

“They are setting up a culture for a revolution”

Retired city workers denounce Detroit pension cuts

By our reporters
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Hundreds of retired city workers attended meetings at Detroit’s Cobo Hall convention center on Wednesday where the union-affiliated Committee of Retirees insisted they accept deep cuts in pensions and health care benefits. The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with workers as they poured out of the meetings seething with anger.

“They are putting a gun to our heads,” said one former Detroit Public Works sanitation worker. I invested a portion of my paycheck in the annuity fund and they promised us a 7.9 percent return every year. Now because the market went bad after 2008 they want to renege and make us pay back the money.”

“They are setting up a culture for a revolution,” said a retired Department of Transportation worker. “People our age elected to work for a living and now they are robbing us our hard-earned pensions. We can’t lie down and take this. We have to fight city hall. Look what’s happening in Egypt and other countries—it’s going to come to a civil war here too.”

William Curtis Walton said, “My position is I am voting ‘no’ on both proposals. Voting ‘yes’ would take away my right to sue—it removes my right to legal process and forever removes money from my pension and the benefits I earned over 32 years of service for the city.

“The plan forever modifies the terms of retirement interview that I had with the city that was supposed to be locked in stone. It also violates the state constitution, which says pensions cannot be impaired. I feel the emergency manager is trying to rush this through before a decision is made at the court of appeals on the legality of Public Act 436, which we feel he is not going to win.”

“I’m voting no on the second part because I am less than 65 years old and I lost the health care that I was promised when I retired. I have to buy my own health care. And I feel that is wrong.”

Walton said without the subsidy he would have to pay \$1,200 a month. He receives a stipend of \$125 from the city and a subsidy of \$644 for himself and his wife. “I receive a subsidy because my income is so low. Out of pocket I pay a little over \$400 a month.”

He said his pension income is around \$1,900 a month. “I think the whole thing is a farce. It is an attack on the state constitution. The governor and Orr were law students together at University of Michigan.”

A worker who retired in 2009 from the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department said, “This is a bunch of garbage. All of this debt they claim the city is in has not been incurred. They cooked the books saying our pensions were unfunded.”

Vernon, a Department of Transportation bus driver for 31 years, said, “I’ve had to have two back surgeries because of the terrible equipment we were forced to use. The pension cuts will kill me. In every single labor contract things have been taken away from us. Detroit is a major city—how can this be happening to us? They are privatizing everything. The water department is next: I’m going to be afraid to drink the water if they run that for profit.”

Toni Bailey said, “I don’t agree with any of it, including the cuts to the Annuity Savings Fund. I have worked for 33 years and now they want to take back the annuities. I also don’t agree that they took our health care. How can they take this at the beginning of the process? I had to go and get Obamacare. It’s not right.

“We took lots of cutbacks while we were working. Now they are taking away everything we worked for. I’m 59 years old. What am I supposed to do? They are not going to want to hire someone as old as me.”

Gordon Machleit, a retired Detroit Water and Sewerage Department worker said, “I’m going to lose \$100,000 from the money they are taking back in the claw-back on the Annuity Savings Fund. My annuity in the last 10 years took off.

“I retired a year and half ago and I assumed that my pension would go up. I now have to pay for medical. I’m under 65 so I am only getting \$125 a month and it doesn’t cover much of anything.

“Right now my healthcare is costing me \$750 a month. Plus they are going to cut my pension about \$900 a month if I vote ‘yes.’ If I vote ‘no’ they are going to get \$2,000 a month. It’s choosing my poison.”

Richard Chambliss, a Department of Public Works retiree said, “The one percent have all the money and the rest of us are fighting over the scraps. I tell everybody this—it’s going to continue until we make them share the wealth. The Democrats and Republicans don’t have our interests at heart. The lobbyists give these guys money. They bailed out the banks and now the rich are buying new boats and planes for themselves. I’m fed up with capitalism. Instead of talking about voting on this Plan of Adjustment we should be talking about the failure of capitalism today.

“I worked for 30 years and I have nothing. They promised me a pension. They said, ‘Look, Richard if you work 30 years I’m going to give you this.’ Now they are taking it away. I don’t want anything more than what I was promised.

“There is going to be violence in the streets of America before people starve. You can’t take food off my table and out of the mouths of kids—I’m going to do something. Young people are coming out of college with millions in student loans and they can’t get a job or plan for their lives. A bloody revolt in this country is not far away.”

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