

The Detroit water shutoffs: A social crime

Lawrence Porter—Chairman of the Detroit Workers Committee
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The shutoff of water to tens of thousands of Detroit residents is a social crime. Although the city is located by the Great Lakes—which contain one-fifth of the world's fresh water—there is no water to drink, bathe, cook or flush away sewage for thousands of people.

Up to 150,000 households—behind on their bills by as little as two months, or \$150—have been targeted. Every week, 3,000 homes, inhabited by single mothers, children, the elderly and sick, low-income and unemployed workers, are having their taps turned off.

In the 21st century, in what is supposedly the richest country in the world, a modern American city has been reduced to Third World conditions, with residents forced to carry buckets from neighbors' homes or fire hydrants, or relying on emergency supplies of bottled water delivered by volunteers from Canada. With temperatures rising, there is a real danger of the outbreak of disease and a catastrophic public health crisis.

These conditions are an indictment of capitalism, a system that guarantees billions of dollars to banks and big corporations while depriving workers and young people of the most basic necessities of civilized life. The entire political establishment—from President Obama, Governor Rick Snyder and Mayor Mike Duggan, to the City Council, the trade unions and the media—are guilty of a premeditated crime, which everyone knows will lead to devastation and even death.

City officials are slandering the victims of this cruel and inhuman policy as shirkers who refuse to pay their water bills. Detroit's water prices have gone up 119 percent over the last decade and are now twice the national average. If nearly half of the population is unable to pay their bills, it is only a measure of the social disaster in Detroit.

The corporate and financial elite have waged a four-decade war to destroy the gains won by the working class in the mass struggles of the 1930s. This class war, including the elimination of 90 percent of the city's manufacturing jobs, has transformed the Motor City, which had the highest per capita income in America in

1960, into the poorest big city in the country, with more than 40 percent of its residents living below the poverty level.

The water shutoffs expose the real character of the bankruptcy process overseen by Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr, the federal courts and politicians from both the Democratic and Republican parties. From the beginning, the aim of this political conspiracy was to enrich the financial elite by looting the pensions, art work and even the water resources that belong to the people of Detroit.

More than 50 cents of every dollar collected by the water department goes to pay principal and interest on its debt. The money squeezed out of poor residents will not go to cover operating expenses, let alone repairing the antiquated pipeline system. On the contrary, it will be funneled to the Wall Street bankers and wealthy bondholders who see the water department as their personal ATM machine.

By clearing up uncollected debt, Orr hopes to entice Wall Street buyout firms to privatize the third largest municipally owned water system in the nation. If this happens, the billionaire investors will make millions of dollars by further hiking up rates, cutting service to poor areas and dumping workers and their pensions.

The Board of Water Commissioners, the gang of corporate executives who ordered the water shutoffs and rate hikes, plans to reduce the number of water and sewerage employees by 80 percent, from 1,978 to 374 workers.

The restructuring of Detroit is being used as a model for the entire country. The gutting of pensions—in violation of the state constitution—is being followed by similar moves in Illinois, California and other states. Attacks on teachers, firefighters and other public sector workers throughout the country go hand in hand with the wage-cutting drive in the private sector backed by the Obama administration.

There is deep opposition to these policies. But the American Federation of State, County and Municipal

Employees (AFSCME), the United Auto Workers (UAW) and other unions have blocked any organized struggle by the working class. The well-heeled functionaries who run the unions agree that workers must pay for an economic crisis they did not create.

In Detroit, AFSCME, the UAW and other unions have joined the “grand bargain” to force workers to accept savage cuts in jobs, wages and pensions and have sanctioned the selloff of public assets, including the art collection of the Detroit Institute of Arts. As a payoff, the union executives have been handed a half-billion-dollar VEBA retiree health care slush fund and a “seat at the table” to negotiate future attacks on workers.

Phony opponents of the water shutoffs such as US Congressman John Conyers and groups tied to the Democratic Party like Moratorium Now, the Greens and the Detroit Water Brigade, have claimed the Obama administration can be pressured to protect workers.

This is a lie. Everything Obama has done since taking office—from bank bailouts, attacks on auto workers and slashing food stamps and unemployment benefits, to waging new wars and organizing police state spying on the population—has only accelerated the social counterrevolution against working people.

While Obama handed trillions to Wall Street, the president has refused to bail out Detroit, and attorneys for his Justice Department intervened on behalf of Orr to block lawsuits by retirees. Far from defending workers, the Obama administration is using the Detroit bankruptcy to launch a nationwide attack on public workers and their pensions.

Many of the groups around the Democratic Party say the water cutoffs are a “racist” attack carried out by white Republican politicians like Michigan Governor Rick Snyder. This is aimed at concealing the class interests behind the bankruptcy and bolstering illusions in black Democratic Party politicians like Conyers and Obama.

Earlier this month, Governor Snyder appointed an emergency manager in Lincoln Park, a downriver Detroit suburb with a majority white population that has been ravaged by the economic crisis. This only underscores the fact that the capitalist system is attacking the entire working class in the US and around the world and that this can be stopped only by uniting all workers—black, white, native born and immigrant.

The provision of water, electricity and other utilities and the guarantee of decent-paying and secure jobs, health care, housing and education are *social rights* over which there can be no compromise. Access to water must be

freely available to everyone. All shutoffs must be immediately stopped, and those whose water has been turned off must have access to this basic necessity restored immediately.

If the powers-that-be insist that modern society is not capable of ensuring that every man, woman and child has the minimal requirements of civilized life this only goes to show that they are not fit to run society and that their economic and political system, capitalism, has failed.

The enormous economic resources and productive capacity of society must be freed from private ownership and the profit system and utilized to meet the needs of the majority, not the wealthy few. The only force capable of doing this is the broad masses of working class people who have a deep interest in ending poverty, inequality and war, and reorganizing society in a rational, democratic and egalitarian, i.e., socialist, fashion.

The fight to build a new leadership for this struggle has already been taken up by the Socialist Equality Party, which organized the February 15 Workers’ Inquiry into the Bankruptcy of Detroit and the Attack on the DIA & Pensions and has spearheaded the fight to build new organizations of workers struggle, independent of the unions and big business politicians. The SEP urges auto workers and all workers to contact our party to take up this fight.

Rally Against Water Shutoffs

Thursday, July 17, 3:00 pm

Detroit Waste Water Treatment Plant

9300 W. Jefferson Ave., Detroit

Thursday, July 24, 3:00 pm

Detroit Water Central Services Facility

6425 Huber St., Detroit



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact