

“They treat us like savages!”

Detroit workers, retirees denounce water shutoffs

WSWS reporters
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Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to workers and unemployed residents Saturday outside the Cobo Water Fair in downtown Detroit. (See: “Thousands attend ‘affordability fair’ as Detroit prepares to resume water shutoffs”)

Interviewees described the horrendous social conditions faced by workers and youth throughout the city. As their comments made clear, the hardships imposed by the city’s water shutoff policy are compounded by mass unemployment, constant and pervasive abuse against residents by militarized city police, and dependency of entire extended family networks on one or two poverty-level incomes.

Tamia Mike, a single mother of five, told the WSWS, “I’ve got a 9-month-old baby and a three-year-old son. I spoke to the Water Department, and they told me over the phone that if I don’t get \$130 by Monday they will cut us off. They treat us like savages!”

To avoid a shutoff, residents are required to sign up for a payment plan, with a minimum up-front payment of 10 percent of their outstanding bill. Monthly expenses will go up to cover back bills, and a missed payment can lead to a shutoff.

Clara Mingo told the WSWS, “They are greedy. It is inhumane. No good will come out of this. If someone can’t afford to pay their bill, why are you putting them on a budget plan for \$275 a month?”

Charles, a carpenter supporting three kids and a senior citizen, asked, “How do they expect people to pay their bills when they don’t have jobs? When there’s no serious public transportation? [Quicken Loans CEO] Dan Gilbert is making all this money off of Detroit, and then investing in the M-1 rail to take people to work who already have money. It’s only

going to go from Midtown to Downtown.”

“In the bankruptcy they took the pensions, and in reality they cut them about 50 percent,” Charles said. “They expect you to work part time for minimum wage. You can’t raise a family on that!”

Referring to the recent events in Ferguson, Missouri, Charles said, “It is a police state. They make money that way, too, by arresting and incarcerating people. You have to pay to be put in jail you know. What do kids have to look forward to?” He added, “Obama has done more spying than Bush did. Bush did the Patriot Act, but Obama has gone even further.”

“It’s not just Ferguson, they do the same kind of thing here in Detroit already. In my neighborhood, they have locked down whole blocks with a SWAT team going door-to-door looking for drugs. They stopped me and my son walking, grabbed us by the arms, and asked us to show ID. If we hadn’t had it on us they’d have taken us to jail,” Charles said.

Marshall Cochran, a retiree, said, “Water bills should not be so high. Years ago my mother had a water bill that was \$60 every three months. Now people are getting bills for \$200-\$300. If I take my bill and add it up, there are at least \$40 in surcharges alone.”

“It was ridiculous when they had those heavy rains recently and it flooded. It wasn’t an ‘act of God.’ It was caused by old sewer lines that they have never repaired. They just call it an ‘act of God’ because they know it needs to be fixed,” Cochran said.

Recent flooding in Southeast Michigan has produced widespread destruction. Nearly two weeks later, piles of rubbish still line many Detroit-area streets. Yet with equipment and manpower in short supply, the City of Detroit government under the leadership of the

Democratic Party is devoting what few resources are left to water shutoffs against residents and families.

Marquinda Jackson complained that the city did not even send a shutoff notice before cutting water service. “When you call their office, the line is always busy,” she said. Her companion Dakari, a hi-lo driver in a small factory, added, “Our bill is real high. They put us on a payment plan, \$180 a month. They cut us off even though we have a five-year-old child.”

“Why are they trying to cut off people’s water when you have companies owing millions in water bills? Water should be free. You pay enough in property taxes on your home,” Dakari said.

Marquinda continued, “[Detroit Emergency Manager] Kevyn Orr is putting all these people in debt and cutting people’s water off. Our whole block got cut off. It is mostly elderly people. We don’t need this. You cut off a pregnant woman with a child, what is she supposed to do?”

Latanya Pettis is a special education paraprofessional with the Detroit Public Schools. She said that she will be impacted by the 10 percent cut in teacher pay being imposed by the district.

“We were scheduled to be shut off August 23. We don’t get paid in the summer, and we aren’t eligible for unemployment. Our pay was cut, and we are going to have to pay more for insurance. I am a sole provider in a household of three. As teachers, we go into our own pockets to help out our kids. If you take from us you are taking from them,” Pettis said.

“We are paying some of the highest water rates. We are a test case to see what they can do in other states. Big business is running everything. The little people don’t have a voice. How are you going to cut off water and kids have got to go to school?” Pettis asked.

“All of us working people are in the same boat. Bank of America is writing off their fines as a tax deduction. Big business is only concerned about their bottom line. They are not interested in humanity,” Pettis added.

Missy Dev was in a major car accident and is now on disability. She came down with her husband to get help with their bill.

“I just purchased a home, and it had a \$2,400 outstanding water bill. The city is trying to hold me responsible. But I only get a disability check of \$720 a month. How do they expect me to pay? By the time I pay water, electricity and taxes I don’t have anything

left over. Half of the month I have to eat peanut butter and jelly, because that is all I can afford,” Dev said.

“It looks like everyone in public office just wants to put money into their own pocket and put down working people. It is not my fault I am disabled. I was making \$45 an hour before my accident. My SSI check is now about what I used to make in a day,” Dev said.

“To keep talking about revitalizing Detroit and hit people with water bills and back taxes doesn’t make sense. The economy is so bad it is ridiculous. When I moved here from Georgia it took me eight months to find a job.”

Richard Cantrell told the WSWS, “I have been unemployed 14 months and my wife is on disability. They don’t care about us as long as they get money in their pockets. What is happening to this town makes me want to cry.”



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