

Workers must mobilize to stop water shutoffs in Detroit!

Jerry White
21 April 2015

Beginning in May, the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department will start issuing 800 shutoff notices each day to households behind on their water bills for two months or more. According to reports, the city is getting ready to cut off water to 28,000 residents and could target up to 73,000 residential accounts.

There is no mystery over the consequences of such a savage act. Deprived of water, families cannot drink, cook, shower, do laundry or flush toilets. The elderly and infirm cannot take their medicines and children cannot bathe or brush their teeth. The shutoff of water will cause enormous suffering, disease and even death.

In what was once the capital of the world's auto industry, where workers secured the highest per capita income in America, conditions today seem to be regressing toward the Dark Ages. In those days, paupers sent to the stockades and workhouses for the crime of being poor were at least given water along with bread.

Depriving hundreds of thousands of people of water epitomizes the criminality and savagery of the corporate and political establishment not only of Detroit, but of the entire country. The wanton violence of US imperialism, which has laid waste to entire societies in Iraq, Libya and other countries, has its corollary in the impoverishment of American workers and the plundering of society by the corporate and financial aristocracy that rules the US.

The water shutoffs have been sanctioned at every level of the political establishment. US bankruptcy judge Steven Rhodes gave the blessing of the federal courts when he declared last year that "there is no right to free or affordable water," any more than "other necessities of life such as shelter, food and medical care."

Both political parties, e.g., Michigan's Republican

governor and Detroit's Democratic mayor, support the shutoffs. They claim they are doing all they can to help the "deserving poor" by providing a charity fund for the entire metropolitan region that totals \$4.5 million, a fraction of the \$42 million the water department is out to collect.

The highly publicized gestures made last year in response to national and international outrage over water shutoffs amounted to nothing, with the vast majority enrolled in so-called payment plans unable to pay and now facing shutoffs.

From the beginning, the conspirators behind the Detroit bankruptcy, including the Obama administration, used the city as a model for a national attack on public worker pensions and the selling off of public assets to enrich the Wall Street banks and wealthy bondholders.

The shutoffs are aimed at facilitating the privatization of the water system and accelerating the process of vacating entire neighborhoods deemed too poor for commercial investment. Meanwhile, vast sums are being poured into the city center to transform it into a mecca for the affluent and boost the fortunes of the billionaire real estate developers who have been handed virtually free land for state-subsidized sports, entertainment and luxury housing projects.

What is happening in Detroit is a microcosm of processes unfolding across the US and throughout the entire world. Mass water shutoffs are taking place in Baltimore and other cities, while brutal austerity measures are the order of the day from Greece and Spain to Japan and Brazil.

While the political spokesmen of the ruling class, led by the Obama administration, claim there is no money to provide the essential necessities of life, the world's stock markets are booming, corporate profits and

executive pay are hitting record highs, and governments are squandering trillions of dollars on war and militarism.

The \$42 million owed in delinquent water bills in Detroit is equivalent to about a quarter of the \$160 million the Pentagon spends on *each* of its F-35 jetfighters, used to bomb Iraq. The annual budget of the Pentagon killing machine—over \$500 billion—is more than six times higher than the entire federal budget for infrastructure repair and renovation, including for the nation’s antiquated and decrepit water system.

None of the official institutions, including the corrupt civil rights organizations, the trade unions and the myriad of liberal and pseudo-left organizations, will defend the working class. All of these forces are beholden to the capitalist system and defend the supposed “right” of the banks and corporations to hold society hostage to their profit interests.

That is why the working class has to take independent action. In the 1930s, workers mobilized to stop the banks from evicting families and throwing residents onto the street. Today, action committees in the neighborhoods, factories and schools must be organized to defend residents against water shutoffs. Meetings, demonstrations and other forms of social protest must be organized to unite every section of workers—employed and unemployed, young and old, black, white and immigrant in the city and suburbs—in a common fight to assure access to all the necessities of modern society.

In opposition to the entire political establishment, the Socialist Equality Party insists that access to clean water, like health care, housing, education, culture and a secure and well-paying job, is a fundamental social right. The fight for these rights, however, requires an understanding that the working class is in a life-and-death struggle against not just this or that corporation or politician, but the entire economic and political set-up of capitalism.

The survival of humanity depends on the working class abolishing this outmoded and reactionary system and reorganizing economic and political life on the basis of a democratic and egalitarian plan to meet human needs, not private profit.

The fortunes of Detroit-area billionaires like Mike Ilitch and Dan Gilbert, as well as the Wall Street banks that looted the city in the bankruptcy, should be seized

to guarantee free water to all metro Detroit households.

Rather than spending billions on stock buybacks, dividend payments and executive bonuses, the vast profits of the auto companies accumulated through the labor of generations of auto workers should be used to launch a multibillion-dollar public works program to hire the unemployed and rebuild the city, its neighborhoods, homes and schools.

The fight to guarantee these social rights is inseparable from the fight against police brutality and the drive to war. A mass political movement, independent of the big-business parties and based on the fight for the international unity of the working class and socialism, must be built. To take forward this fight, we urge our readers to participate in the International May Day Online Rally on May 3.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact