

Detroit water shutoffs violate human rights

Patrick Martin
27 June 2014

An agency of the United Nations issued a statement Wednesday condemning the shutoff of water to thousands of residents of the city of Detroit.

“Disconnection of water services because of failure to pay due to lack of means constitutes a violation of the human right to water and other international human rights,” the statement read. It was signed by three representatives of the UN’s Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights: an anti-poverty advocate from Canada, and law professors from Colombia and the United States.

The OCHCR concerns itself with gross violations of human rights, including torture, capital punishment, racial oppression and the abuse of women and children, as well as mass starvation, epidemics and the social consequences of flood, drought and other natural disasters. Most of its reports and statements deal with the impoverished countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America. It is rare for this agency to issue a statement about conditions of daily life in one of the wealthiest countries in the world.

That the social conditions in Detroit have become the subject of a declaration by a UN human rights panel, made in response to an appeal from various local organizations, is an expression of the staggering decay of social conditions in the city, once the center of American manufacturing.

The moves to shut off thousands of people from water is part of the bankruptcy and restructuring of Detroit, under the leadership of Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr. The Detroit Water and Sewerage Department began mass disconnection of water services from households more than two months behind on their bills—owing as little as \$150.

More than 7,500 homes have been disconnected so far, and DWSD has set a goal of increasing the rate of disconnection to 3,000 customers per week. Ultimately, this could affect 150,000 customers, nearly half the

households in the city, who have fallen behind on water bills under conditions of widespread poverty, unemployment, and cutbacks in food stamps, unemployment compensation and other forms of aid.

According to the water department, two-thirds of those cut off service pay their bills within 48 hours. This does not mean, as city officials claim, that these are people who *would* not, rather than *could* not, pay their bills. It only means that under threat of shutoff, money that would have gone to pay rent or utilities, buy food, or keep a car running to get to a low-paid job, went instead to keep the water on.

And that still leaves one-third of those shut off, unable even with a gun at their heads to get the money to restore their water service. What does it mean to live without running water in a modern society? You can’t take a shower, cook a meal, wash your hands or use the toilet. These conditions are extraordinarily dangerous from a public health standpoint, particularly for children, the elderly and the sick or disabled. Yet so acute is the economic and social crisis of American capitalism that tens of thousands of people in a major city now face such degrading conditions.

From a historical standpoint, the mass water shutoffs represent an unprecedented retrogression. Water and sewage service as a public utility was essential in the development of urban life in the 19th century and throughout the 20th century, banishing such diseases as cholera and dysentery, which once took thousands of lives every year.

Detroit symbolizes the long-term decline of American capitalism—and the ruthless avarice of the financial aristocracy that runs society. In the 1950s, workers in the Motor City had the highest standard of living of any in the world.

Today the city is in bankruptcy, ruled by a state-appointed financial overseer and a federal judge, with the public schools largely dismantled, pensions and

health benefits for city workers gutted, and the assets of the city—from the paintings in the Detroit Institute of Arts, to the sewage plant on the Detroit River, to the water department itself—being primed to be auctioned off to the highest bidder.

As in Detroit, so in the rest of the country. Since the 2008 crisis, the ruling class, under the leadership of the Obama administration, has orchestrated a massive transfer of wealth—a policy mirrored in all the major capitalist countries. Every remaining social right of the working class is being eliminated—health care, public education, pensions, transportation and water. Mass unemployment and poverty are the norm.

The banks and financial institutions live a parasitic existence, amassing wealth on the basis of social misery. Just this week, the Commerce Department reported that the economic output fell at a 2.9 percent annual rate in the first quarter of this year—a sign of continuing, and indeed deepening, economic slump.

Yet the stock markets have continued their upward march, confident that the government will keep open the supply of cheap cash. Ever greater sums of wealth are simply funneled back into new speculative ventures, combined with an intensification of the wrecking operation targeting basic social infrastructure.

The consequences of these conditions are not hard to calculate. The ruling class has thoroughly discredited its own political rule, while exposing the historical bankruptcy of the social system, capitalism, upon which it rests.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:



wsws.org/contact