

Low turnout at Detroit “Water Affordability” stunt

Our reporters
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On Saturday, the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD) hosted an all day event outside the DWSD office on the city’s east side under the misleading title of “Water Affordability fair.” The event was held just days before the city resumed water shutoffs after a 15-day “pause.”

The temporary delay and the water department’s event were essentially publicity stunts aimed at mollifying the outrage over the shutoff of 17,000 households and the targeting of the homes of tens of thousands of Detroit residents unable to pay their bills. Last month, the federal judge overseeing the bankruptcy of the city warned that anger over the shutoffs posed a danger to the restructuring of the city, which includes the gutting of city worker pensions and health care benefits and the selloff of public assets, including the probable privatization of the water department itself.

Despite an initial turnout of hundreds of residents in the morning, the crowds dwindled to nothing by the middle of the day. Most residents boycotted what they correctly saw as a public relations exercise, which would offer them no genuine relief.

Several of those who attended spoke to the WSWs about the crushing cost of their water bills, which are already among the highest in the country. Water rates went up another nine percent this year and are scheduled to rise nine percent in each of the next four years, according to the bankruptcy restructuring plan.

One woman said she was too angry to be interviewed because she had been waiting for four hours at the DWSD office. With an autistic son, she was trying to get her water turned back on but was told she was \$32 over the income threshold to receive assistance.

Another resident, Yolanda, told the WSWs, “I’m not getting help because I live in Redford (a working class

suburb of Detroit). I just moved there last year and now my bill is \$3,000. I’m low-income and get paid every two weeks. I’m caring for children, grand children and other kids. When I moved into a new house they put the bill on me. It’s not fair.”

Yolanda said she works a double shift for Direct Care, CNA Nursing Corp, and does taxes on the side for commission just to survive. “Even with the three jobs I have, there’s no guarantee I get a weekly check!” Responding to the slander that people who have their water turned off should simply pay their bills Yolanda remarked, “We want to work, we work, and we still can’t make ends meet! I make \$8,000 to \$10,000 a year. My water has been turned off for the last two weeks.”

When asked how she survives without water she said, “My brother helps me out. People got so desperate they get water keys at Home Depot to turn it back on. They’re now sold out.”

Portia, a student originally from Southfield, told the WSWs, “I owe \$349. They bumped it up by \$60 just to turn it back on. I have no income and I have four kids. I’m in school and training for construction. I have 10 days to get the \$60 to turn it back on.”

Portia told the WSWs she had been without water for two weeks, adding, “I was going to someone else’s house for water. I had to send the kids away. They are ages 12, 9, 7 and 2 years old. I also have a dog. My neighbor said I could use the water faucet from their house.”

Asked how she copes without water, she replied in desperation, “Put pressure into a balloon and see how fast it pops. Now you’re making me pay bills when there are no jobs. I don’t have transportation, so how can I get the education to get a job? If the kids have nothing to look forward to, society is going to be

messed up.”

Sheila told the WSWS she had gotten her water turned off and had come to the DWSD office to get it back on. “My son is terminally ill. I only get a disability check and when my son got cut off I had to fight to get it back. I can’t live on a \$690 income when my rent is \$665 a month, so I have to get help. I have sclerosis, a paralyzing condition. My son got lead poisoning in my house from the paint and the old pipes. Lead causes learning disabilities. He’s been in special education classes his whole life. When I told Social Security they said he no longer qualified for disability after 18.

“When my husband passed away in 2007 he had a tumor growing. He worked at Ford’s Dearborn plant for 25 years since he was hired at the age of 18. He was approved for disability insurance a month before he died. They even took back the \$205 to bury him.

“My husband worked his whole life. They say you can’t work at any better job than the Big Three auto companies. Now I’m a widow and I was left with nothing. Next thing you know they’re going to charge you for breathing air.”

Kenneth, an unemployed worker who has been a machine operator and handyman explained, “There were ten Homrich contractors working for the City of Detroit in my neighborhood to turn people’s water off. The state DHS (Department of Human Services) gave them an order to turn mine back on. I went down to DHS to explain the situation.

“I get food stamps, and I live in a house where the landlord walked away over two years ago after I paid him \$400. I have a lease and everything to show that I am supposed to be there. He left me with his water bill. I had to put in a new breaker because the old breaker didn’t work. I also had to fix a drain that was stopped up.

“The majority of the people in the City of Detroit are squatting. It’s not unusual for a landlord to walk away from a home and leave a large water bill of an old tenant’s behind with the house.”

The “water fair” was part of the effort by the city officials and the bankruptcy court to conceal the brutal character of their shutoff policy. With the backing of the media, they are claiming that the neediest cases are being addressed—which is refuted by the lack of genuine assistance—in order to justify the resumption of

mass shutoffs. Under the new narrative only “cheats” and “squatters” who are forcing others to subsidize them by paying higher rates are being targeted for shutoffs. In reality, many of the so-called squatters are families and individuals living in homes abandoned or sold to them by landlords who walked away from the houses owing large water bills or city taxes.

In a sign of the concern city officials have over explosive social tensions in the city—where a large section of the population has been reduced to Third World conditions and stripped of the most essential necessity of life—a large number of police were dispatched to the water fair. This included squad cars, cops on horseback and an armored vehicle.



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