

“It is inhumane”

Detroit water shutoffs hit families, ill and elderly residents

A WSWS reporting team
10 July 2014

Thousands more Detroit families had their water shut off this week as part of the city administration’s plan to cut service to 150,000 households who are overdue on their water bills. Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr said he hopes to shut off water service to as many as 3,000 homes per week this summer.

The city’s water rates have been climbing for years and are now about double the national average. 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 visited a bill payment center Monday, where residents can attempt to get their service reinstated after paying what they owe, plus a \$30 fee. We encountered enormous opposition to the shutoffs. Several residents reported that they were shut off with no notice, leaving their families completely unprepared. Others said they lost water service due to mistakes on the part of the water department and hadn’t actually missed a payment, but even after confirming this, were still required to pay the fee to restore service.

“I’m retired, and I’m sick with cancer,” said Renella. “That’s why I can’t understand how they can turn off the water on people that are sick like me, who are on a fixed income. Detroit is down to its lowest now as far as income and people working. Look around you! You know there’s something going on when people can’t pay their water bill. We need water to survive. Besides the water, everything here in Detroit is just coming apart. I’ve never seen it like this, and I’m 66 years old.

It’s like we’re over in the old country or something.”

“To shut off someone with no warning is terrible!” said Andre Hill, a welder and father of six whose family’s water was shut off with no notice. “How can people prepare to deal with not having water, especially with no notice? We are a family of eight. I have four girls, plus my wife. What are they supposed to do, go to the bathroom outside? It is inhumane. They hired outside contractors to do the shutoffs, probably because the regular workers would refuse to do it.”

“I had to call off work to come down here and try to get us turned back on. And as far as I can tell, we don’t even owe any money, all the payments have been made.” After coming back out of the payment center, Andre said, “I was right, we didn’t owe any money. But they still made me pay \$30 to get it back on.”

Andre said he opposed the bankruptcy of Detroit, in particular the private takeover of the Detroit Institute of Arts. “What they did to privatize the museum is the same kind of thing. They want to get as much money as they can from the people. That art belongs to the people of Detroit. A lot of it was donated by people who wanted everyone to be able to see it. You’re not supposed to be able to sell it. If they can sell the art, why would anyone donate more art in the future? It can wind up who knows where.”

“Even if you always try to pay your bills, you can easily find yourself getting cut off,” said Laura, a longtime Detroit resident. “I know someone whose job told them that their last day will be this Friday. There goes their income! Now they’ve got to hurry up and find out how to avoid having their water cut off. My uncle is a retired Detroit police officer. They are cutting his pension check [as part of the bankruptcy]. Now he

can't afford to pay his bills. He could get cut off."

"It's not fair," said Anthony, a disabled veteran. "They're cutting people off for having \$60 or \$70 balances. But billionaire business owners like Mike Ilitch don't pay their bills, and they haven't had their water cut. I don't know why they do it, other than the Detroit politicians are crooked. They are so crooked, they steal from anyone. I came out of the military disabled. I get \$3,000 a month to live on, and I'm broke at the end of it."

Leonte compared the current crisis in Detroit to the Great Depression. "This is the worst situation since the 1930s. But you know what? The banks are getting money hand over fist. And [the government] bailed them out. But they wouldn't bail us out."

Referring to the housing crisis that led to the financial crash of 2008, Leonte added, "Freddie Mac and Fannie Mae and all those companies, they got found guilty of doing wrong. They get on TV and do their little speeches and that's that—they're not held responsible for anything.

"I know a lot of people who have had their water cut off. If they cut you off, you have to pay \$30 for coming back out to cut it on. So if you owe two hundred, you have to pay that plus the fee! People can't pay it. It's ridiculous!"

"It's a shame," said Rhonda, "We have about 100-200 people in line here. Water should be a human right. You know, you can't live without water. You have to worry about where you're going to shower when you go to work. How can you cook your food if you don't have water to rinse it off, or to wash your pots and pans? You can't wash your clothes...and there are people being shut off who have children. Before, the water bill used to be every three months. Now it comes every month, and it's the same [charge as before]."

"My water has been off for four days," said Carl Thomas, a city sanitation worker. Because of the [fourth of July] holiday [when the payment centers were closed], I couldn't pay until today. I was given no warning. People can't live without water. My brother's water has also been turned off. He is unemployed and trying to figure out how to come up with the money to get it back on."

"It's not right," said Tiffany, a worker at Henry Ford Hospital. "They are letting the big companies [that owe

money] stay in service while they're out here cutting off people for \$80. They should give people a chance. Give them some time to pay off their bills, don't just cut them off."

Jackson, a landlord, said, "What is happening today is that people cannot afford these high rates. It used to be that water bills were paid quarterly, every three months. Now you've got a bill to keep up with every month. For me, my bill used to figure out to \$30 or \$40 for every month. Now it's around \$160 a month. People can hardly ever water their grass anymore because you've got to pay so much for it. It's hard on everybody, but the poorest are always the ones that catch hell."



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact