

AFL-CIO Shrugs Off Detroit Bankruptcy

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The AFL-CIO has responded to the bankruptcy of the city of Detroit with a predictable combination of rhetorical appeals to the Obama administration and a refusal to lift a finger to actually defend the interests of the working class.

The union bureaucrats, enjoying six-figure salaries and guaranteed—and lavish—pensions, are separated by a vast social distance from the city employees and residents of Detroit. They could scarcely disguise their indifference to the social counterrevolution being inflicted on the workers who are compelled to pay dues to these pro-corporate organizations.

A statement issued by the AFL-CIO Executive Council, which met last week in Washington, DC, condemned the bankruptcy filing by the city while declaring, “The AFL-CIO will continue to support our city of Detroit active and retired members in their fight to maintain dignity on the job, a safe workplace, fair wages and benefits for their labor, and against cuts in the pensions they have paid for and earned. We call on President Obama, Congress and the leadership of Michigan to stand with us and with the people of Detroit.”

The statement concludes with a call for “President Obama and Congress to commit to an immediate infusion of federal assistance for Detroit, and to demand that the federal financial commitment be matched by the state of Michigan.”

As the union officials are well aware, such an appeal is an empty and cynical gesture. Obama, Congress and the political leadership of Michigan are all agreed on using the bankruptcy courts to rob workers, first in Detroit and then in other cities, of their pensions and health benefits. Obama’s treasury secretary, Jacob Lew, flatly rejected any bailout of Detroit when asked on several network television programs broadcast Sunday.

“The issues that Detroit has in terms of problems with its creditors, it’s going to have to work out with its creditors,” Lew said on CNN, repeating the same remark in almost the same words—clearly scripted in advance—on several other programs.

While the AFL-CIO at the national level issues perfunctory statements designed to cover up its own treachery and the anti-working class character of the Obama administration and the Democratic Party, in Michigan and Detroit its affiliated unions instruct their members to remain on the job and do nothing to fight the bankruptcy. AFL-CIO and city union officials have repeatedly complained that they helped impose cuts in jobs, wages and benefits on city workers but are nevertheless being frozen out of the city’s restructuring by Orr and Republican Governor Rick Snyder.

The AFL-CIO statement notes that Detroit Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr was a bankruptcy attorney for the Jones Day law firm, which currently represents Peabody Coal in bankruptcy

proceedings. The largest US coal mining company is seeking to strip retired miners of their pensions and health care benefits, using a shell company, Patriot Coal.

But the statement is silent on an even more significant connection between Orr and attacks on the working class. Nowhere does the AFL-CIO acknowledge that Orr himself is a Democrat, who worked closely with the Obama administration during the Chrysler bankruptcy, when the unions agreed to cut the wages of newly hired workers by 50 percent as well as slashing pensions and health benefits.

This silence on the role of the Democratic Party demonstrates the essential political function of the AFL-CIO, which serves both as an industrial police force for big business within the workplace and a political police force maintaining the domination of the Democratic Party and the corporate-controlled two-party system.

The AFL-CIO statement notes the obvious fact that, "Retired men and women in Detroit are not responsible for the city's economic state." But it passes over in silence the real culprit: the profit system, based on private ownership by giant corporations, which the union apparatus both supports and serves.

Over the past 35 years, the unions have been transformed from defensive organizations of the working class, albeit in the grips of a right-wing bureaucracy, into corporatist organizations that serve only the interests of the privileged stratum of the upper-middle class that controls them. The moribund character of the official "labor movement" is shown most starkly in the AFL-CIO's own membership figures: the percentage of workers in unions dropped in 2012 by the largest amount in six years, from 11.8 percent to 11.3 percent. The average age of a union member has risen from 38 to 45 over the past quarter-century.

As workers in Detroit and other cities begin to wage battles against the attacks on their jobs, wages, pensions and other benefits, they will find in the AFL-CIO an implacable enemy. The first step in carrying out a successful struggle is a complete break with these reactionary organizations and the building of new fighting organizations of the working class.

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