

VOICE OF DETROIT <http://voiceofdetroit.net>

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AN EYE-WITNESS REPORT FROM DETROIT'S AFSCME LOCAL 207 WATER STRIKE



Commentary by Donna Stern

October 1, 2012

The first and most important thing: the strike has NOT been called off and WILL CONTINUE in full force tomorrow, Tuesday, October 2nd.

Everyone who can, every union member and every strike supporter, should be at the picket lines starting at 6am tomorrow morning. The early morning picketing is the most important time to picket because it is the time when we can get other union members to support our strike.

Where We Are Now

A strike is a clash of two forces and a struggle for power. The moment that crew 5 of Local 207 walked out of the plant on Sunday morning, the balance of power shifted in favor of the union. Until we acted, nearly all of the power to determine the future of the city of Detroit, the fate of our union, what our jobs, wages and working conditions would be—was in the hands of

Workers say their strike is for Detroit Judge Cox, Mayor Bing, the Water Board, and all the rich suburban interests that have stood together to try to break our union and destroy the lives of hundreds of thousands of people in Detroit and its neighbors.

But once we acted, the pendulum shifted in our favor, beginning with those first thirty workers. Our union gave the people of Detroit a voice and a leadership and a cause that could win—and a chance to build a new civil rights and labor movement and era of mass struggle throughout the area.

Detroiters want the DWSD, which serves 6 counties and 40 percent of Michigan's population, to remain in the hands of the public, not private water profiteers. Virtually every national media correspondent and environmental group has said that people all over the country regard this struggle in Detroit as the key to determining

whether the water supplies of this country remain in the hands of the public or become privatized. If we win this fight, it will be one of the first and most important victories for Detroit, for the labor movement, for the new civil rights movement, and for the environmental movement—which has had a great deal of publicity but next to no successes.

If you measure the power of a strike just by the number of people who are out on a picket line, you'll be deceived into believing that something that is very strong—is weak.

Sunday, September 30

Sunday was a dress rehearsal for Monday. On Sunday, we began to see the outlines of the power that our strike could best, which would be confirmed on Monday. Our picket lines started small on Monday morning but grew throughout the day. Small numbers of picketers at the different plant gates were able to turn away cars and trucks by using courage, determination, and persuasion.



Workers who were traveling on W. Jefferson Ave.—in small numbers, because it was Sunday—honked their horns and shouted out through their windows their support for our actions and expressed their hope that we would win. We got some media coverage, but much less than we deserved. And, for the most part, the police stayed a good distance away from the picket line.



BAMN youth at MLK Day protest outside Gov. Rick Snyder's home.

As the day progressed, more Local 207 members, and youth from BAMN—the Coalition to Defend Affirmative Action, Integration & Immigrant Rights, and Fight for Equality By Any Means Necessary—joined the picket lines. For the Local 207 members who had never been on strike before, and for the Detroit youth on the picket lines, stopping cars and trucks from crossing the picket lines [through presence and persuasion] gave people a sense of power and joy that they have never experienced before.

Monday, October 1st

By the close of Sunday, spirits were high, but everybody knew that Monday would be the

first real test of the strength and resilience of our strike. Monday's strike activity got underway between 1 and 2 a.m., when trucks that haul out the sludge started arriving earlier than usual at the plant.

Most of the trucks were turned around. Every truck driver that the picketers talked to understood that the Local 207 strike was on behalf of every person in Detroit who is struggling to maintain a job, a family, a neighborhood, and, for the young people—the hope of a decent and meaningful future.

And so, even though lots of the truck drivers

we're scared of what their management would do to them if they refused to cross our picket lines, they still turned their trucks around, refusing to scab on our strike.

As the early morning progressed, the number of trucks that arrived was growing. But on the side of the picketers, both the number of the picketers and their resolve increased more and faster than the flow of the traffic. By 6:30 in the morning, picket lines were up at every important gate to the plant.



