

Detroit elites declare: “Water is not a social right”

Jerry White
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The shut off of water service for tens of thousands of Detroit residents has generated national and international attention. The scenes of young mothers, children, the elderly, the sick and low-income workers deprived of water for drinking, cleaning and cooking—in what is supposed to be the richest country of the world—have provoked astonishment and revulsion.

This barbaric policy has become a major political question in Detroit. Earlier this week a federal judge overseeing the city’s bankruptcy case complained that the shutoffs were producing “a lot of anger” and giving Detroit “a reputation not only in this country but around the world.” Opposition generated by the shutoffs, he warned, could threaten the city’s plan to impose deeply unpopular cuts to city worker pensions and health care benefits.

The near universal condemnation, which included charges by the UN that the shutoffs were a violation of international human rights, has not led to any shift in policy. In an interview published in the *Detroit News* Thursday, the city’s unelected emergency manager Kevyn Orr defended the shutoffs.

“I’m very supportive of the water department’s and the Board of Water Commissioners’ decision to do what every other regulated utility does in the United States, which is, if you use water you’ve got to pay for it,” Orr told the *Detroit News*.

Orr scoffed at the “hysteria out there that we are cutting off water to tens of thousands of people” and insisted “less than five percent” of those being shut off “had legitimate needs.” He slandered the majority of the victims of this inhumane policy as “drug addicts, illegal squatters, scofflaws and the people gaming the system.” These people, he insisted, should not be “provided with a free service.”

Orr repeated the lie that the “scofflaws” were causing

rates to go up for paying customers. In fact, the water department has admitted that rising rates—which have shot up 120 percent in the last decade—are chiefly due to the disappearance of federal funding to repair the antiquated water system and the high cost of debt servicing. Fifty cents of every dollar in revenue goes directly to the Wall Street banks and wealthy bondholders who have used the municipally owned water system as a cash cow.

Behind all the lies and cynicism, the message was clear: people do not have the right to water any more than they do to food, shelter, health care or any other vital necessity. In capitalist America, if you do not pay for something, even something as essential as water, you will have to do without it.

This brutal outlook of the American ruling class was made explicit by Nolan Finley, the right-wing columnist for the *Detroit News*, whose opinion piece Thursday was headlined: “There is no right to free water.”

Finley has long been a shameless mouthpiece for the corporate and financial interests that dominate Detroit. He has previously called for the destruction of the “entitlement mentality” in the city—that is, the view that workers should expect decent wages, pensions and health care. Two years ago, he declared that “democracy has failed” in Detroit and called for a “short-term dictator” (later arriving in the person of Kevyn Orr) to “create a sustainable operating model.”

Looking for a higher authority to justify the inhumane shutoff policy, Finley turns to the Old Testament in his more recent column, writing, “Ever since Adam and Eve got booted out of Eden, people have devoted most of their energy and labor to meeting the basic needs of food, water, clothing and shelter. It’s the origin of work—you’re hungry, you’re thirsty, you need some

decent threads and a roof over your head, you have to get up in the morning and do something constructive.”

With unabashed arrogance and contempt for the population, Finley accuses residents of squandering money on cable television and cell phones. Once the shutoffs began, he asserts, many households paid up their bills, “suggesting that they could have been paying all along.” What existed in Detroit, he declared, “is not a humanitarian crisis” but a “forced reordering of priorities.”

There is little doubt many residents stopped paying for food, medicine and other daily necessities to get their water turned back on. Thousands of others, however, continue to live without water or are hauling buckets from their neighbor’s homes and fire hydrants or relying on bottled water from volunteers.

According to the corporate and financial elite and their political and media henchmen like Orr and Finley, workers have no social rights. Pensions, health care, public education, access to culture will be available only to those who can afford it. If the capitalists could privatize the air people breathe, it would not be a right either.

The shutting off of water in Detroit is part of a national and international process in which the gains won in over a century of struggle by the working class are being destroyed. This is part of a vast transfer of wealth into the hands of the super-rich. Whether it is in Detroit, Athens or Madrid, hundreds of thousands of teachers, firefighters, transit and other public workers are losing their jobs and having their pensions stolen to pay off the banks responsible for the financial crash of 2008.

The Detroit bankruptcy is being used to spearhead this assault in the US. The financial dictator, Orr, and the federal bankruptcy court are setting a precedent for the gutting of constitutionally protected retirement benefits, while selling off and privatizing water, street lighting, art museums, parks and other publicly owned treasures.

Low-income residents are being kicked out of the city, as Orr implements a plan to essentially shut down whole areas of Detroit that are deemed too poor for investment. Meanwhile, hundreds of millions of dollars in subsidies are being handed over to real estate developers who have snatched up land and skyscrapers for pennies. This is the “restructuring of priorities” that

Finley advocates.

Finley directs his immediate complaints to a demonstration planned by Netroots on Friday. The demonstration is part of a conference organized this weekend in Detroit by a coalition of Democratic Party officials, unions, publications like the *Nation* magazine and other organizations oriented to the Democrats. Netroots is seeking to divert attention from the responsibility of the Democrats who run Detroit, including Orr himself. The water shutoffs are in fact a bipartisan policy, and the restructuring of Detroit enjoys the full backing of Obama and both big business parties.

Significantly, however, the actual target of Finley’s column is a position that no section of the political establishment, including the groups organizing Friday’s rally, raise: that water should be a social right, freely available to all. What Finley and the ruling class as a whole fear is that the demand for these rights will become a rallying cry of a mass movement, and that workers will come to understand that these rights are incompatible with the capitalist system.

Concluding his editorial, the newspaper columnist writes: “Charitable minded citizens have never objected to helping care for neighbors who are unable to care for themselves. But they understandably don’t have much appetite for carrying on their backs those who choose to indulge their wants before their needs.”

Here Finley says perhaps more than he intends. The true “scofflaws” are not the workers of Detroit, but the financial parasites that Finley speaks for. It is this social layer that workers can no longer afford to “carry on their backs.” The outrageous, inhumane and barbaric policy dictated by Orr, Finley and their political co-conspirators is only making this fact all the more clear.

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