

“It’s monstrous! We’ve got to organize!”

Detroit workers oppose water shutoffs

A WSWWS reporting team
9 June 2015

Socialist Equality Party campaign teams in Detroit received an enthusiastic response over the weekend to their call to build the June 9 meeting sponsored by the Detroit Workers Action Committee to oppose the mass water shutoffs being implemented by the city.

The Democratic administration of Mayor Mike Duggan has resumed its policy of shutting off water service to Detroit residents who are too poor to afford their water bills. At least 1,000 households had been shut off as of May 26, and at least 25,000 are in danger of being shut off over the course of the summer. This is in addition to more than 33,000 who were shut off in 2014 during the Detroit bankruptcy trial.

Under the current policy, those who have overdue bills amounting to as little as \$150 are threatened with shutoff. This puts more than one-third of Detroit’s approximately 73,000 residential accounts in danger of losing access to one of the most basic necessities of life. No consideration is even made for children, the elderly, or those with medical conditions that require water access for treatment.

The city is offering a water payment plan to those in arrears that does nothing to reduce the burden on working class families. The payment plan requires a large down payment up front just to enroll. By spreading the remainder of the overdue amount across the next several monthly bills, the amount that must be paid each month in fact increases. Failure to keep up with these higher bills results in shutoff.

The Detroit Workers Action Committee (DWAC) is holding a public meeting Tuesday in opposition to the mass water shutoffs. DWAC demands an end to all water shutoffs and that homes where water has been shut off must be reconnected. The committee insists that water is a social right that must be freely available to everyone. This requires the development of an

independent political movement by the working class in opposition to the entire political setup.

DWAC supporters and members of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) have been building for the meeting for the past month. A campaign team recently spoke with a number of residents outside Detroit’s westside water bill payment center and in the surrounding neighborhood.

Arlanea Alexander said that she and her husband received a letter from the DWSD telling them that if they did not pay their water debt their water would be shut off. “We have 10 people in our household, including seven children ages 9-18 years old. It would be a disaster.”

Arlanea said things became especially hard since she lost her job in October, leaving them with only one income in the family. “Both of us were working and we were able to stay afloat. Now the bills are piling up and we got behind.”

Reginald, her husband, said they signed up for the payment plan, but that he is only earning \$10 an hour, making it very difficult to pay the bills. “The water bill was for \$400. We had to pay 10 percent down, \$40, and we were told that the monthly bill had to be paid on time or we would get another shutoff notice.

“It is hard. To get by we look for every bargain we can get.” Reginald said there were three generations living in the home including his mother who is in her 60s. “And we have six boys and one girl, most of them teenagers, so you can imagine what this means.”

When campaigners pointed out that a large share of the people on the payment plan defaulted because they couldn’t keep up with their payments, Reginald said, “I can see that. When you speak to the Water Department on the phone they say they are going to help you, but when you come down to the office there is no help at

all.”

“I think there should be programs to genuinely help people,” he continued, “but this is like Obamacare. They say it is to help you but it’s not. I think water should be free, especially for those who can’t pay.”

Lynda, who is currently unemployed due to a disability, was outraged over the high water bills she and other Detroit residents face. “It seems the more money I pay the more I owe.

“The sewer drain outside my house is leaking and it is making my driveway sink. I can see it. Then they had a water main break and it damaged my basement. I put in a claim, but I have gotten no help.

“Whenever I get some money I pay my water bill. It is a choice between paying for water or paying for lights and gas. This is crazy. I have never been in a situation like this.”

She noted the police presence at the water bill payment office. “Why are the police here? Because they know the city is doing what it is not supposed to and they are scared.

“A lady who lives next door to me hasn’t had water all winter,” she said. “I understand now why some people steal. When your back is up against the wall you will do anything to feed your family.”

“They have property taxes, and we pay taxes on everything we buy and everything we use. But they tell us there’s no money for this, or the roads in Michigan,” said Louise Matthews, a retired bank employee. “Every [tax] break goes to somebody richer, but the people that are in need are denied,” she added.

When campaigners invited Louise to the DWAC meeting against water shutoffs, she said, “I think this is very much needed. I never thought it would be like this.”

A carpenter who lives near the westside water payment center called the shutoff policy “Monstrous,” declaring, “Everybody needs water!” He said, “If you can’t have water what can you have? There won’t be life if there’s no water. There are people out here with children. You need water to do everything, even carpentry. Taking away water is like taking away everything from us—all our money, all our power. It’s just slavery.”

“We’ve got to organize!” he concluded. “We’ve got to get the power. The government is supposed to be for the people, instead they are for themselves.”

Maybelline Robertson is on the water affordability plan. She showed WSWS reporters her bill, which showed that the plan provided her with a credit for \$1.00, an absurdly small amount given that her bill is close to \$1,000.00.

“They know they are in the wrong. The government isn’t working for us anymore. People need to speak up. How can we live without water?”

Letitia, who is on disability and currently attending Wayne State University, said, “I think it is ridiculous to make people put down money before you can get help. All they do is give you an application, but there is no guarantee that you will get anything. We shouldn’t have to go through this. Water is a necessity.”

Dametris, who works at McDonalds, said he would attend the June 9 meeting. “I feel Detroit could be fixed,” he said. He was shocked to learn that the US government spends more than \$165 million on each F-35 fighter jet. “You know what they could do with that money? I believe war is not good for anyone,” he said.

“I want to help with this campaign and find out as much as I can. I want to really know more about this.”

The Detroit Workers Action Committee calls on all workers and youth who oppose the water shutoffs policy to attend Tuesday’s meeting.

Meeting information:

Oppose all water shutoffs!

Tuesday, June 9, 7 p.m.

Always Brewing Coffee Shop

19180 Grand River Avenue, Detroit



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact