

Detroit water department preparing mass utility shutoffs

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The Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD) announced that it will begin shutting off service for 1,500 to 3,000 customers per week. The shutoff process will commence on Monday, when the department will mail out shutoff notices to customers who are behind on payment.

As of March 6, according to the DWSD, 165,000 out of 323,900 of Detroit's business, school, and commercial accounts are overdue, and more than 154,000 of 296,000 residential accounts are similarly delinquent. Residents who are more than 60 days behind on water bills will be shut off, the department said.

These delinquency figures reflect a staggering decline in the conditions faced by Detroit workers.

The aggressive turn by the DWSD to shut off residents is a criminal act. For many, it will be a possible death sentence. In February 1993, such a shutoff led directly to the deaths of seven children on Detroit's east side. Their unemployed parents, Shareese Williams and Leroy Lyons, had the water shut off to their Mack Avenue home in the depth of winter. Before Lyons knew their water was shut off, he attempted to apply heat to what he thought were frozen pipes under the house.

After losing their children in the blaze, city authorities, with the unrelenting support of the media sought to criminalize the parents.

Targeting Detroit residents for shutoffs is a ploy. Claiming they can raise more than \$260 million in outstanding bills, the DWSD is directly acting on Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr's plan to "wring every bit of value from the assets of the city." Constance Williams-Leveye, commercial operations specialist at the water department, described their motivation: "We're trying to shift the behavioral payment patterns of our customer base right now. And so aggressively we'll have a team of contractors coming in, in addition to our field teams."

The *Detroit News* reports it more gleefully, saying the

DWSD's message for overdue Detroit customers is: "We're coming for you."

The DWSD has hired at least 20 crews of private contractors to enforce the shutoffs. DWSD will also implement stricter rules to crack down on partial payments by customers who are overdue but cannot afford to pay the full amount.

It is not just residents who are behind in water bill payments. Businesses and organizations, though fewer in number, owe proportionally much more than households. Detroit Public Schools, which has been ravaged by budget cuts for years, owes \$2.2 million. Other communities, such as economically devastated Highland Park, which is being sued by the DWSD for a \$17.4 million water and sewerage debt, is among many examples.

At the same time, the city is moving rapidly to regionalize or privatize the DWSD, paving the way for even higher rates. As Detroit's official investment banker, Kenneth Buckfire, said during the bankruptcy hearings, "The only way is to sell it [the DWSD] or privatize it. Several private equity firms have expressed interest, but only if they can charge higher rates."

The unpaid water bills are among the obstacles that have prevented the three counties served by the DWSD from buying into a regionalization deal which essentially would require that they pay \$47 million a year for 40 years. County officials have expressed concern that they would be additionally responsible for other DWSD debts, including the unpaid bills. A Macomb County executive put it this way: "I do not understand why this becomes our obligation. What did we do wrong, the ratepayers in Southeast Michigan, but pay [our] water bills? ... Why should we be held accountable for that?"

Last week, emergency manager Kevyn Orr announced that he is looking at options for the privatization of DWSD operations. Any privatization scheme would be geared to extract wealth from one of the city's most

valuable assets on behalf of the bondholders.

Privatization of DWSD, whatever form it takes, will impose still higher rates on a working population whose finances are already strained beyond the limit. Whereas the City Charter prohibits the DWSD from charging rates above what is necessary to cover costs, transferring department management from the city would abrogate that restriction.

While the city insists that Detroiters must cough up more cash for their water, Detroit's aging water infrastructure, like the city's infrastructure generally, is breaking down in catastrophic fashion.

Much of the city's water infrastructure is more than 100 or even 150 years old. This year's harsh winter has taken a toll on the aged water system. By the end of January 2014, the city had accumulated a backlog of 111 unrepaired broken water mains. The breaks have caused extensive flooding, frequently trapping motorists in pools of ice several feet deep.

The breaks are one symptom of the water infrastructure crisis facing Detroit and cities across the US. In its 2013 Report Card for America's Infrastructure, the Society of Civil Engineers concluded that much of the country's drinking water infrastructure is "nearing the end of its useful life," causing more than 200,000 main breaks annually. The response of the Obama administration, rather than launching a massive public works project to overhaul the decaying systems, has been to cut funding to water infrastructure.

The role of the unions in abetting the plunder of Detroit's infrastructure, including the DWSD cannot go unmentioned. During the bankruptcy hearings, attorneys representing the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) and the United Auto Workers (UAW) pleaded to the court that they were prepared to accept the sale of virtually all city assets, including the DWSD, to avoid a Chapter 9 filing. The unions, exclusively concerned with defending their dues payments and control over the pensions, left no doubt about their willingness to support whatever schemes the city might devise to press every drop of value out of the city's assets.

AFSCME played the key role in betraying a strike of hundreds of DWSD workers during the fall of 2012. DWSD workers struck in opposition to the Bing administration's plan to cut 82 percent of water department jobs and privatize operations, courageously defying a federal back-to-work order and threats of police repression.

True to form, AFSCME hung the water workers out to dry. The union intentionally isolated the struggle, refusing to mobilize hundreds of other city workers facing the same attacks by the city, and allowing 34 of the striking workers to be fired by the department in retaliation.

In their efforts to milk the DWSD and Detroit's workers for every penny possible through privatization, layoffs, rate increases, etc., the banks and corporations have no surer friend than the union bureaucracy.

The coming water shutoffs will target a population that has already suffered extensive energy shutoffs and ever-increasing rates. Between January and September of 2013, DTE Energy and Consumers Energy (CMS) disconnected some 169,407 households from their energy service. DTE shutoffs more than doubled between 2007 and 2011.

Utility shutoffs are a nationwide epidemic. Energy shutoffs in winter frequently cause fire and deaths, as residents attempt to fend off the cold using unsafe alternatives such as space heaters. The consequences of having one's water shut off are similarly dire.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) advances a socialist program which would guarantee access to necessities such as electricity, water, nutrition and housing to all workers. Provision of these social rights must be the main priority of society. At present, these social rights are sacrificed to the profit interests of the corporations.

The SEP demands:

- All utility shutoffs must be halted and declared illegal.
- Utility workers and contractors should refuse to participate in the crime of utility shutoffs.
- All utilities should be nationalized and transformed into publicly owned, democratically run entities and billions of dollars invested to maintain and improve the utilities' infrastructure.



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