

Detroit Workers Action Committee holds meeting against water shutoffs

Shannon Jones
11 June 2015

Workers, young people and retirees attended a meeting of the Detroit Workers Action Committee (DWAC) held June 9 on the west side of Detroit to oppose the policy of mass water shutoffs by the city.

In the weeks leading up to the meeting supporters of the Socialist Equality Party and DWAC campaigned in the neighborhood around the meeting venue, seeking to mobilize support for the demand for free access to water and an end to water shutoffs.

The administration of Detroit's Democratic Mayor Mike Duggan resumed mass water shutoffs in May after a pause during the winter months, putting at least 25,000 homes in danger of shutoff over the course of the summer. The water shutoffs coincide with preparations for the privatization of the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department, which is slated to become part of a newly-created regional water authority in July.

In opening the meeting, DWAC Chairman and Socialist Equality Party (SEP) assistant national secretary Lawrence Porter stressed that the water shutoffs were part of an unrelenting class war that has been launched by the ruling elite against working people at the behest of the banks.

"It doesn't matter if you are an auto worker, a teacher or a student, the rights and living standards of working people are under assault by both the Democratic and Republican parties," said Porter.

He then reviewed the broader context in which the water shutoffs are taking place. He pointed to the mass water shutoffs in the city of Baltimore as well as protests in Ireland against the imposition of fees for water. In Detroit, those with unpaid bills amounting to as little as \$150 and two months behind are threatened with shutoff.

The crisis in Detroit, said Porter, represented the convergence of a number of factors, including the long-term deindustrialization of the region and the economic crash of 2008. As the city's finances collapsed, the

response of Detroit's political elite was to launch escalating attacks on the working class, culminating in the Detroit bankruptcy, which gutted city workers' pensions and health benefits.

As a result of financial swindles forced onto the city by the banks, currently some 50 cents of every dollar in water revenue goes toward bond payments. The Obama administration has meanwhile slashed infrastructure funding as it pours ever more money into the Pentagon war machine.

Many on the so-called "left," said Porter, presented the crisis in Detroit as a primarily racial issue. This was false, he insisted. Racial politics, he said, has been used for decades by the ruling elite to divide the working class and to promote the interests of a narrow stratum of privileged African-American politicians, administrators and businessmen. He noted that since the election of Coleman Young in the 1970s, Detroit's first black mayor, conditions in the city have steadily deteriorated to the point where they are now worse than at the time of the 1967 riots.

Porter also took up the question of the so-called water affordability plan being set up by the new regional water authority and championed by pseudo-left organizations such as Moratorium Now. "The plan is regressive," declared Porter, "forcing better-off workers to pay for the bills of poorer residents while letting the government and corporations get off without any responsibilities."

He continued, "We are calling for a program based on the needs of the working class and not subordinated to the banks or the two big business political parties."

Following the conclusion of Porter's remarks, Gladys Booth, a retiree and a local neighborhood resident, told of her own situation. She said that the water to her home had recently been shut off. "My water is off now. They say I owe a \$7000 bill. I bought the house in foreclosure, I put in new gutters and windows, and then they came and shut

off the water for the previous owners' back bill.

“They never sent me a bill. Now I am without water in the house. I am scheduled to have surgery on June 18th, but now I can't have it because I don't have water.”

In the discussion that followed, participants raised a number of issues, including the question of globalization and the role of DWAC and the SEP.

In response to a question about the steps that need to be taken in the fight against the water shutoffs, Jerry White, a leading member of the Socialist Equality Party responded, “We established DWAC in the wake of the Detroit bankruptcy because we understood that opposition to the cuts required the independent initiative of workers. We have to find a means to unite all the different forms of opposition, to police killings, the fight against war and in a common struggle against the ruling elite.”

To fight for its interests, said White, the working class needed a revolutionary leadership and new organizations independent from the existing trade union structures and big business political parties.

Discussion continued following the meeting. Marlene, a friend of Gladys Booth, said, “I used to live in Benton Harbor. What Detroit is going through I have seen before. The conditions there are no better than they were 20 years ago when they brought in the emergency financial manager.

“It blows my mind the way the city of Detroit is going down; how the rich are willing to destroy a city.”

Emily, a graduate student working on a thesis on the housing crisis, said the meeting helped her gain a wider perspective. “When I got here last summer the water crisis in Detroit erupted into a human disaster. People are being stuck with thousands of dollars in water bills. Housing and water are fundamental to human rights. And I definitely agree that water is a social right. I think the scope of the crisis has convinced many to look at water as something that is a necessity and that should be available to all.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact