

SEP rallies workers and youth against Detroit water shutoffs

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On Thursday, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the Detroit Workers Committee (DWC) held a rally against shutoffs at the Detroit Water Central Services Facility on the city's east side. The rally, the second organized by the SEP and DWC, insisted that access to clean water is a social right and fought to unite water workers and Detroit residents against the shutoffs and to oppose privatization and the attack on workers' jobs and pensions.

Over the past year, the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD) has conducted at least 42,000 shutoffs in order to make the department more attractive for private buyers. DWSD workers, like other municipal employees are facing savage cuts to pension and health care benefits, in addition to threats to reduce the workforce at the water department by 80 percent.

Joining in the rally were members of the SEP's youth movement, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, and local workers. The demonstrators made it clear they were not blaming public workers for the shutoffs but were fighting to unite water workers and residents against a common enemy—the emergency manager, both big business parties and the Wall Street banks they serve.

Water and decent jobs are social rights, the SEP demonstrators insisted, saying that profit had to be taken out of the provision of water by breaking the grip of the big banks and putting these vital resources under the genuine public ownership of the working class.

Workers and passersby expressed their support by honking and those leaving their shifts took copies of the latest *Detroit Workers Newsletter*. Picketers chanted slogans of “Hey! Hey! Corporate Henchmen, keep your hands off our pensions!” and “Detroit workers are here to fight, water is a social right!”

There are 150,000 households being targeted for

shutoffs because residents have fallen behind two or more months and owe as little as \$150 on their bills. Approximately 3,000 households have had service terminated per week.

The city responded to widespread revulsion towards this brutal policy with a 15-day “pause” in shutoffs, which was announced Monday. The city is supposed to use this period to publicize payment options for low-income residents, which include large down payments, which most families cannot afford. Advocacy groups reported Thursday that despite the supposed “pause” they are still receiving phone calls about continued shutoffs, as the water department steps up its campaign against supposed “illegal usage.”

At first several workers were wary of the demonstration. One worker said, “You’re protesting at the wrong place. All the BS about the shutoffs is coming from management.” SEP members explained that they were there to support water workers who are facing layoffs and pension cuts as part of Detroit’s bankruptcy and unite them with the workers facing shutoffs.

The appeal of the SEP to independently mobilize workers against all aspects of the Detroit bankruptcy won a warm response.

At the rally, most workers declined to be interviewed for fear of reprisals but the day before, one worker spoke at length with WSWs reporters about shutoffs, work conditions, and the bankruptcy. He requested to only be identified as a “disgruntled employee” of the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department.

“They’ve been talking about privatizing the department for years but now they’re actually doing it. They’re cutting back on everything. I used to go to work and it used to be fun but now we’ve got equipment that doesn’t work, and they’re hiring

managers who've never been in the field who don't know what it's like.

"There used to be a three-man crew on the leak trucks, now it's down to a two-man crew and it's impossible. You'll damn near kill yourself. With two men, by the time you're done working the jackhammer and get to the leak, you're too tired to fix it.

"You don't feel appreciated. They're replacing us with contractors who don't know what they're doing and then we've got to fix it when they mess up. If they knew you gave an interview like this they'd railroad you right out, you'd get fired."

About the bankruptcy and shutoffs, he said: "The whole city is hurting for money. Detroit has been mismanaged, because it's run for the rich. I've got no sympathy for someone who has money to pay their bills and doesn't, but if the City went after them big rascals that owe hundreds of thousands they wouldn't have to even care about the little guys.

"Instead, they're giving subsidies to [billionaire Red Wings hockey team owner Mike] Ilitch for that stadium. He's already rich and they're taking the hatchet to the little man."

About the plan to cut pensions, he added, "That's just wrong. These people worked and paid for those pensions and now they're taking them despite the constitution. It's a class war."



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