

No to Detroit water shutoffs!

Utilities are a basic social right!

Lawrence Porter
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Lawrence Porter, the assistant national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party and chairman of the February 15 Workers Inquiry into the Bankruptcy of Detroit and the Attack on the DIA & Pensions, issued the following statement.

As chairman of the Workers Inquiry into the Bankruptcy of Detroit, I condemn the decision by the Detroit officials to begin the shutoff of water service to 170,000 households, which are more than two months late on their water bills. If this brutal and inhuman measure is carried out tens of thousands of men, women and children will be deprived of the most elemental necessity of life.

In a city that sits astride one of the largest concentrations of pure water on the planet, up to 3,000 households a week will lose water for drinking, cooking, cleaning and the disposing of sewage. This will inevitably lead to tragedies and death.

Like everything else under capitalism, the corporate and financial lords who rule society see water as a commodity to be bought and sold for profit. Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr wants to squeeze every penny he can out of city residents in order to make the Water and Sewerage Department more attractive to private investors. Several private equity firms are already looking to take over one of the largest municipal water systems in America, jack up rates and make a mint.

Orr has already handed the public lighting system to DTE, turned Belle Isle over to the state for private development, forced the Detroit Institute of Arts into the grip of wealthy foundations and given away enormous tracts of land to billionaires Dan Gilbert and Mike Ilitch. At the same time, he is robbing retired city workers of their hard-earned pensions and health care benefits and driving them into destitution to pay off the Wall Street banks and big bondholders that control the

city's debt.

The mass shutoffs are part of a bigger plan to “shrink” the city by cutting off water, street lighting, fire and EMS service to entire neighborhoods deemed too poor or underpopulated for private investment. In recent comments at the University of Michigan, Orr said his policy was to help “pockets” of the city because it was not viable to provide services to residents in all 139 square miles of Detroit. In other words, the “revitalization” of the city is intended to benefit only the rich and the most affluent layers of the upper middle class, while the majority of the population is condemned to darkness, disease, hunger and thirst.

The *Detroit News* recently endorsed the shutoffs in a hypocritical editorial entitled, “Water cutoffs send notice to scofflaws,” which painted the city's residents—over 40 percent of whom live in poverty—as lawless thieves who refuse to pay their bills. Supporting the privatization of the department, the *News* wrote, “A private manager will have very little tolerance for nonpayments, so Detroiters should get used to the new reality.”

The water department's shutoff policy, the *News* continued, should be modeled on DTE Energy and would teach residents to pay their bills on time. In 2013, DTE shut off gas and electricity to over 150,000 households in southeast Michigan affecting anywhere between 375,000 to 500,000 people because many families now double up. Over the years these vicious shutoffs have resulted in fatal fires, which claimed the lives of hundreds of victims who desperately sought to keep themselves warm in the winter.

In 1993, seven children died in a house fire on Mack Avenue on the near east side after the city shut off water to a family in the middle of winter. The father, thinking that the water pipes had frozen, attempted to

thaw the pipes with a burning roll of newspapers. Embers underneath the house later triggered a fire that engulfed the house. In an inquiry convened by the Workers League, the predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party, our party proved that the tragedy was not caused by “negligent” parents—as the media and politicians had claimed—but the criminal utility shutoff policy of the city and energy monopolies and the desperate conditions of poverty in Detroit.

To call Detroit residents “scofflaws” is a joke. The media is not demanding the shutoff of water and electricity to the properties owned by Gilbert and Ilitch, who have dodged paying millions of dollars they owe to the city in taxes. Moreover, as the Workers Inquiry established, the whole gang of conspirators who threw the city into bankruptcy—Orr, Governor Snyder, former State Treasurer Andy Dillon, ex-Mayor David Bing, Bankruptcy Judge Steven Rhodes, the Wall Street bankers—are guilty of deliberately violating one law after the other, including the state constitution.

The water shutoffs expose the real purpose of the bankruptcy: to rip away every benefit and right working people have won over the course of more than a century in order to further enrich the wealthy elite.

Predictably, there hasn’t been the slightest criticism of the water shutoffs by the Democratic politicians, the unions or the media—which are all complicit in the looting of the city. At a press conference at the University of Michigan Wednesday, Orr praised the unions for working hard to reach an agreement to expedite the bankruptcy, while behind the scenes he is offering the union executives a half-billion-dollar retiree health care benefit slush fund to buy their cooperation and support. As for Mayor Mike Duggan, the City Council and the Obama administration, they are all bought and paid for by the corporations and banks.

A report issued by the Georgetown Law Human Rights Institute last year titled *Tapped Out* illustrates the public health disaster threatened by water privatization. “In the United States today, the goal of universal water service is slipping out of reach,” the report notes, because of increased rates and the growth of poverty. The study, reviewing conditions in Detroit and Boston, showed restricted access to water leads to health problems such as dehydration, sewerage backup and the growth of psoriasis and eczema in children.

Landlords are now adding water as an extra charge, making the cost of rent even higher while unpaid bills in private houses are added to property taxes making home ownership even more unaffordable. If water is shut off, residents face the danger of having their homes condemned as unfit for habitation or their children taken away by the state for failing to provide habitable housing.

The February 15 Workers Inquiry held by the Socialist Equality Party exposed the social, economic and political forces behind the bankruptcy and outlined a strategy to mobilize the working class to defend the right to pensions, health care, access to culture and all the other necessities of modern life. It showed that the only force capable of opposing this attack was the working class, which must be organized independently of the corrupt trade unions and the two big-business parties.

The shutoff of service goes hand in hand with the attack on water department workers, who are facing 700 job cuts. We call on utility workers and private contractors to reject orders to shut off water to city residents, an act that will have dire and even fatal consequences. Water and all utilities are social rights! The provision of water, electricity, gas and other essential utilities cannot be left in the hands of giant monopolies and big bondholders only concerned with their profits. Instead, the water department, DTE and Consumers Energy must be turned into publicly owned utilities, under the control of working people and run on the basis of meeting human need, not private profit.



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