

Detroit workers speak out against water shutoffs

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The city of Detroit is shutting off water service to thousands of households around the city each week for paying their bills late. The ruthless policy is part of the bankruptcy restructuring plan and part of an effort to attract private investors to take over one of the country's largest municipally owned water and sewerage system.

The Socialist Equality Party is fighting to mobilize the working class against the shutoffs as part of the fight to stop the looting of city worker pensions and public assets like the Detroit Institute of Arts. On Saturday, SEP supporters campaigned at Eastern Market in Detroit to build for a public meeting against shutoffs, which the SEP is holding on Wednesday, April 23.

In addition to describing the impact of water shutoffs, workers spoke about the social catastrophe in America's poorest large city. Diane Harmon told the WSWs, "You pass a bus stop in the city and there are 20 people waiting there to go to a minimum wage job. I have lived here in the city all my life. Everyone on my block is struggling. I own a home and I am trying to keep things together. There is nowhere I can go to get help rehabilitating the home. Gas to heat the home is high, everything is high and there is no help for us.

"Our schools are the pits," Diane continued. "Our kids aren't being educated. If you can't afford to send them to private school, they don't have a chance for a good education. People need to understand they only have a voice if they stand up."

Diane's sister Marlene Clemons added, "They are shutting off water and isn't it ironic that we live in a state surrounded by the Great Lakes. It is the haves and the have-nots, and you don't want to be one of the have-nots.

"I left here when I was 22. I am almost speechless

when I look at the neighborhoods. Every nook and cranny is in rubble. It is not acceptable for people to be living without proper shelter and the security you need to be safe."

Colleen Ludwig and Bruce Charlesworth, art professors at Oakland University, responded to the SEP campaigners' slogan that water is a social right. "Everyone should be guaranteed basic rights. The wealth of society should be used to ensure this," Bruce said.

"Our democracy has turned into an oligarchy. The system is set up to keep power in the hands of certain elite families and groups. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, socialism has been demonized, yet at the same inequality has grown astonishingly, and endless wars have taken place," Colleen said.

Cherese Kleckly spoke to the WSWs about the privatization and selloff of city assets. "They're selling off the water, Belle Isle, even trash collection. Now they are talking about privatizing the DIA. It's illegal to sell the art, it's a public trust," Kleckly said.

"We are right next to the Great Lakes. That's where the water comes from—mass bodies of water that belong to all of us. And we the workers built the infrastructure that transports it.

"I'm really scared by what is happening in Ukraine. It seems like a really big war is building up. Clearly, these are not just Detroit problems," Kleckly said.

Debra, an adult student pursuing a new degree in business accounting, said of the shutoffs, "The rich do what they want in this country. It isn't right. It's injustice. They're going against peoples' basic human rights. The rich are showing us that they will take more and more, with no limit.

"They're taking Belle Isle away from us too. I was there last week, and I've never seen so many police. So

many people were getting arrested.

“Water rates in Highland Park are being jacked up through the roof. Gas is going way up too. My parents are there and they can’t pay their bills anymore.”

Anna Smith, a bank worker and single mother, told the WSWs, “They’re shutting me off for \$258. DTE is also killing me with the heating bills. My last one was \$500. I need a car to get around. I’m paying hundreds of dollars for the insurance on the car alone.

“My daughter goes to University of Michigan, and that obviously costs money too. I’m asking myself, do I pay these bills or keep my kids in school?

“I already work full time for a bank. Now I am trying to get a second job. I’ve been interviewing, but no one wants me, because I can only work weekends,” Smith said.

Paul, a Chrysler worker, spoke the WSWs, saying, “It’s getting to be like the Third World in this country. Everyone is on food stamps, and now they’re taking those away too.”

Paul spoke about conditions in the auto factory, saying, “We’re constantly encountering horror stories at Warren truck. People are beat up. People fall out because of the extremely high pace of the work, and the overseers just push you to the side and keep going.

“Obama is with the system. He is going to do what they tell him,” Paul said.

Marilyn Alvis told the WSWs, “This stuff is a big mess. I worked for the government. I think the pension cuts are a terrible shame. It is a bunch of hypocrisy. [Detroit Emergency Manager] Kevyn Orr needs to go. He didn’t need to be here in the first place.”

Marilyn expressed sympathy with the plight of families losing water service, “I feel for them because I have been there. I lived without water for an entire year. I lived on bottled water. The water company wouldn’t do anything for me because my house was in foreclosure. I had young children.”



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