

Workers on Detroit water shutoffs: “They are making it so you can’t live”

Shannon Jones
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Over the weekend, the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to workers at the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD) bill payment office downtown.

Many reacted angrily to the DWSD’s brutal shutoff policy that authorizes up to 3,000 shutoffs per week of households and small businesses, some with bills of as little as \$150. Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr’s office characterizes the cutoffs as a necessary measure to help restore financial stability to the city.

Linda Clarkston, who is on disability after being injured in an auto accident, said, “It is inhuman. They are making it so you can’t live. You have to pay more for utilities than the cost of living. Rich people don’t care about working class people. I am disabled and I have to struggle just to pay my bills. Never mind eating.

“My water is \$200. I have to pay the bill plus pay on the back bill. They have it marked for cutoff already. You shouldn’t have to live in fear. All of this stuff they are doing is illegal.”

The policy of the DWSD is so egregious that three experts from the United Nations office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights issued a statement condemning the practice. The statement declared in part, “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 added, “The households which suffered unjustified disconnections must be immediately reconnected.”

Michael Smith, a worker with 37 years at Ford, told the WSW, “I don’t see how they can justifiably turn someone’s water off. They are not hurting for money. It is just a façade. It is almost robbery. Everything revolves around dollars and cents. They don’t take people into account.”

“They just take your money. Even when there is no usage it is \$27 month. It is ridiculous.”

Nicole Williams added, “Water is a basic necessity. What they are doing is appalling. I saw on the news that there are companies that owe hundreds of thousands of dollars, but they are not shutting off those big companies.”

Her mother, Jean, agreed, “It is a violation of human rights.”

The move to disconnect the water of thousands of Detroit residents is part of the bankruptcy restructuring plan of Kevyn Orr. It could ultimately affect 150,000 customers, one-half the households in the city. Some 7,500 homes have been disconnected so far. It takes place under conditions of widespread poverty and unemployment in a city where the per capita income for residents is just \$14,861.

One worker told the WSW, “I am opposed to raising the rates in this economy. First fix the economy. Food has gone up because of the rough winter. Gas prices were supposed to go down, instead they are going up.

“Kevyn Orr is fixing downtown. They are spending millions. But for the neighborhoods nothing is being done.”

Michael added. “Every time there is a for sale sign in the city [Detroit billionaire] Dan Gilbert is buying up every property he can buy up. He stands to gain enormously out of all of this.”

A number of those who spoke to the WSW said their water had been turned off without notice. Indeed, the policy of the water department is to make no exceptions for the elderly, the sick, families with children or people with disabilities.

John Crowley works as a high-low driver in a factory. He said he had come down to the bill payment center because his water had been shut off. “I was shut off

Thursday morning. Right now my bill is \$800 and I had to put down a \$112 deposit.”

Arandi Gillery, a young worker with two years at Ford, said his water had just been turned off for a \$90 bill. “They should have at least sent a shutoff notice. I have a three-month-old baby, but they don’t care. Our bills are running about \$90 a month. That is crazy.”

Lezli Johnson works as a medical assistant. She told the WSWs, “The water department is horrible. They turned my water off yesterday. I just moved into my place in October, but they never transferred service into my name. They say they are not turning it on.

“I never even got a notice. You cannot live without water. We are using bottled water and going over to my sister’s and my parent’s home to bathe. We will probably have to move out if we can’t get it turned back on.”

The move by the city to implement mass disconnections of water service runs parallel with the plans of the city to privatize the water department. It comes as Detroit retirees are voting on Orr’s proposed plan of adjustment, which imposes massive cuts to the pensions of retired Detroit city workers.

John said, “I think it is a bunch of trash what is happening in the city. It is terrible what they are doing to the retirees. People who have worked here all their lives are losing their pensions. They just invest everything downtown, but there are not a lot of jobs. Where is all the money going?

“I paid \$5,000 last year in property taxes. But the city is not keeping up with maintaining the sewage system. I have a problem with the sewer backing up on my property.”



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