Youth on Belle Isle Sept. 14, 2012; child poverty rate in Detroit is 57 percent; young people desperately need public sector jobs at union wages and benefits.

The Water Board, desperate to get their management personnel inside, set up a staging area on Lafayette where managers could arrive, park their cars, and get into vans. Each van was given a police escort, but more importantly, every window of each van was covered so that the managers would not have to show their faces to the workers, who they knew they should be supporting. The police escorts made it possible for those few vans that tried to enter the plant to get in, but the window covers could not hide the shame and guilt that was felt by those who crossed.



DWSD construction crews fix Macomb Interceptor break, caused by faulty contractor work.

On Sunday morning and afternoon, no Local 207 members crossed the picket lines, and on Monday morning, our members continued to stand firm in their decision to strike to win.

The construction crews—the electricians, the people doing the new cement work, and other skilled-trades contractors—had arrived and were poised to go into the plant by 7 a.m. Monday morning. The number of construction workers far outweighed the number of picketers at the back gate where they were told to enter.

But, one by one, the construction workers got out of their trucks, huddled together, and

after talking to a handful of striking 207 workers and BAMN youth, made a collective decision that they were not going to cross our picket lines. Those who came early and were at the front of the truck caravan of construction workers lined up at the back gate, offered to stay at the plant to make sure that late-arriving construction workers would honor the decision of those to come before them: to honor the picket lines and refuse to go into the plant. Many Teamster truck drivers who were arriving as the morning progressed followed the lead of the construction workers and, after a brief discussion with the striking workers, simply turned their trucks around and rumbled away.

Judge Cox, with no authority, issues order to end strike

The success of our early morning action, not surprisingly, was met with an attempt by Judge Cox and his cronies to use all the mechanisms of the state that they have at their disposal—the laws, the courts, the police—to try to shut down our strike. By 8:30 in the morning, Judge Cox had issued a temporary restraining order to the leaders of Local 207 and our union as a whole—ordering us to stop picketing and go back to work. The union leaders of Local 207 fired back with our own legal initiatives. By 12 noon, our lawyers were holding a press conference making clear to the court and to the people of Detroit that we believe that Judge Cox’s order to stop the strike was not legal or valid.

In our court documents, we argued that Judge Cox should recuse himself—that is, step aside—as the judge determining the fate of our strike, because he has a real conflict of interest. The earlier orders of Judge Cox pronounced that our work force would be cut by 80%, that our union officials would be curtailed from being able to represent us, that our job classifications would be reduced to two job classes—which our union leaders described as “hey you” and “you too”—and that we would have to give over control of our pension fund to Judge Cox.

These union-busting provisions put Judge Cox in the position of acting as the employer in our contract negotiations and it is unethical and illegal for a judge to serve both as employer and as “neutral mediator between the parties.” Our lawyers made other arguments to point out why the temporary restraining order should be struck down, and as was true from the start of Monday, received largely favorable coverage from the local media and, increasingly, from national media sources.

By Monday afternoon, the outpouring of support for our strike throughout the community continued to grow. Bus drivers offered pro-strike leafleters to board their buses and make announcements about what was going on to all the passengers who were riding the bus. The passengers and the bus drivers applauded the people that they heard speak and expressed real, heart-felt support for our fight.

AFSCME Council 25’s role

Again, our enemies devised a counter-attack. But the second counter-attack merely exposed the growing popularity and strength of our strike. At around 2 p.m., representatives from AFSCME Council 25 arrived at the picket lines with copies of the injunction—with letters from Council 25 stapled to them—telling Local 207 members

that they had to return to work, and that if they refused to do so and were suspended or fired by management, then the union would refuse to represent them.

Some workers, at first, were bewildered by the union notification, knowing that it did not come from 207's leaders or lawyers. Others knew right from the start that they had to argue against and expel the Council 25 officials from our picket lines. The Council 25 attempt to splinter Local 207 and demoralize the workers, instead elicited the opposite response.

