

# Detroit meeting called by SEP endorses fight against water shutoffs

Shannon Jones  
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Supporters of the Workers Inquiry into the bankruptcy of Detroit held a meeting March 26 at Wayne State University to discuss the plan by Detroit city officials to begin the mass shutoff of water customers who are late on their bills.

The meeting, attended by Wayne State students as well as workers and Detroit retirees, unanimously adopted a resolution calling for the mobilization of the working class against the water shutoffs.

Lawrence Porter, assistant national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party and chairman of the Workers Inquiry, gave the main report. He explained that the city of Detroit, with the backing of emergency manager Kevyn Orr, was preparing to implement a plan to shutoff 1,500-3,000 homes and businesses a week for back water bills. "This is an attack on the working class that has to be opposed," he declared.

He continued, "The cuts being planned in the water department pose an immediate threat. People will in fact die as a consequence." He went on to explain the case of the tragic Mack Avenue fire in Detroit in 1993, where seven young children died in a house where water service had been disconnected.

Porter then read a statement calling for the development of a movement in mass opposition to the water shutoffs. The statement noted that the campaign of mass service disconnections went hand in hand with attacks on workers in the water department, where 700 jobs cuts are planned.

It called on water workers and private contractors to reject orders for shutoffs and for the transformation of the water department as well as the gas and electric monopolies into publicly owned utilities under the control of working people and run on the basis of meeting human need, not private profit.

In summing up, Porter stressed that Detroit was being

used as a testing ground for reactionary policies that were being implemented domestically and indeed internationally. "Water privatization is being carried out in cities across the United States, including Atlanta, Baton Rouge, Indianapolis and Fort Worth, Texas. This is even going on in England," Porter declared.

"The working class cannot carry forward its struggle without breaking politically with the Democrats and Republicans, the parties of big business."

Following Porter's report a lively discussion ensued. One retiree noted that many landlords now were forcing tenants to pay for their own water bills, where before it had been included in the rent. Another asked why the government was neglecting the maintenance of infrastructure.

Jerry White, US labor editor for the *World Socialist Web Site*, emphasized that the policy of mass shutoffs of water was part of a broader attack on the working class. "It is inseparable from the evictions of tenants from downtown Detroit and attacks on retiree pensions," he said.

He continued, "The issue of water is critical. I was reading a book on the history of Detroit. Before you had a public water department you had sewage in the streets and the outbreak of cholera. Water is a necessity for life. We sit astride the largest bodies of fresh water in the world yet they want to take this away from the people. The work we do on this issue will be a very critical means of preparing workers to conduct a fight."

On the question of infrastructure, White noted that the government was not a neutral body; it supported the interests of the rich. While it had neglected infrastructure development, such as water lines, limitless resources have been made available to Wall Street.

Another retiree remarked that it was important to

stress the fact that the Obama administration was involved in the attacks being carried out on the working class in Detroit.

Porter expressed his strong agreement. “Both parties defend the interests of big business. In the Ukraine you wouldn’t know from media reports the parties that have come to power are fascistic. These are the forces the Obama administration is now supporting.”

In response to a question about the defense of the Detroit Institute of Arts, Porter stressed that the posing of the question as pensions versus art was false. He denounced the role of the unions such as the American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) that called for the sale of DIA art. The art, he insisted, belongs to the people of Detroit and should be used for their education. “The unions don’t want us to be educated.”

He explained that the unions were working out their own deal with Kevyn Orr to implement a “plan of adjustment,” slashing pensions. “They are going to get control of millions of dollars in a retiree health care trust fund in exchange for helping to implement massive cuts.”

Following the meeting the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with Cynthia, a retired 911 operator with the city of Detroit. She said she strongly supported the resolution in opposition to the water shutoffs. “What they are doing reminds me of primitive times. Will you have to go down to the Detroit River with a bucket to collect water?”

“What is happening here will ricochet across the country. The meeting really opened my eyes and showed me how everything connects.

“Larry brought out facts that reflect what the majority of retirees are thinking. He brought out the reasons we are being thrown under the bus by the union.

“I think people need to be informed. The average person does not know what is in the plan of adjustment.”



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