

Democratic Party organizations hold rally on water shutoffs

Our reporters
19 July 2014

On Friday, sections of the Democratic Party, trade unions and associated organizations organized a rally on the issue of water shutoffs in the city of Detroit, Michigan. About 500 people attended the event, many of them participants in the Netroots Conference held over the weekend.

The aim of the protest was to promote the Democratic Party and contain mounting public anger over the shutoffs in Detroit. A particularly prominent role was played by Moratorium Now, associated with Workers World, which is being brought forward in an attempt to provide a “left” front for the right-wing policies of the Democrats.

The Netroots Conference is an annual gathering of the self-styled “progressive” wing of the Democratic Party, which has in fact no significant political differences with the Obama administration. The main speakers at the conference included Vice President Joe Biden and Elizabeth Warren, who is being primed for a possible presidential campaign.

Over the past several months, the Detroit water board, with the support of Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr, has moved to shut off water to nearly 150,000 households that are delinquent on their bills. This attack on the working class, part of the broader restructuring of Detroit in bankruptcy court, has forced disabled workers, retirees, the unemployed and poor to choose between keeping their water on and cutting back other necessities like food or medicine.

Democrats and Republicans at all levels of government, along with the unions, are on record supporting the bankruptcy proceedings—from the Democrats on the city council, to Orr, to Republican Governor Rick Snyder. The Obama administration intervened to support what is taking place in Detroit, which is seen as a model for similar attacks throughout

the country.

Speakers at the rally included Democrats who have cut social spending and union heads who have endorsed concessions contracts. The unions have signed on to a “grand bargain” proposed by the bankruptcy court, involving massive cuts for workers and a few handouts for union executives. Among the unions present, a prominent role was played by National Nurses United.

The overarching theme of the speakers was the need to get rid of Snyder by electing Democrats—even though it is Democrats who are implementing the water shutoffs. Orr himself is a Democrat with close ties to the Obama administration.

Democratic Congressman John Conyers took the stage to thank the unions supporting Netroots. Earlier this year, Conyers told a similar rally that he would “talk to the president of the United States about what we are doing here and how the federal government can help us.” At this rally he made no mention of Obama.

Dennis Williams, the new president of United Auto Workers (UAW), after a demagogic speech about water being the “people’s resource,” declared: “We need to take back the House, take back the Senate, and make the president work for us.”

Before becoming UAW president, Williams was best known for negotiating the UAW’s first two-tier wage contract, with new hires brought in on a permanently lower wage scale with worse health care and retirement plans.

Charles Williams, associated with Al Sharpton’s National Action Network, issued his own appeal to Snyder to intervene to stop water shutoffs.

The speakers list concluded with Councilman Wantwaz Davis from Flint, Michigan who told the crowd that he had spoken to gubernatorial candidate Mark Schauer, and that if Schauer were elected he

would “remove the emergency manager day one.”

None of the speakers addressed Obama’s direct support for the Detroit bankruptcy.

While many of those attending the rally were Democratic Party or union functionaries, reporters from the WSWS spoke to some workers during the march from Cobo Hall to Hart Plaza and the rally afterwards.

George Gaines, a retired public health worker explained why he was there. “Shutting off water creates unsanitary conditions. We need to be going after the big commercial people, not the little guys. There are companies that owe tens of thousands of dollars but they’re shutting off the poor people for owing \$150.

“The entire bankruptcy is a mistake. They stopped my wife’s health insurance, so that’s about \$500 a month they took from us, and now they’re threatening to take even more in the ‘grand bargain.’ I believe that what they’re doing with the emergency manager is illegal. Kevyn Orr is a corporate stooge.”

Charmaine, an unemployed woman at the rally described her situation. “I didn’t have my water shut off, but they cut off my electricity and gas. The costs spiked over the winter, and my energy bill got up to \$600 a month. They cut me off when I got behind and said I needed \$1400 to get it back on. I’m a diabetic and need electricity for my care, so I had to move to the homeless shelter.”

Charmaine talked about some of the groups that endorsed the rally. “The unions aren’t what they used to be. They supported the bankruptcy and they’re crooked as hell. The Democrats and the Republicans are in on it too.”

Millard Campbell, a retired truck driver explained, “This is not only in Detroit but all of Michigan. It is a shame that the Detroit Emergency Manager is going after senior citizens and children who are left floundering for water. I can’t understand how the officials in Detroit could make people suffer.

“This government will spend billions to go to war, and my feeling is this government is ready to go to war. And yet, they are not prepared to take care of the people here at home.”

David, who lives in Southeast Michigan said his concern was that water shutoffs could cause a major health crisis in the region.

“If water is shutoff in Detroit, the city will become a cesspool of disease,” he said. “Disease will spread as a

public disaster and will affect everyone. It would be very expensive to address, much more expensive than the water itself.”

Dismissing the claim that there is no money for social services, David added: “We do have the money. We have the resources to remain a first world country and not descend into a third world status. We have the potential to turn into Haiti. We have the potential to create a human nightmare in Michigan.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact