

Emergency meeting on the crisis in Detroit and Flint draws over one hundred workers and youth

By E.P. Bannon
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More than one hundred workers and youth participated in an emergency meeting on the crisis in Detroit and Flint held at Wayne State University on Wednesday. The meeting was called by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and its youth movement, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE).

The diverse audience, which represented a broad section of the working class throughout the Detroit Metropolitan area, participated in an intense discussion and debate. Present were teachers, city workers, retirees and other workers, as well as students from Wayne State University, University of Michigan, Monroe County Community College and Cass Technical High School in Detroit. Dozens more, including many auto workers from throughout the country, participated by remote connection.

Jerry White, a leading SEP member and editor of the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*, gave the opening report. His remarks focused on the water crisis in Flint, which has poisoned thousands with lead and contributed to the deaths of at least 10 people, and the eruption of opposition to the attack on public education in Detroit. White said there was not lack of determination to fight, but that a strategy to address the crisis could only begin with an understanding of its causes and the political forces behind it.

White noted that the meeting was an extraordinary and unique event, providing workers with a forum to discuss a political strategy to oppose the assault on their rights by the ruling class and the entire political establishment. “This meeting gives expression to the growing militancy, social opposition and the unity of the working class,” he said. He pointed to the fact that after decades of wage cuts, factory closures and cuts to social spending, a new movement of the working class was beginning to emerge and take form independent of the trade unions, which have for so long suppressed the class struggle.

White called attention to the struggles by Detroit teachers, who staged “sickouts” independent of the Detroit Federation

of Teachers earlier this month to protest the deplorable conditions and lack of basic educational supplies within the city’s public school system. He also pointed to the actions by high school students, who staged walkouts earlier this week in support of their teachers.

White read an excerpt from an interview a representative of the group We The Students gave to the *World Socialist Web Site*: “When the injunctions were filed in an attempt to prevent further sickouts, it angered not only the teachers, but the students as well. We collectively decided that enough was enough!” White added: “Indeed, a sense that ‘enough is enough’ is growing amongst tens of millions of workers.”

Despite the official proclamations from the Democratic Party establishment over the Flint water crisis, White noted that not a single lead pipe has been replaced. He denounced comments by Democratic Party supporters such as filmmaker Michael Moore and MSNBC anchor Rachel Maddow. Their efforts to place blame for the disaster solely on the Republicans and racism are aimed at covering up the role of the Democratic Party and obscuring the primary division in capitalist society: class.

“The great question we believe that workers have to understand,” White said, “is that we have completely independent interests from those of the corporations and their political representatives, Democrat and Republican.” He argued that workers have suffered defeat after defeat over the past three decades not because of a lack of will to fight, but because the trade unions have abandoned any opposition to the banks and corporations and have become businesses in their own right.

White closed by arguing that the working class needed its own program in order to be prepared to defend itself. The struggle for social rights “places the working class on a collision course with the capitalist class and its political representatives.”

Two seniors from Cass Technical High School, Jonea and Natalya, addressed the audience during the discussion

period. As representatives of We The Students, the group that organized the student walkout at Cass Tech earlier this week, they called on those in attendance to support the struggle of the students and the teachers.

“We want to stand for Detroit Public Schools as a whole,” Jonea said. “We don’t want our schools to become charter schools. We don’t want politics to run our schools. Natalya added, “Cass Tech is an excellent school, but we are facing a lot of different problems and that’s why we’re doing this—for all students, because not everyone is fortunate to be able to go to Cass Tech.”

D’Andre, a student, said, “A lot of people don’t realize that the US constitution doesn’t prohibit discrimination on class. It protects you for religious or racial reasons, but it doesn’t protect you from class discrimination... This is class war.”

Angie, a student from Wayne State, placed the Flint water crisis within a global context. “They’ve been doing the same thing in countries all over the world, like Bolivia for example,” she said. “They privatized the water and raised the prices so that nobody could afford it. This thing that’s been going on in Third World countries is happening here. Governments and these huge corporations are trying to take as much control of the water supply as they possibly can.”

The discussion raised many of the central political issues facing the working class. One speaker said that she thought that while class was important, racism was a principle motivating factor in the attack on workers in Detroit. A local trade union official in attendance defended the unions as important instruments for supporting working class interests. The significance of the campaign of Bernie Sanders was also discussed.

Addressing the issue of race, SEP Assistant National Secretary Lawrence Porter noted that many of the workers effected by the disaster in Flint were white, and that workers of all races throughout the country and internationally are effected by mass unemployment, poverty and social inequality. “This issue of race,” he said, “has been continuously injected into the working class to keep it divided!”

White explained that while the word “unions” may invoke for the older generations the struggles of the working class during the 1930s, many of which were led by socialists, the unions today are deeply hostile to the interests of workers. They operate under corporatist policies aimed at containing working class opposition while carrying out the interests of the bankers and CEOs. He pointed out that the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) had collaborated with the Democratic Party in attacking teachers and expanding charter schools.

Speaking on the Sanders campaign, White noted that

widespread support for someone who claims to be a “democratic socialist” had immense significance. “This is a country where anti-communism, anti-socialism has been something of a state religion. Suddenly, socialism is a popular issue. A large section of voters, mostly young people, consider themselves socialists.”

White explained that the SEP was opposed to the campaign of Sanders, which is aimed at keeping popular opposition within the framework of the Democratic Party. “He claims to be against the ‘billionaire class’ but is a member of the Democratic Party, which is owned and controlled by the ‘billionaire class.’ He also has no criticism of the war policy of his President Obama. How can you claim to be against the billionaire class but not be against the wars the billionaire class wage to enslave the rest of the world?”

The issue, White said, is whether workers turn to political establishment, which is controlled by the wealthy, or to the broad mass of working people who have the very same interests to build a movement to take political power.

Porter gave closing remarks, emphasizing the significance of the emerging movement of workers and youth. “The teachers could not depend on the DFT,” he said. “So they began to organize independently. The autoworkers could not depend on the UAW. So they began to organize independently. We are saying that we should follow that logic. We should ask: who are our friends and who are our enemies? We’re saying today what is necessary is the building of new forms of organizations of the working class.”

Many attendees stayed another hour after the meeting adjourned for informal discussion with SEP members over a wide range of political issues.

The WSWS will publish in the coming days further reports on the meeting, including interviews with those who attended and video coverage.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>