

Detroit workers denounce water shutoffs

Jerry White
22 April 2015

There is widespread anger among Detroit workers over plans by city officials to resume mass water shutoffs next month. According to reports, the city is getting ready to cut off water to 28,000 residents who are late on their bills by two months or more, and could target up to 73,000 delinquent accounts.

Last summer, water shutoffs provoked national and international outrage, leading to warnings from the federal bankruptcy judge that popular anger could link up with opposition to the cutting of city worker pensions and the selloff of public assets. A temporary delay was imposed while Mayor Mike Duggan, the water department, and so-called “community leaders” worked out a plan to supposedly help residents keep up their payments. This gave the city time to push through its restructuring plan, which channeled billions into the pockets of wealthy bondholders and real estate developers.

The city’s fund to aid low-income residents turned out to be only \$4.2 million, a fraction of the \$42 million in unpaid bills. In November and December alone, some 13,000 residents enrolled in city-sponsored payment plans reportedly defaulted. They are now among those on the list for shutoffs.

“It’s inhuman to shut off water,” Curt, an auto parts factory worker, told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “Without water there is no life, no way to bathe, cook or clean. What are they going to take away next?”

In addition to hitting unemployed city residents, single mothers and the elderly, Curt said, the shutoffs were also affecting thousands of workers whose wages are so low they can’t keep up with rising bills. “During the auto bailout, they cut workers’ wages. Now the auto companies are making billions. I work at Detroit Manufacturing Systems, which only pays \$11 an hour, and we make parts for Ford. The bailout was nothing but bringing the banks in to cut wages. As for the union, the UAW has been bought off.”

The shutting off of water is part of the plan by city officials to “shrink the city” by eliminating essential services in neighborhoods considered too poor for commercial investment. “I heard about the plans to get rid of poor people in order to bring in the rich,” said Curt. “They are also cutting pensions to retired city workers. Detroit is the forerunner for the country. They think if they can get away with it here they can do it anywhere.”

WSWS reporters distributed the web site’s perspective, “Workers must mobilize to stop water shutoffs in Detroit!” The statement calls for independent struggle by workers against the corporate and political forces—on the federal, state and local level, both Democratic and Republican—that are demanding the shutoffs to facilitate the privatization of the water system and channel even more money into the hands of the financial aristocracy.

“It is wrong what they are doing. It’s for the billionaires, not for the working people,” said Francis Lee Weathers, a retiree with 32 years at General Motors. “The big shots don’t care about me and you. They are going to run a lot of people out of the city that can’t pay their bills. They were going through the neighborhoods buying up houses. They wanted to buy my house. I said stop back when you offer more money.

“They don’t want anything in the city. All they care about is downtown. They don’t care about the neighborhoods--the street lights, the roads.”

Remarking on the Detroit bankruptcy, Francis added, “They took money from the pensions and health care. Some people had worked 45 years and could hardly afford to live. They don’t want to be bothered with pensions and Medicare. They want you to pay for your own pension.”

According to the *Detroit Free Press*, the average water and sewer bill in the city increased to \$70.67 a

month last year, an 8.7 percent increase. This July, under plans to put the water system under a regional authority—a stepping-stone towards its outright privatization—water and sewer rates are expected to increase another 12.8 percent.

“Water is essential for survival,” a construction worker told the WSWS. “Detroit has some of the highest water rates in the country. It should be free.” Referring to the selling off of city assets to various corporate interests, the worker added, “They’ve sold off whole sections of my neighborhood to Hantz Farms. (See: “Detroit’s ‘urban farming’ scheme: A cover for a corporate land grab)

“The city told neighborhood people if they wanted the lot next door they could get it for \$200. But the city sold it to Hantz for \$200 a lot and if we want to buy it from them it would cost us \$1,000.”

“I’m trying to pay my water bill but it is getting higher and higher,” said one retail worker. “It’s tight out here and the last thing they should be doing is cutting peoples’ water off. It’s a human right. The city says people just don’t want to pay their bills. But that’s not true. People are working hard. I just paid my bill. I have a house in Detroit that I haven’t been able to rent. The house is not occupied and there is no running water in it, but I am still being charged \$50 a month!”

Martha Cleaves, another retiree, said she had come down because her water had just been shut off. “My water was paid. Do you know how bad that is, if you have to use a catheter? I haven’t had a turnoff in 30 years. I am so upset. This is horrible. They could not even tell me why my water is off.”

According to the National Consumer Law Center, water and wastewater bills shot up 106 percent from 1990 to 2006, a 4.6 percent annual increase. Increasingly the costs of maintaining the nation’s antiquated water pipelines have been shifted onto the backs of working people as big corporations have been granted tax breaks and federal and state governments have frozen or reduced aid for infrastructure repair.

The Obama administration—whose Pentagon budget of \$500 billion a year is more than six times higher than total federal infrastructure spending—has deliberately starved cities of resources, forcing municipalities to enter into so-called public-private partnerships and to privatize public services. In Detroit, more than half of every dollar collected by the water department goes for

debt servicing.

Such attacks are not limited to Detroit. Protests against water shutoffs have taken place in Baltimore and other US cities, and in Ireland last summer there was widespread opposition to the introduction of the first-ever water fees.

Another Detroit resident told the WSWS, “Look at my bill. I am on a fixed income and got a shutoff notice for \$46. That’s an insult. I just paid last month. I am bringing in proof of payment. You should give people water for free. It is part of nature. It is inhuman what they are doing. You might as well charge for air next. The people in control are stealing everything.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact