

”I take my elderly aunt four buckets of water a day”

Detroit residents and water workers speak out against water shutoffs

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The city of Detroit is racing ahead with its plans to shut off water to some 150,000 families who cannot afford to pay their water bills, at a rate of about 3,000 households per week, as part of plans to privatize the city’s water department.

Last month a United Nations agency issued a report denouncing the city’s water shutoffs, stating, “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.”

A *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team encountered strong opposition to the water shutoffs among workers at the Detroit Wastewater Treatment Plant (DWWTP). Leon Boyd, a DWWTP worker of 15 years, said the city administration “should be whipped for what they’re doing. I heard that one lady got shut off for \$3. They don’t care.”

“They’re doing this to help them privatize the water department. They are going to make the workers pay and the people of Detroit pay. But as far as I am concerned the public should own it and the people should have a say in what is happening.”

“Maybe they should be doing due diligence before they shut off someone’s water,” said Pete Sisen, a veteran DWWTP worker. “A hundred and fifty dollars seems like a miniscule amount to owe for the city to be shutting off someone’s water. I don’t think they should be doing it.”

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to city residents about the water shutoffs at the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD) payment center in downtown Detroit on Thursday. Many visitors to the building were either attempting to get their water

turned back on or knew others affected by the water shutoff.

“I’d like for them to stop forcing poor and working people to foot the bill,” said resident Lynette Lanier. “Maybe they should go after some of these guys like [Quicken Loans Chairman] Dan Gilbert. It’s hard enough as it is without the shutoffs.”

“If you’re going to make someone pay why not make the corporations pay? They bailed them out, but they should bail out Detroit instead.”

“My elderly aunt lives down the street at Prince Hall Apartments, which is section 8 housing,” said Markeita Selvy, a Detroit resident, with tears in her eyes. “They’ve been without water for two weeks. I take her four buckets of water a day.”

Markeita said that upon visiting the payment center to check on her own bill, she learned that she had been charged an additional \$112 on her account for money that her landlord owed.

“They came around to shut off my water but it was already shut off,” said Dokie, a Detroit resident. “My bill is \$125, which I’m going to try to figure out right now. But I have four dogs and they need the water. How can they cut it off in the middle of summer? My water meter was broken and my basement flooded so I have to deal with that as well right now. I don’t even know how much that’s going to cost.”

“I think people are angry and want to fight back,” said Warren Nickerson, a former Unemployment Agency worker and a Detroit resident for 35 years. “I think the church is a part of the problem. You used to be able to pack a church full of people who were ready to fight for their rights. Nowadays, you go into a church and if you said the wrong thing they might throw you

out.”

Detroit resident Howard Robinson had been laid off since 2008 but was keeping up with his bills. “I’ve only missed a few times,” he said. “And this time they shut it off. I had to call my brother in Arizona to get the money to turn it back on. I’m not surprised that they’re doing this—they’ve been wanting to privatize the water department for years.”

“The whole water system is messed up,” said one water department worker of 27 years, who asked to remain anonymous out of fear of being victimized.

She said that a recently-implemented computer system that communicated remotely with meters had failed to consistently work and was causing chaos. When communication with meters failed customers received bills based on prior usage. She gave the example of a single homeowner who may have a visiting relative for a month. The next month the customer might receive an incorrectly high bill if the charge was based on the prior month’s usage.

“We workers can only do so much, especially when they want to downsize the department. The department is trying to do too much at one time to appease the Emergency Manager. We’ve gone from 1,800 employees to around 800, and it’s projected the ultimate goal is 542. It’s disheartening to see the overall failure of the system. It’s my fear that this will cause a water catastrophe. How can equipment be kept up with to keep river contamination down with such reduced staff?”



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