

Detroit Water and Sewerage workers express anger over layoffs

By James Brewer
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While public opposition to the latest round of layoffs at the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD) has been reported in several articles in the media, the real and most powerful opposition—that of both laid-off workers and those still employed—has been bottled up, thanks to the unions that claim to represent them. Key employees with years of experience in specialized areas, including dozens of chemists, have been terminated and their positions eliminated.

Concerns that the lack of manning will prevent the department from maintaining water quality have been raised publicly. These legitimate doubts are answered by officials with bureaucratic doublespeak, as reported by the *Detroit News* in the comments of DWSD Chief Operating Officer Cheryl Porter. The newspaper refers to one example in an email: “The consolidation will align operations with feedback from sample testing to ensure adjustments are made promptly to maintain the current improved compliance record.”

Last week, Detroit City Council President Brenda Jones announced plans to convene an investigation into the DWSD plan to downsize its staff, referring to the department going from 2,200 employees to 1,100 under the “optimization plan.” Porter stated to the *News* that the DWSD has cut job titles from 257 to 57.

Contrary to the public claim by Jones that the DWSD’s layoff of critical employees was a surprise, the plan to drastically cut the workforce by 81 percent was publicly announced over three years ago, on August 9, 2012. Part of the announcement, published in the *Detroit Free Press*, was the plan to reduce job classifications from 257 to 31. When this was made public, then-City Council President Pro-Tem Gary Brown, recently appointed DWSD director, stated that he supported the cuts and thought the changes at the water and sewerage department could be a model for other city departments.

It was just four months earlier, in April 2012, that the

City Council approved the “consent agreement” that gave a state-appointed “financial advisory board” power to overrule elected officials on budgets and operations, and abrogated the city’s responsibility to honor contracts with its employees.

By that time, the conspiracy to plunder Detroit’s assets was well underway. Newly inaugurated Michigan Governor Rick Snyder had signed the first statewide emergency manager law, Public Act 4, into law in March 2011.

Public opposition to the imposition of such dictatorial measures was expressed most clearly in the overwhelming response to a referendum at the polls in November 2012 to repeal Snyder’s emergency manager law. Yet, just seven weeks later, a new “referendum-proof” emergency manager law was enacted by Snyder and the conspiratorial band of thieves in Lansing, including Democrat Andy Dillon.

While the DWSD publicly claimed that that the “optimization plan” had nothing whatsoever to do with the Detroit bankruptcy proceedings, this was just a smokescreen. The DWSD was recognized as one of the city’s most valuable assets. On April 16, 2014, US Bankruptcy Judge Steven Rhodes ordered the three leaders of counties serviced by the DWSD to hold closed-door talks in order to come to an agreement on the creation of a regional entity that could take over its management from the city—and in so doing provide the legal pretext to override the Detroit city charter that prohibited profit-taking from the water operations.

The City Council president’s call for an investigation is a half-hearted attempt to cover up for the role of the council itself and the political forces it is aligned with. A real investigation into what is behind the attacks on city workers and the threat to public safety has to include the uncovering of the conspiracy to prey on the population of an economically devastated city. The bankruptcy

proceedings were only part of the process of the clawing back of social gains made since the explosive development of the working class movement in the Great Depression.

The Obama administration, in its refusal to consider any bailout for the city of Detroit, and its motion in support of the bankruptcy proceedings during the 2014 hearings under Rhodes, endorsed the attacks that would be carried out against workers.

Workers instinctively recognize the class character of the attacks on water department employees. Outside the Wastewater Treatment Facility, a worker told a WSWS reporter in relation to the layoffs, “This is something they’ve been wanting to do for years.” In addition to the layoffs, workers who remain confront humiliating and degrading conditions of employment. “It’s B.S.! They froze my time. I had to sign up for a new position and now I’m starting from zero.”

DWSD employees spoke to the WSWS under conditions of anonymity. The first worker, who we will call Mike, said, “It’s emotional. We are fighting to get the people who have been laid off back to work. We have been fighting since 2012 when the strike took place.”

Mike’s wife added, “It’s terrible, one day my husband comes home and they’ve laid off 30 more people, then 60 more people, then 40 more people. This doesn’t just hurt them physically, but mentally, emotionally. They are destroying people. They are breaking up our ‘family.’”

“We are talking about real good workers, those who have put in as many as 30 years—out the door. These are not people who broke something or had a reason to be let go. Any excuse is used and the union doesn’t represent them like they used to.

“This is just wrong. It’s all about money. Many are living check-to-check in the first place and it’s a dangerous job. They took their money, now they’re taking their jobs. They’re being stripped of everything. The more people they get rid of, the more money they make. Like the bankruptcy of Detroit, it’s not fair.”

Mike explained, “All of a sudden after the strike [of 2012], the DWSD became its own entity and broke away from the city. They started acting on their own away from the city. They began having their own authority, making their own rules. It used to be under the city’s control.”

Another worker, Tony, spoke on the department’s forcing workers to reapply for their jobs over the last year: “I was threatened with layoff if I didn’t accept the new title. And I am very lucky to take the title because when I asked how do they really do the classification for

the titles, they created new titles and new criteria to have that title. You had to have certain types of licenses, and all of that. So I questioned if anybody had licenses with my experience and knowledge and I asked them where did I stand. They could not answer.

“It’s a shame that the person who is in charge and runs the plant can’t operate anything that I operated. They can’t put the plant back in line if it goes under. The person in charge that is qualified over me, they have the same title, but can’t run the plant.”

Concerning the reports in the media, Tony added, “What I hate the most is that the news goes right along with them [management]. They never seem to honestly report something. What a lot of people don’t know is that the news is a corporation. A lot of people think freedom of the press means that they have the freedom to say what they want to say. But that doesn’t mean it is for the people. They are not a voice for the people at all.”

Mike’s wife spoke on the lead poisoning in the water in Flint, Michigan: “You can see from Flint that they don’t care. Babies are sick and being given discolored water. The city claimed it was okay to drink! That’s really sad. They are hurting the workers and the families. Diseases can spread.

“What I don’t understand is that they always claim there is no money. Where is it going? It should be recycled into the city. Instead, it’s like the Nike swoosh, it goes straight out.”

Tony added, “What they did is what corporations do. They don’t care about the people. I really think the governor should be held responsible because he should have said something about it immediately.

“Once they saw it was a problem they should have reconnected the water. You can see he sided with the corporations. And when it comes to children, there is no party line. There is no color line. You have to do something about that immediately. They have to be held accountable. All those in charge are responsible and have to be held accountable.”

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