

The Detroit water cutoffs and the social counterrevolution in America

Joseph Kishore
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*Water, water, every where,
Nor any drop to drink.*

— “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” Samuel Taylor Coleridge

In a city that lies alongside the largest surface freshwater system in the world, the authorities have begun a shutoff of water services, targeting 3,000 households every week for the next several months. If these plans are fully implemented, by the beginning of the summer tens of thousands of families will no longer have access to one of the most fundamental necessities of life.

This is not only a stark expression of the irrationality of capitalism, it is a social crime, and those who are responsible are criminals.

The Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD) is setting its sights on those who are delinquent on their bills. Incredibly, nearly 50 percent of all accounts (150,000 out of 324,000) fall into this category, in a city where more than a third of the population lives below the poverty line.

The consequences of this policy are easily foretold. It will mean a sharp increase in hardship, disease and death, as families are forced to live without basic sanitation or choose between running water and other necessities such as food, clothing and health care.

Lack of access to running water means an inability to shower, use the toilet, cook or take medications. It can lead to buildings or homes being condemned, forcing residents onto the street. It can mean the breakup of families, as children are shifted to relatives or removed by the state on charges of neglect. Like the cutoff of gas or electricity—a mass phenomenon in Detroit—a water shutoff is a destabilizing, debilitating and psychologically devastating experience.

That this fate is now facing tens of thousands of

people in Detroit—a former center of manufacturing in America, which once boasted the highest per capita income in the country—is a damning indictment of American capitalism and the corporate and financial elite that runs the country.

Historically, access to water was seen as a benchmark of social progress. It was considered a national disgrace that, in 1950, a quarter of the population (and half of the rural population) did not have access to plumbing.

Government programs, along with a general increase in living standards, established plumbing for the vast majority of the population—though some 2 million Americans still have insufficient or no running water. At the same time, the *cost* of water for consumers was kept low as a matter of policy. Most water companies were set up as public utilities, subsidized by local and federal government spending.

As with all the gains of the working class in the post-World War II period, these advances were the product, directly or indirectly, of social struggle. But for more than three decades there has been a systematic effort by the ruling class to turn back the clock—a massive retrogression that, since the financial crisis of 2008, has turned into a social counterrevolution.

As it has targeted the jobs and wages of the working class, the ruling class has systematically slashed spending on social infrastructure. A recent report by the Georgetown Law Human Rights Institute noted: “Historically, federal and state governments would cover some long-term costs in the form of infrastructure grants. Since the 1980s, however, these grants have given way to infrastructure loans, pushing water systems to charge their customers full-cost, or near full-cost, rates.” (“Tapped Out: Threats to the Human Right to Water in the Urban United States”)

Between 2000 and 2012, water rates in Detroit

increased a shocking 119 percent. Over the same period, median household income in the city declined by about 15 percent. Today, the average monthly water bill in the city is \$75 (\$900 a year)—or about 3.5 percent of the median income.

The high rate of delinquency is a direct consequence of these changes. And Detroit is not alone. A *USA Today* report in 2012 found that water rates have surged nationwide over the past decade, more than doubling in a quarter of the 100 cities surveyed.

Rather than a necessity of life, the provision of water is increasingly seen as a money-making opportunity. Some 85 percent of US water agencies are still nominally public utilities, though many, including the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department, have been aggressively financed through loans to big investors and bondholders—loans that are repaid by raising rates and eliminating services for those who cannot pay.

Moves to outright privatization are also well advanced. Detroit Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr is pushing for the possible sale of the water department, or its leasing to a regional authority in preparation for a future sale. The DWSD is the third largest water utility in the country, with \$1 billion in annual revenue. It is considered a potential cash cow. To make the DWSD fully profitable, however, delinquent accounts must be ruthlessly eliminated.

This is the real face of the Detroit bankruptcy. While the media and the political establishment proclaim the “revival” of Detroit, what is taking place is the wholesale theft of public resources and the pensions and benefits of city workers and their families.

After undermining the finances of the city through the shutdown of auto production, predatory bank loans, tax abatements and other corporate handouts, and massive cuts in state and federal financial aid, the ruling class is moving to reduce large parts of the city to the type of conditions that prevail in the slums of Haiti and other impoverished countries. Other working class areas will simply be evacuated and made available to real estate speculators.

Detroit is seen as a model for the entire country, and, indeed, the world—in the shutoff and privatization of water services and the overall restructuring of which it is a part. It is for this reason that the bankruptcy of Detroit has been fully supported by the Obama administration and the political establishment as a

whole, Democratic and Republican.

The source of the catastrophe lies not in the productive capacity of mankind, nor in the resources provided by nature, but in the social system of capitalism—a system based on private profit and the subordination of every social right to the rapacious dictates of the corporate and financial aristocracy.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on workers throughout the city to mobilize in opposition to the criminal policy of water shutoffs. Committees must be organized in every neighborhood to protect homes from the actions of city officials. We make an appeal to water and sewerage workers, who face a brutal attack on their own jobs and wages, to refuse to carry out the orders of their bosses.

This popular mobilization must be connected to a political struggle by the entire working class. The resources necessary to guarantee free and full access must be obtained by confiscating the fortunes of the corporate-financial elite. The water system in Detroit and throughout the country must be placed under genuine public ownership and the democratic control of the working population, as part of the socialist reorganization of economic life.



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