

Detroit to resume mass water shutoffs

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Detroit, the poorest large city in America, is set to resume water shutoffs for tens of thousands of residents. Next month, the city will begin posting 800 shutoff tags a day on the doors of residents who have fallen behind on their water bills, giving them ten days to pay up or lose access to water in their homes.

As many as 28,000 households could have their water cut off beginning in mid- to late April. The city has already begun disconnecting water service for hundreds of people who were “illegally” receiving water. The policy could potentially affect close to 100,000 people, or 14 percent of the city’s residents.

The denial of a basic necessity of life to tens of thousands of people in one of America’s largest cities reveals the real state of social relations in America. The American financial oligarchy and its political puppets in both parties are waging class war against working people in every part of the country. There are no limits to their ruthlessness, brutality or barbarism.

Last year, the city shut off water to more than 30,000 households, but temporarily halted additional shutoffs once winter temperatures made the process more difficult. The shutoff program is intimately connected with the city’s bankruptcy, which concluded late last year with the approval of a plan to slash city retirees’ pensions and health benefits and privatize city services.

The resumption of water shutoffs follows the announcement of water rate increases of 3.4 percent in Detroit. The sewerage portion of residents’ bills will go up by 16.7 percent. The broader metro Detroit area, including Wayne County, which has a poverty rate twice the national average, will see water rate increases of up to 12 percent.

In October of last year, US bankruptcy Judge Steven Rhodes ruled against a challenge to the city’s water shutoff policy, declaring that there is no “fundamental enforceable right to free or affordable water... Just as there is no such affordable right to other necessities of

life such as shelter, food and medical care.”

This is the unvarnished voice of the American ruling class, spoken by its black-robed enforcer. These words—reactionary as they are heartless—were spoken by the same man who presided over an illegal bankruptcy process, which, in violation of the explicit language of the state constitution, imposed sweeping cuts on the pensions of thousands of retired city workers.

Judge Rhodes was far more generous to the lawyers and consultants who made a fortune from the bankruptcy operation. He approved \$178 million in legal and consulting fees, including \$58 million for the well-connected law firm Jones Day, where Kevyn Orr was a partner until he was appointed by Michigan Governor Rick Snyder to run the city. Orr took Detroit into bankruptcy in July of 2013.

This brazenly undemocratic operation was carried out under the de facto dictatorship of Orr, who superseded all elected officials during his one-and-a-half year stint as emergency manager. He had the bipartisan backing of both big business parties—a Republican governor and state legislature, a Democratic mayor and City Council, and the Obama White House.

Detroit’s water shutoff plan has drawn widespread international condemnation, including from the United Nations. In June, three representatives of the UN’s Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights signed a statement declaring that “Disconnection of water services because of failure to pay due to lack of means constitutes a violation of the human right to water and other international human rights.”

Even before the water shutoffs went into effect last year, Detroit already had an extremely high incidence of electricity and gas utility shutoffs, which have led to scores of fires throughout the city and dozens of deaths in recent years.

City authorities have claimed that charity water

payment assistance is broadly available, but less than one thirtieth of those facing water shutoffs have received assistance so far.

Detroit's plans to raise rates and cut off service to residents are driven by the demands of the banks and big investors, who are seeking to squeeze as much money out of the city's impoverished population as possible.

The resumption of water shutoffs is bound up with plans to privatize Detroit's water department stemming from the city's bankruptcy. In September, the city's water department was spun off to a regional authority, with members appointed from the city, the surrounding counties, and one member appointed by the governor. The spin-off is widely seen within official circles as a prelude to the sale of the system to private investors.

This week, Bill Nowling, a spokesman for the new regional water authority, spelled out in an interview with the *Detroit News* the financial interests driving the campaign of shutoffs. "Making sure that DWSD [Detroit Water and Sewerage Department] itself in its current state is as sound fiscally as it can be is very important in the minds of creditors, which are ultimately going to approve a regional deal...

"People have become conditioned to say 'well, I'm short tonight. I'm going to pay my water bill next month.'"

The shutoffs are also part of an attempt to drive sections of poor and working class people out of the city and transform select parts of the downtown and midtown areas into playgrounds for the affluent, while enriching speculators such as Little Caesar's Pizza billionaire Mike Ilitch, who owns the city's professional baseball and hockey teams, and Quicken Loans CEO Dan Gilbert.

Ilitch is receiving \$286 million in public subsidies to pay for the construction of a new hockey stadium. Gilbert, who has bought up prime downtown real estate at bargain basement prices, has been put in charge in demolishing abandoned homes, the better to cash in on his investments.

Detroit's water shutoff policy is in line with the general aim of the bankruptcy procedure—to use the bankruptcy court to provide a legal cover for the theft of billions of dollars in city workers' pension and health benefits, as well as the sell-off of public assets to private investors.

The Detroit City Council, which fully supported the bankruptcy proceeding, is now clamoring for a ten percent pay raise for its members, even as the poor and elderly have their water shut off and retired city workers see their pensions slashed and their health benefits gutted.

These attacks have been made possible by the complicity of the trade unions, including the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) and the United Auto Workers union (UAW), which backed the bankruptcy in exchange for a share in the financial spoils, including control over two Voluntary Employee Beneficiary Association (VEBA) funds worth \$524 million.

The cutoff of water to tens of thousands of Detroit residents is an indictment of the capitalist system. The very fact that water is a commodity—rather than a necessity guaranteed to every man, woman and child—testifies to the irrationality and bankruptcy of the profit system. Access to clean water, like a decent-paying job, food, shelter and education, must be seen as a social right that cannot be denied to any person.

The only way to secure these rights is to nationalize the utilities—such as water, electricity and gas—under the democratic control of the working class, as part of a socialist program to transform the major corporations into public entities and reorganize society on the basis of social need, not private profit.



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