

The Detroit News endorses mass water shutoffs

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In yet another criminal assault on the working people of Detroit, city officials have announced their intention to shut off water service to as many 154,000 households, which are overdue on their bill payments. On Monday, notices were sent out to “delinquent” customers—more than half of the city’s residential accounts.

Hundreds of thousands of working class families are threatened with losing the most basic necessity of life, despite living next to the second largest concentration of fresh water on the planet.

The city has openly stated that the shutoffs are intended to coercively “modify the behavioral patterns” of Detroit residents. The crackdown on families behind on their water bills aims to make the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department more attractive to investors seeking to take over one of the largest water systems in the nation and transform it into a profit machine.

The *Detroit News*, long a mouthpiece for the auto companies and other corporate interests that dominate the city, hailed the initiative in an editorial, “Water cut-offs send notice to scofflaws.”

“There appears to be no better solution than to attack Detroit’s unacceptably high payment delinquency rate” than “massive water service shutoffs,” the *News* concluded. “It seems a harsh measure, but it has been effective in the past. Previous cutoff drives have resulted in higher payment rates, the department reports.”

“When private contractors were brought in last fall to do shutoffs, the department collected more than \$300,000 in overdue bills in one month, more than double the normal amount,” the *News* gushed, praising the city’s decision to hire 20 teams of contractors to carry out the shutoffs.

Such comments only illustrate the class arrogance

and contempt for workers of the corporate media establishment. The inhuman proposal to deprive poor households of water for cooking, cleaning, bathing and removing sewage will inevitably lead to disease and death.

In February 1993, seven children were killed in a blaze on Mack Avenue on Detroit’s near east side which was the direct result of a water shutoff. The father, believing the water pipes had frozen, sought to thaw them with a burning roll of newspapers. Smoldering embers later triggered the disastrous fire.

The *News*’ reference to “scofflaws” turns reality on its head. The past months have witnessed historic acts of criminality by the financial elite against the people of Detroit, abetted at every step by journalists and pundits of the Detroit media. This includes the years-long plan by politicians from both big business parties to throw an American city into bankruptcy in order to skirt the state constitution and other protections in order to facilitate the Wall Street looting of pensions and public assets like the masterpieces of the Detroit Institute of Arts.

Many of those who cannot afford to pay their bills are, undoubtedly, retired city workers who face draconian pensions and health benefit cuts under Orr’s Plan of Adjustment. These workers are victims of a premeditated, criminal attack. In ramming through the Emergency Manager laws and the Chapter 9 bankruptcy ruling of December 3, the super-rich and their political and legal servants have made a mockery of the rule of law.

The *News*, which has the audacity to slander impoverished Detroiters as law-breakers, hardly has a record of standing up for legality. In fact, the pages of the *News* have seen open calls for dictatorship in recent years. In April 2012, *News* columnist Nolan Finley

wrote, “As horrible as it is to say, democracy has failed Detroit. A short-term dictator could have operated outside a political environment to create a sustainable operating model.” Roughly a year later, Finley got his wish with the installation of Orr.

Social conditions in Detroit increasingly resemble those of 19th century England as depicted in the novels of Charles Dickens. The working class is increasingly forced to live in subhuman, degraded conditions, denied access to the basic amenities of modern civilization. Child poverty is over 50 percent. Education and culture are distant dreams for the entire sections of the population, which struggle every day to survive.

The Heat and Warmth Fund (THAW), a “charitable” entity touted by the *News* as a “good model for the water system,” would not be out of place in Dickens’ London. The fund’s role is to dispense a few crumbs to residents who are unable to cover their energy expenses during the winter. Its purpose is to make the shutoffs more palatable.

The Socialist Equality Party insists that water and other utilities like electricity and heat are social rights, not privileges to be dispensed at the leisure of charity programs.

The utility shutoffs are bound up with the drive by Detroit’s ultra-wealthy to dismantle and demolish whole portions of the city deemed “unviable.” The Detroit Blight Task Force, led by Dan Gilbert, is preparing to destroy some 80,000 structures in the city as part of this barbaric agenda. After being ravaged by decades of factory closings and mass unemployment, whole neighborhoods are to be denied water, lighting, fire and other basic services, so that these resources can be funneled into the hands of the corporate and financial oligarchy.

As for the true “scofflaws,” when asked at a conference this week about millions in unpaid taxes owed to the city by billionaires Gilbert and Mike Ilitch, Orr responded that the “statute of limitations” had expired on such claims. Far from having their water and power shut off, Gilbert and Ilitch are in fact benefiting from generous tax abatements and subsidies, including \$250 million in public money for Ilitch’s new hockey stadium.

The shutoffs send an unambiguous message to the working class: the cuts to pensions and health benefits

imposed by Orr and the bankruptcy court are only the opening volley in a massive intensification of the attacks on the rights and conditions of the vast majority of the population. If the capitalists have their way, social conditions in the US will be rolled back 100 years and more.



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