When our union president, John Riehl, and our other executive board members heard what was going on at the plant, they rushed to the plant to address the members themselves. Picketers gathered at every gate and held meetings to decide among themselves how to respond to Council 25's threats. After discussion, the picketers at every gate decided to stand strong, to keep the strike going, and to do everything in their power to convince their friends and coworkers to maintain the strike and refuse to go back to work.

Needless to say, the Council 25 leaders—who were more management than management itself in their aggressive attempts to shut down the strike—left the plant, discredited and defeated. Many people at the picket line asked why it was that Al Garrett, president of Council 25, who promised support for Local 207 at the strike vote, was now trying to bully members into returning to work.

The simple answer to the question is that Garret and the other leaders of Council 25 recognize that every day that our strike continues creates the greater likelihood of other city workers' unions joining the strike. Garret and the other Council 25 leaders' actions on Monday were those of desperate union leaders, more terrified of their own members fighting and winning than they are of the consequences of Judge Cox's order—the consequences on our lives and the lives of millions of people throughout the tri-county area who depend on Local 207 for clean and ample supplies of water, the consequences if Judge Cox's order stayed intact and condemned the tri-county area to greater destruction of the environment.

The leaders of Council 25 know that their decision to try to break the Local 207 strike has completely discredited them with Local 207 members and will discredit them with other union members that hear about what they did. But they have a sense of how powerful our strike is and how quickly it could go from the strike of one union to the strike of many. In some ways, they recognize the power of our strike, its massive popularity, and its ability to spread—in a single day or over a single night—into being a strike of thousands of Detroit city workers. Every day that our strike continues, increases the possibility of its growth and increases our power.

To some of the workers on the picket lines, our strike feels isolated and not very strong, and that is understandable; there have been so few strikes during the last period of time that it is easy to feel that the 207 strike may be the last strike in Detroit for some time to come. But what the picketers feel and what is real are two different matters. If we keep fighting, stand together, and refuse to go back to work until we have a just settlement—

which has to include amnesty, that is, no disciplining of any of the strikers—our strike can be the first of many in which workers come to see how much power we have and how much we can gain when we wield our power.

After Two Days

After only two days of our strike, Judge Cox, Mayor Bing, the Board, and Council 25 are floating the idea of meeting with our union officials tomorrow (Tuesday) to start to figure out how to resolve our strike. If large numbers of our own members cross the picket lines tomorrow, then that meeting will never occur.

But if we stay strong and stay out, then for the first time in nearly four decades, the federal court which has overseen the operations of the sewage plant since the 1970's will have to hear what the workers have to say and will have to meet with our union. In all the nearly 40 years that our plant has been controlled by the federal courts, those courts have never had to hear what the workers have to say and have never had to negotiate with our union.

The federal court has changed the plant operations, has changed the scope and the function of the water and sewage department, and every decision that the court has made has directly affected the lives of the people who supply fresh water for the people in the tri-county area—and never once have they asked for our comments on their changes. So, in two days, our strike—so long as we stay strong—will have achieved more for the water department workers of Detroit than years of lawsuits, lobbying efforts, town hall meetings, and other tactics have ever achieved.

Being in a strike is like riding on a roller-coaster. You can feel like you're dropping from the highest high to the lowest low. The mood and morale of the people who are on strike can shift from hour to hour. But, like any other roller-coaster ride, once you have been on it for awhile, the ride is so exciting that you wish it would go on for so much longer.

In the first two days of this strike, the members of Local 207 have strapped on their seat belts and experienced that slow trip to the top of the first drop, and then the quick decline, and then the rise again. And for those who have been out on the picket lines, the strike has gone from being exciting but scary—to a completely exhilarating and great ride. The people who have been out on the picket line are settling in and looking forward to the ups and downs, the curves and surprises, that this ride has in store for us. And that means that everyone is feeling stronger and more certain and relaxed—and increasingly happy that they made the decision to stand and fight.