

New Jersey's largest city cuts water to working class households

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The city government of Newark, New Jersey announced last week that it would begin shutting off water service to 1,600 of the roughly 5,000 property owners who owe more than \$1,000 on their municipal water bills. These delinquencies are not primarily of major property owners, but individual homeowners and owners of small residential and commercial properties.

Figures from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics for June show unemployment in Newark, the state's largest city, rose from 13.4 percent in the previous month to 14.3 percent, the highest level in 15 years. Newark's unemployment rate is nearly double that of two years ago and 33 percent higher than the same time last year. The city, part of the New York City metropolitan area, has a population of about 280,000, and is one of the poorest major cities in the U.S.

The growing unemployment and poverty means that homeowners are falling further behind on water and other utility bills. Small landlords are also falling behind as their tenants fail to keep up with rent bills.

The *New York Times* quotes one owner of a small apartment building: "Times are bad, nobody's working, business is slow," he said. "Some of my tenants are not working. They've been laid off. They're paying when they can."

In other cases, absentee landlords have not paid the bill and unsuspecting tenants all of a sudden find themselves without water. The city is making no distinction. In order to maintain service some tenants are being forced to make up for their landlord's delinquency, even though they've already paid for water as part of their rent.

One worker, April Virhuez-Collins, said that she had recently retired from a job with New Jersey Transit and had had difficulty keeping up with bills. "I worked all my life for 40 years," she told the *Times*. "I never

thought I'd have to go through this."

Another homeowner, Fatima Cabrera, the mother of a 16-year-old and a 10-year-old, fell behind after being out of a work for a year. She rushed to make a payment and said she would have to take a day off work in order to ensure that the threat to shut off water service was not carried out.

The *Newark Star-Ledger* cited Matt Shapiro, president of the New Jersey Tenants Organization, accusing the city of punishing tenants. He called the action "immoral," adding, "I can see a private water company wanting to do this, but not a city that has a responsibility for the health and safety of its residents. They're attacking their own residents."

Many people lined up at City Hall hoping that paying what they could afford would delay the service cut-off for a while. There were reports that some flexibility was exercised by city staff. However, with economic conditions continuing to deteriorate, the situation with water and other service cutbacks is not expected to improve anytime soon.

The decline of manufacturing and the wholesale abandonment of the working class by the trade unions have left working class families to confront unemployment and poverty largely on their own. While official sources speak of the end of the recession there is no recovery for the working class. Falling incomes and rising debts force families to choose between paying water bills or buying food or medication or paying their rent or mortgage payments.

The water crackdown comes as the city has suffered a significant budget deficit. As a result, it has chosen to squeeze money from those who can least afford to pay. It has already cut off service to hundreds of locations. There are also allegations, reported by CNN, that the city is being much more lenient with major corporate

accounts that are also delinquent on their water bills. The Newark administration is headed by Mayor Cory Booker, a supposed rising star in Democratic Party circles who counts himself as one of President Obama's major backers.



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