SEP and Detroit Workers Inquiry to hold meeting April 23 to oppose water shutoffs

Our reporter
14 April 2014

The Detroit Workers Inquiry and the Socialist Equality Party are holding a public meeting April 23 (see below) to begin the mobilization of the working class against the criminal policy of the city of Detroit, which is carrying out mass water shutoffs.

The campaign of shutoffs by the city is targeting 150,000 residents who are behind on their water payments. The shutoffs are aimed at making the Department of Water and Sewerage more attractive to investment, prior to privatization. If the plans are fully implemented, by summer thousands of families will no longer have access to one of the fundamental necessities of life.

Over the past several days Socialist Equality Party campaign teams visited public locations around the Detroit area to promote the meeting. They distributed copies of a newsletter containing a statement by Lawrence Porter, chairman of the Workers Inquiry, headlined, "No to Water Shutoffs! Utilities are a social right!" It called for turning the Detroit water department, as well as the major gas and electric monopolies, into public utilities under the democratic control of the working class.

One SEP team visited the Michigan Secretary of State's office in the New Center area of Detroit on Saturday. Zakiya, a young restaurant worker, said, "It's terrible. I don't think they should be cutting people's water off if they are behind in their bills.

"People cannot live without water. If they are shut off it means they are going to be out in the street.

"It is not the people's fault that Detroit is in bankruptcy. They don't understand that they are going to create a lot of problems with the cuts they are carrying out. The people need to speak up instead of accepting whatever comes."

John stopped by our campaign table outside the Secretary of State's office, "My neighbor's water bill has gone up by 50 percent. I am lucky because my water is included in the rent and at this point the landlord pays the bill.

"What is being done to people is ridiculous because we are sitting on the largest fresh water supplies in the world. They used to say there was a shortage of rock salt and we are sitting on rock salt mines. What is being done is to take money in any way that they can away from the working people and the poor and give it to the wealthy. After the riots in the 1960s, they talked about white flight to the suburbs; today the working people as a whole are vanishing and this is what they want."

Yesha, a website developer, spoke about the ruling last week by the bankruptcy court that the city pay $85 million to the banks that swindled the city into agreeing to swap deals that were likely illegal. "If there was a fraudulent action with the swaps it should be looked into. Why hurt the city because of some deal you did?

"I grew up when we had some prosperity remaining in the city. Now, watching my friends not have jobs is depressing. I have traveled to many countries and it seems people are worse off in Detroit than in Jamaica."

Contessa works at an auto parts factory. She told the WSWS, "Nobody's water should be cut off. They should not be charging higher prices either.

"I think their main plan is to sell off the water department by any means necessary. They have think tanks that are working on this."

Eric, who works in sales, spoke about the Detroit bankruptcy. "They have been planning this for decades. If this took place in the 1950s or 1960s it wouldn't have gotten legs.

"But they have now disenfranchised the voters. The governor never came in as a partner. He came in to take over. [Detroit Mayor] Dave Bing was also complicit.

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He thought he could get a position on the Wayne County Commission."

He spoke about the attempts to frame the issue in Detroit in racial terms. "The color line is changing from black and white to green. If you don't have green you are out of luck. The whole race thing is a diversion. The people with money and power don't care about anything but money.

"The people who think it is black versus white are ignorant. Poor whites are no better off than poor blacks. When Obama did the bank bailout there were no poor people at the table. They never go after the guys at the top. They took all the bailout money and no one ever questioned what they did with it."

A SEP campaign team also visited the water bill payment center on the east side of Detroit.

Sherrye is a hospital worker in the city. She said, "The City of Detroit has been taken over and is no longer run on the basis of certain rules and regulations. We are living under a dictatorship and people have no say in how things are being done.

"It is really barbaric that the city is turning off water for a large number of elderly people. I noticed on the street where I live that houses, which are scheduled for a shutoff, get sprayed with either blue or green paint. It is not possible to function without water and what is being done is a form of bullying people, forcing them out of their homes, breaking up families and causing terrible problems…

"We are not being told the truth about why this is being done. They claim there is not money and that is a lie, they are covering things up.

"I have lived in the city all my life and never thought things would be this way.

"Everything, including health care, is looked at from the standpoint of making money. The hospitals are being turned into big businesses and it is very disheartening. In ten years we will not recognize Detroit. [Detroit billionaire] Dan Gilbert is reorganizing a small section of the city at the expense of many people who are getting hurt and some who will eventually die."

Alberta Powers came to the center to see if she could get any assistance. She has been living without water for four months after the city cut it off around the time of the Christmas holiday last year. She told the WSWS, "I went and got a medical document stating that water was necessary and they refused to turn it back on. I am living in an older house and all the utility payments are very high. One has to make a choice between paying the taxes on the house so you can keep it, paying the gas bill or paying the water bill. When you explain that things are difficult, they give you numbers to call but when you reach someone, you are told there are no funds available. Over the past number of years my water bill has doubled."

Public Meeting:

Date: Wednesday April 23

Time: 7:00 PM

Location: First Unitarian Universalist Church 4605 Cass Avenue

(Corner of Cass and Forest, parking one block south on Prentis St)

Detroit MI

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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