

The politics of the Detroit People's Water Board

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Last week, the Detroit People's Water Board (DPWB)—a loose-knit coalition of unions, religious groups, liberal and “left” organizations—organized a protest in front of City Hall. While the nominal purpose of this rally and others held by the organization was to oppose water shutoffs, the basic aim of the DPWB is to channel growing popular outrage over shutoffs back behind the Democratic Party, the main political organization that is responsible for the shutoffs.

The DPWB and its associated organizations are being deliberately cultivated by the corporate elite and political establishment in Detroit as part of an effort to mollify popular outrage over the shutoff of water to tens of thousands of residents unable to pay their bills. The same politicians who sanctioned this inhumane policy are now proclaiming their compassion for the “truly needy” and issuing promises to help low-income residents pay their bills.

These actions—which include Tuesday's announcement that Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr is relinquishing control of the water department to Mayor Mike Duggan—followed a warning earlier this month from federal bankruptcy judge Steven Rhodes that widespread anger and “bad publicity” over the shutoffs in the national and international media were threatening to derail the restructuring of the city.

Fearing that opposition to the shutoffs could come together with resistance to Orr's plan to gut city worker pension and health benefits—and privatize the city's art museum and other public treasures, including the water department itself—city officials implemented a 15-day “pause” on July 21. Rhodes instructed water department officials to work with “grassroots” organizations to enroll low-income households in payment plans to avoid shutoffs.

All of these measures are aimed at giving the city breathing room to prepare for an intensified assault on workers.

Enter the Detroit People's Water Board (DPWB). The DPWB, which was involved in getting the UN to declare that Detroit's shutoff policy was a violation of international human rights law, is in essence a faction of the Democratic

Party and its servants in the trade union bureaucracy. It includes within it AFSCME Local 207 (led by members of By Any Means Necessary), the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization (MWRO), the Green Party, MECAWI (associated with the Workers World Party and Moratorium Now!), and a number of other organizations.

Two weeks ago, members of the DPWB joined protesters from the National Nurses United union and others at the Netroots conference—an event organized by a faction of the Democratic Party—to blame Republicans for the water shutoffs in Detroit. The line is that somehow Michigan Governor Rick Snyder, a Republican, is exclusively responsible for the water shutoffs, even though he is working closely with Democrats in every aspect of the restructuring of Detroit.

The thoroughly establishment perspective advanced by the DPWB was evident in the rally last week, which consisted largely of moral appeals to the powers-that-be to adopt a more humane policy. The slogan of the DPWB that “water is a human right” conforms to the language of the UN and sections of the American political establishment, including US Representative John Conyers and members of the Detroit City Council, with whom they have close relations.

Not a word was mentioned at the rally about the role of the Democratic Party in the assault of the working class in Detroit. No criticism was made of President Barack Obama, who has endorsed the bankruptcy as part of a nationwide attack on public sector workers and for the wholesale privatization of public assets. No mention was made of the fact that Orr is a Democrat who has worked closely with the Obama administration.

DPWB's rally was accompanied by a petition to City Council President Brenda Jones, which was copied to President Obama, Governor Snyder, Kevyn Orr, Judge Rhodes and Mayor Duggan. In the most craven language the petition declared, “We are writing to urge you, respecting your supervisory or decision-making role as leaders in this matter, to uphold the residents and citizens' human right to water.”

Among those who spoke at the rally was Mike Mulholland, the acting president of AFSCME Local 207, which includes hundreds of water and sewerage workers. Mulholland played a chief role in the betrayal of the DWSD workers in the 2012 strike. In his remarks, he said nothing about the fact that AFSCME has endorsed Orr's bankruptcy plan to gut the pensions and health benefits for city workers. Instead, he suggested the destruction of the city was part of a "racist" plan. This is aimed at dividing the working class and concealing the role of the black Democratic Party political and corporate establishment in the city.

The forces behind DPWB may have differences with the way the bankruptcy restructuring of Detroit is being carried out, but this is from the standpoint of the grievances of a section of the upper middle class. Their aim is to extend their political influence within the corporate and political establishment and stake out a portion of the carve-up of Detroit for themselves, in the form of paid positions as consultants and advisors, real estate, seed money for "socially responsible" startups and urban farms.

Maureen Taylor, president of the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization, personifies the strivings of this social layer. She became a de facto advisor to DTE Energy after a wave of deaths caused by utility shutoffs in 2010, and is now pitching her proposal for low-income payment plans to the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department.

Taylor is also a member of the Board of Trustees of New Detroit, a "racial justice organization" established by Henry Ford and other corporate magnates after the 1967 riots to integrate a layer of blacks into the political and corporate establishment. Taylor sits alongside representatives of the auto companies and the big banks that are looting the city.

As part of the rally, Taylor delivered a "Water Affordability Plan" to the council president. The proposal, drafted in 2005, does not challenge the ability of the water department and the big bondholders that control its multi-billion dollar debt to make a profit. Instead it argues that instituting a rate discount for low-income residents and a specific program of payment plans would be beneficial for the "business needs" of the water department.

The DWSD, the proposal complains, is burdened with high "collection expenses arising from the need to 'chase' bill payments; increased working capital expenses associated with higher arrears, and increased bad debt/uncollectable expense associated with long-term nonpayment."

In her remarks to the rally, Taylor called for "local control" of the water department and criticized plans to privatize the system. In fact, four of the water board commissioners who ordered the rate increases and water shutoffs were drawn from the black political establishment in Detroit, which in the name of "local control," has long

enriched itself at the expense of the working class, both black and white.

The entire political program of the DPWB is based on two interconnected lies: that the Democratic Party is not responsible for the shutoff of water in Detroit, and that shutoffs can be stopped without a political struggle of the working class in opposition to the entire restructuring of Detroit, dictated by the corporate and financial elite.

In fact, the systematic efforts to cut people off from one of the most basic necessities of modern life is an integral part of the transformation of Detroit, backed by both Democrats and Republicans. The Detroit Water and Sewerage Department is being primed for privatization, part of the wholesale looting of the city and any public assets by the financial vultures of Wall Street. At the same time, the shutoffs are part of a policy to turn off essential services to neighborhoods in the city deemed too poor for investment.

In other words, the shutoff policy flows directly from the interests of the capitalist banks and corporations that dominate American society as whole. It will not be overturned through appeals to the conscience of the political and corporate establishment, which stands to reap enormous gains in wealth in direct proportion to the number of shutoffs being carried out.

In opposition to the pro-Democratic Party policies of the DPWB, the Socialist Equality Party insists that the provision of water and the guarantee of all the basic necessities of modern life—secure jobs, pensions, public education, housing, medical care and culture—are social rights that must be fought for by the working class itself.

The development of a powerful movement of the working class is only possible through a conscious political break from the Democratic Party and the trade unions and pseudo-left forces that tie workers to this capitalist party. Armed with its own political program and fighting to mobilize the overwhelming majority of the population, the working class can break the grip of the financial oligarchy and reorganize economic and social life to meet the social needs of everyone, including the provision of water and other basic essentials free of charge.



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