“In the 120 days since [Orr] started, things have already begun looking up,” the author enthuses. The city “has placed orders for new Tasers, vests, cars and PCs for the police department...”

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