

Detroit's water shutoffs and the aristocratic principle

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Next month, Detroit city officials plan to resume shutting off water to tens of thousands of residents. Nearly 30,000 households that cannot afford to pay their water bills are scheduled to receive shutoff notices, affecting perhaps one in seven residents.

The resumption of mass shutoffs that began last year is taking place as the water department plans substantial rate increases, in a city where water bills are already far higher than the national average. The aim is to funnel money to Detroit's billionaire creditors, while preparing the city's water department for eventual privatization.

In few places anywhere on the globe is the systematized, ruthless cruelty of the ruling class—facilitated by all factions of the political establishment—so flagrantly on display as in Detroit, Michigan, the poorest large city in America.

The cutting off of thousands of families every day from one of the most basic requirements of modern life is taking place in a country with the highest concentration of billionaires in the world, overseen by a state that spends more on its military than the next ten largest militaries combined. And yet the inevitable claim is that there is simply no money, that the impoverished residents of Detroit cannot be allowed to get away without paying.

Certain comparisons are illuminating. The Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD) claims to be running a deficit of \$22 million. It is to collect these funds—amounting to about \$750 per delinquent water bill—that the city intends to raise rates and begin shutting off water to residents.

The United States Congress is now consumed by discussions over financing the US military machine to the tune of \$600 billion per year, or some 27,000 times the deficit of the DWSD. Without a second thought, the

politicians of big business, Democrat and Republican, allocate astronomical sums to fund the US war machine. In fact, the water department's deficit is about one sixth of the cost of a single F-35 Lightning II fighter plane.

Then there is the unending transfer of wealth to the financial oligarchy. The wealth of the Forbes 400 billionaires, which has doubled since 2008, has hit a total of \$2.9 trillion, more than 130,000 times the DWSD deficit. Amazon.com founder and CEO Jeff Bezos alone had his wealth increase \$5.8 billion over the past year, to \$34 billion. The amount of money Bezos made over the past twelve months is enough to cover the water department's deficit 260 times over.

To protect this bankrupt social order, billions are spent every year on domestic repression. Last year, the Defense Department's 1033 program provided local police departments with \$980 million in military hardware, a figure nearly fifty times greater than the deficit of Detroit's water department. This equipment includes belt-fed machine guns and armored vehicles, some of which were seen on the streets of Ferguson, Missouri last year.

Yet there is supposedly no money to continue providing water to the people of Detroit ... Clearly the question is not one of resources, but who controls these resources, and upon what principle the productive capacity of mankind is based: private profit or social need.

The resumption of mass water shutoffs in Detroit follows the conclusion of the city's bankruptcy, a criminal conspiracy that fully embodied the ruthlessness of the American financial oligarchy.

For over a year and a half, Detroit was run as a de-facto dictatorship by Kevyn Orr, a Wall Street lawyer turned "emergency manager." Within months of taking

office, Orr thrust the city into bankruptcy in order to carry out long-plotted plans to slash workers constitutionally-protected pension benefits and restructure the city in the interest of the financial elite. His actions were backed by the entire political establishment, up to and including the Obama administration.

The bankruptcy eliminated most health benefits for city employees and slashed the pensions of tens of thousands of municipal retirees, while creating a bonanza for a handful of billionaire speculators. Well-connected oligarchs such as Mike Ilitch, who owns Detroit's professional baseball and hockey teams, and Quicken Loans CEO Dan Gilbert, have effectively received sections of the city as their own personal fiefdoms, accompanied by hundreds of millions of dollars in subsidies from public funds.

Now the financial elite, having gotten everything it wanted in the bankruptcy, is seeking even more. Nationwide, the financial oligarchy has used the Detroit bankruptcy to set a precedent for slashing workers' pensions and retirement benefits.

For the American ruling class, the resumption of mass water shutoffs goes beyond squeezing ever greater sums of money out of the poor. It is also the assertion of the "aristocratic principle"—that the population has no right to anything, that whatever it might receive comes only through the beneficence of the ruling class.

Bill Nowling, a spokesman for the new regional water authority, and a former PR man for Orr, expressed the thinking of the ruling class when he declared, "People have become conditioned to say 'well, I'm short tonight. I'm going to pay my water bill next month.'" What an outrage! That workers might think that they can continue to have access to running water even if they cannot pay for it due to rising costs, declining wages and endemic poverty and unemployment.

Nowling was merely extending into practice the declaration of bankruptcy court judge Steven Rhodes last year that there is no "fundamental enforceable right to free or affordable water."

For the ruling class, there is an important principle at stake. Workers have no right to water, as they have no right to health care, pensions, public education, a decent job with a livable income. All of this, to the

extent that it still exists, will and is being taken away. Nothing is guaranteed. All must be sacrificed for the preservation of the capitalist system and the wealth of the ruling class whose interests this system serves.

In opposition to the dictates of the corporate and financial aristocracy, the working class must assert that it does have the right to water, and to all the necessities of life. These rights cannot be maintained within the framework of a society subordinated to the interests of a corrupt and criminal corporate and financial elite.

As Marx wrote, "Between equal rights, force decides." The question of what will prevail must and will be decided on the arena of the class struggle.



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