

Thousands attend “affordability fair” as Detroit prepares to resume water shutoffs

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Thousands of workers and retirees in Detroit, Michigan lined up to attend a “water affordability” event advertised by the city as a “last chance” to avoid water shutoffs.

With shutoffs set to begin again Tuesday, just days before Detroit Public Schools are scheduled to open for the fall semester, some two thousand residents flooded into Cobo Hall in an effort to save their households from the catastrophic consequences of shutoff.

Detroit residents waited in line for hours in hopes of finding relief from their constantly growing water bills and securing water service for the next month. Among those in line, many said they never even received their water bill, while others said they were unable to make payments as a result of having their wages cut, being laid off, or struggling with rising food, gas, and health care costs.

The resumption of shutoffs follows a “pause” announced by the water department last month, at the urging of Judge Steven Rhodes, who, along with Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr, is overseeing the city’s bankruptcy proceedings. In the face of mass anger and damaging exposures in the international media, the aim of the pause was to give the city more time to prepare and escalate its brutal policy.

“The goal of the fair is to get as many people as possible current on their water bill. Don’t wait until shutoffs resume,” said Democratic Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan in a statement promoting the event.

Rather than genuine relief, however, the city proposed a payment restitution plan demanding that residents make an immediate payment equivalent to 10 percent of their back water bills, followed by full repayment of all debts owed within 24 months.

Under the payment plan, residents will actually see a substantial increase in their monthly bills, with a

portion of their water debt being tacked on to each bill.

“I’m only two months behind on my water bill,” Detroit resident Vanessa Jackson told the *World Socialist Web Site* outside Cobo Hall. “I’m on a fixed income, Social Security. I get less than \$1,300 a month, and I support four other people. About two months ago, our water bill went up from \$50 a month to \$65 a month. And if they put me on this ‘payment plan’ it will cost \$88 a month.”

Many said they felt deceived about the purpose of the event. Lillian Thompson told the WSWWS, “Initially they [the Water Department] lied and said they would pay bills up to \$1,500 at this water fair. But when people got here, and then waited and got to the front of the line, they said ‘where’s your ten percent?’ You need to be able to pay ten percent right now to qualify, but they never told us before!”

Like other initiatives claiming to offer assistance to Detroiters threatened with utility shutoff, the “Water Fair” was planned as part of a public relations effort to allow the city to make the claim that it gave people the opportunity to avoid shutoffs.

In reality, the shutoffs will continue in full force, with thousands of households being deprived every week of tap water, flushing toilets, and functioning showers.

Utility “fairs” held in previous years by corporate giant DTE, which attracted similarly large crowds, have not prevented deaths and other tragedies resulting from the company’s aggressive policy of shutting off gas and electricity.

The water shutoff policy, which the city began at a break-neck pace (up to 3,000 households in a week) during the spring of this year, is targeted at an estimated 150,000 households currently behind on their water bills. Many of those facing shutoff owe as little as \$150 to the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department.

The banks, the big bondholders and the hedge funds are seeking to extract as much money as possible from the Water Department. A possible privatization of the water system will enable investors to extract ever-greater profits by further raising rates, ending service to impoverished areas of the city, and “streamlining” the system through layoffs and pension and wage cuts.

By ridding the system of areas inhabited by poor customers and forcing marginal customers to pay in full, the shutoff policy aims to make the third largest municipally owned water system in the US more attractive to investors.

In anticipation of these efforts, the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department Board of Water Commissioners, the official body that ordered the shutoffs and has also raised rates, is already planning to cut the number of water and sewerage employees from 1,978 to 374.

The privatization and restructuring of the water department is only one component of the citywide attacks being implemented within the framework of the bankruptcy courts. Proceedings are to resume September 2 before Judge Rhodes to review Orr’s plan of adjustment.

A revised plan includes the creation of a state-run “financial review commission,” which would have the authority to dictate spending and borrowing limits and impose cuts even after the city leaves bankruptcy and Orr departs as the de facto financial dictator of Detroit. The plan also includes sharp cuts in health care and constitutionally-protected pensions for city workers, while facilitating the overall restructuring of the city in the interests of the rich.

The entire process has been overseen and supported by the Obama administration, which sees Detroit as a model for nationwide attack on pensions and other benefits. The future of the water department in Detroit is also being looked at closely as a model for similar actions throughout the country.



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