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Detroit residents call water shutoffs a “crime”

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2 July 2014

The drive by Detroit Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr to shut off water service to three thousand households every week is in full swing, spelling catastrophe for the approximately 150,000 Detroit households with overdue water bills. The water shutoffs, a measure of almost unspeakable cruelty, are pushing the most vulnerable layers of the population in America’s poorest large city even further into misery and desperation.

Orr has called the shutoffs, which are designed to facilitate the privatization of the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD) as a part of the largest municipal bankruptcy in US history, a “necessary part of Detroit’s restructuring.”

Last week, a United Nations agency issued a statement condemning Detroit’s water shutoffs, which read, “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.”

World Socialist Web Site reporters visited the DWSD payment center on Grand River Avenue on the city’s West side Tuesday. At the entrance, a security guard announced every few minutes that those looking to simply make a payment could be seen immediately, while those who needed to negotiate the reinstatement of water service were to wait in the long line that stretched out the door and around the building. Scores of people, including retirees, workers, and parents with small children stood in the 85 degree heat where they were monitored by Detroit police officers.

Many people reported being shut off for overages far lower than the \$150 threshold announced by the city, and one woman said she was unable to reinstate service

for want of just \$11. Others said they had made payments online or over the phone that were not honored, resulting in their water service being shut off.

Dierdre Johnson is a single mother of six children, the youngest is six months old. She works as a home health aide and has had her water shut off over a \$1200 bill. “For years, they used to bill me for water every three months, and it was about \$150. Now, they bill every month and it’s \$170 per month.”

“These water shutoffs are a crime. We are talking about kids who are going to be affected, and the elderly.” When asked what it means for a mother of six to have to come up with \$1200, Dierdre choked back tears and said, “it makes me feel crazy, like I’m going to lose my home or lose my kids. Child protective services can take away your children if they don’t have a good home. I cannot afford to pay \$1200 and I am here to see if I can work out some kind of deal.”

Crystal Walker works as a TSA agent and lives with her elderly parents, who are both disabled. “We had a water leak in the house somehow, and we did not know about it. We normally pay about \$100 a month and this month it was \$500. The water department said we still had to pay it because you have to report a problem within 30 days, and we didn’t realize what was going on in time.”

“I think these water cutoffs are crazy. My mom was just telling me the news about the UN calling Detroit a humanitarian crisis. I’m at a loss for words. You can’t take care of your family without water. And I’m pregnant. Everything happened all at one time.

“They want to drive people out of the city. They’re tearing down homes, mental hospitals, homeless shelters and services. And the people who stay here are

going to be hit with higher bills, and higher property taxes that they can't afford. It's a conspiracy."

Ned, a retired Ford worker, said "they need to put those responsible for this situation in jail. These people here [in line at the payment center] are not the ones who wasted all the city's money and got into this bankruptcy."

Madiha Fattah lives with her husband and five children. "I am here because I usually get a \$30 bill each month, but suddenly this month it was \$700. I have no idea why. There is no way we can pay that."

"How can they do this?" she asked. "They know we don't have the money. My family gets by on social security and food stamps. My husband is unemployed and looking for work, but there are no good jobs. But they don't care about us and our problems."

Kathy works as an insurance agent. She had her water cut off the day before without notice, over a \$389 bill. "My husband is a retired Detroit city worker, and they're cutting his pension. People worked hard to earn those pensions. How can they just take them away? If they sell all these city assets, if they sell the art out of the museum, in what sense will this even be Detroit anymore? The whole city will be controlled by these new owners, and not by the people that live here and care about it."

Paulette Graves, a retired Detroit Public School teacher, said "They aren't cutting off [local billionaire Mike] Ilitch's water, or any of the corporations that owe thousands of dollars to the city. But they keep coming after retiree pensions, and they shut off people's gas and electricity, too."

A 67-year-old retired woman who asked to remain anonymous, said "I think these cutoffs are terrible. I've paid my water bill for 30 years here. Sometimes I'm late, but I always eventually catch up, and that's always been fine with the water department. Now they've shut me off and I have to pay all of it to get it turned back on. I owe \$400. Right now I'm living off of social security, and I'm looking for work again. I think this is a way to force poor people out of the city. These rich landowners want all the property for themselves, and this is their way of forcing us out."

Lola Porch, 81, a retired General Motors worker, said "I think the shutoffs are awful. It shouldn't be happening. The whole bankruptcy shouldn't be happening. I've lived in this city for 77 years. I've

seen things just decline, decline, decline."

I know people with children, with families, who are getting cut off from water. Yes, I do think water is a right. Water is your life, it's our life. We're people aren't we? This is a disgrace to humankind."



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