

Detroit hearing on water shutoffs promotes UN, Democrats

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Three-hundred people attended a hearing on mass water shutoffs in Detroit on Sunday, held at the downtown campus of Wayne County Community College. The brutal policy, which has led to the termination of service to 50,000 households over the last two years, including 5,000 in September alone, has provoked popular opposition throughout Detroit, the United States and internationally.

The event, which was sponsored by several organizations affiliated to the Democratic Party, was not aimed at broadening the fight against water shutoffs, which have been sanctioned by the bankruptcy court and both big-business parties. Instead, the chief purpose of the hearing was to contain opposition within the politically safe channels of the United Nations (UN) and the Democrats.

The main sponsors of the event were the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization (MWRO) and the Detroit Peoples Water Board (DPWB). The latter is a coalition involving the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 207 (led by supporters of By Any Means Necessary), Moratorium Now! (affiliated with the Workers World Party) and the Detroit Green Party.

During the summer, these groups appealed to the UN, which condemned the water shutoffs as a violation of human rights. On Sunday, two representatives from the UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner—Catarina de Albuquerque, a Portuguese lawyer and special rapporteur on water and sanitation, and Leilani Farha, special rapporteur on adequate housing associated with a Canadian anti-poverty NGO—took testimony from shutoff victims. Their three-day visit also included a meeting with union officials, Detroit mayor Mike Duggan and the City Council.

MWRO leader Maureen Taylor, who chaired the event, presented the UN officials as influential power brokers

deserving of the greatest deference. “The UN has now stepped in again after declaring water to be a human right,” Taylor said. “National and international groups have stepped up. We need Mayor Duggan and Governor [Rick] Snyder to do the same.”

In reality, the UN has no means to compel the city to provide water. The organization’s human rights statutes are chiefly ceremonial, unless member states, like the US, selectively employ them to justify new military adventures.

The impotence of the UN was admitted by de Albuquerque herself, who said, “We have been appointed by UN states that have given us very little power because these are the states we are criticizing. All we can do is raise attention and make recommendations to federal, state and local officials. We want to help you to put pressure on them to uphold your human rights, but we told Maureen [Taylor] we don’t want people to have too high expectations of what we can do to help them.”

In addition to the UN officials, the panel included long-time Democratic US congressman John Conyers Jr., underscoring the orientation of these groups to the Democratic Party. Taylor gave a warm welcome to former Detroit city councilwoman JoAnn Watson, who was in the audience. A seat on the panel of “experts” was also prepared for by United Auto Workers vice president Jimmy Settles—a man who is deeply hated by workers for his collaboration with the auto bosses. Settles did not end up attending.

Like similar events organized by the MWRO and DPWB (see: “The politics of the Detroit People’s Water Board”), Sunday’s hearing deliberately covered up the role of the Democratic Party, peddling the lie that the shutoffs and restructuring plan were chiefly the responsibility of Republicans like Michigan governor Snyder.

In fact, Snyder has relied entirely on the

Democrats—including Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr, former mayor David Bing and Mayor Duggan—and City Council members like Watson and current president Brenda Jones to carry out these attacks. While Conyers has repeatedly presented Obama as a savior, the president has given his full backing to the bankruptcy, using it as a model for a nationwide attack on pensions and the wholesale privatization of public assets, including municipally owned water systems.

For their part, AFSCME, the UAW and other city unions have joined the “Grand Bargain” against the working class, overseen by Orr and the bankruptcy court, in exchange for the control of a half-billion-dollar retiree health care slush fund.

The pro-Democratic Party organizations accept the entire framework of the bankruptcy and the rationale for the water shutoffs. One of the demands of the Peoples Water Board is for the “federal and state governments to work with the city to ensure a sustainable public financing plan and rate structure that would prevent a transfer of the utility’s financial burden onto residents who are currently paying exorbitant rates for their water services.”

This is nonsense. The Obama administration has specifically starved Detroit and other municipalities of federal infrastructure funding, forcing municipally owned utilities to sharply increase rates to finance their debt, which in the case of Detroit consumes 50 cents out of every dollar in revenue. Meanwhile, Obama has encouraged cities to establish “public-private partnerships”—i.e., privatize their services—to make up for lost federal and state funding.

Throughout the two-hour event, no one uttered the name “Obama.” Monica Lewis-Parker, from We the People of Detroit, demagogically denounced various politicians, including the unnamed “president of the United States,” for genocide. However, Lewis-Parker hosts a web site called obamafordetroit.org, which urges Obama to remove Orr and provide federal funding to Detroit.

Far from representing any genuine challenge to the political establishment, these groups are nothing more than the “left” of the corporate-backed political set up in Detroit. While initially protesting the takeover of the city by an unelected emergency manager—who stripped local officials of their power to approve contracts and collect kickbacks—figures like Conyers, Watson and other city officials “in exile” back the attack on the working class. They are only concerned with grabbing their own piece of the spoils from the carving up of city assets.

Repeated demands for “home rule,” invariably

presented as a fight against the “white takeover of black Detroit,” are aimed at dividing the working class and protecting the interests of the corrupt layer of African-American Democrats who have long run the city on behalf of the corporations and banks.

As part of these efforts, the MWRO and DPWB have been intimately involved in the efforts of the bankruptcy court to mollify public outrage over the water shutoffs so that the city’s restructuring plan could be implemented.

During the summer, bankruptcy judge Steven Rhodes warned that popular outrage over the shutoffs threatened to derail the bankruptcy plan. He ordered water department officials to work with “community groups,” including the MWRO, to craft a supposedly more humane shutoff policy. Following a month-long “pause,” the shutoffs resumed.

During this time, lawyers for the welfare rights organization and the Workers World Party argued that the city should adopt an “affordability plan,” based on customer’s income and ability to pay, saying that this would be more cost-effective for the city than tracking down unpaid bills and shutting off service. At no point did they challenge the system of for-profit water.

The insistence by these groups that workers should place their faith in the courts was exploded when Rhodes rejected any extension of the pause, ruling instead that Detroit residents “did not have a fundamental right” to free or affordable water, any more than they did food, shelter and health care. What was sacrosanct, the judge made clear, was the “right” of the water department—and behind them the wealthy bondholders—to profit off of this elemental necessity of life.

The prerequisite for any serious struggle against the water shutoffs and looting of the city by Wall Street is a rejection of the politics of the middle class groups that function as a component of the political establishment. What is needed is a politically conscious movement of the working class, independent of and in opposition to the Democratic Party and its pseudo-left and trade union allies, which demand that workers pay for the crisis of the capitalist system. This is the fight that has been taken up by the Socialist Equality Party.



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