

Detroit City Council imposes new 7.5 percent water rate hike

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Two weeks ago, the Detroit City Council voted by a 5-4 margin to increase water rates by 7.5 percent for City of Detroit residents. The hike adds an additional cost of around \$60 per year. The average monthly payment now totals more than \$70 per month—a price well above which nearly one third of Detroit workers are already unable to pay.

The rate hike comes as thousands of Detroiters have been cut off from running water, and tens of thousands more remain at risk of having their water shut off by the Detroit Water and Sewage Department (DWSD), which seeks to justify the hike on the basis of an announced \$27 million profit shortfall.

As a result of the water shut-offs, many workers in the former center of American industry face third-world conditions in which the search for clean water for bathing and drinking is a part of everyday life. Amnesty International has described the denial of access to water by the city as a “human rights violation.”

According to the City Council’s legal division, the rate hike “appears to be necessary to mitigate recent structural revenue shortfalls, and help provide sufficient revenue for a highly capital intensive operation.”

Such statements asserting that budget shortfalls must be balanced on the backs of the working class are false to the core. As the city simultaneously raises water rates on struggling families, it doles out hundreds of millions in public funds for the business projects of billionaires like Mike Ilitch, whose Detroit Red Wings hockey team received \$286 million to construct another sports arena.

“This is an investor’s playground,” Ilitch told *Crain’s Detroit* in a July 2014 interview.

The passage of the rate hike comes after the City Council’s 6-2 vote last month to reject the hike. After

the initial hike was rejected, city water officials callously threatened to lay off workers in order to make up the profit shortfall.

Despite the fact that politicians and local water officials continually justify water rate hikes on the basis that they are required for infrastructure repair, Detroit’s water infrastructure is dangerously failing. This January, the *Detroit Free Press* reported that more than 500 water lines broke in Detroit.

Detroiters have seen a 119 percent total increase on water rates over the last decade, not including a 9.3 percent hike imposed by the City Council in March. In spite of repeated rate hikes, the National Center for Healthy Housing placed Detroit as 43 out of 44 for “healthy housing,” citing that 21 percent of all Detroit homes face water leaks from pipes outside the home.

In the water departments across the city, conditions are increasingly unbearable. The city has laid off hundreds of water and sewage workers in recent years, replacing some with low-paid contract workers and speeding up others. This February, 35 additional maintenance workers were unexpectedly fired. These moves have only exacerbated the crisis facing Detroit’s crumbling water infrastructure, as Michigan winters see hundreds of water line and water main failures.

The City of Detroit announced at the beginning of the summer that it would aim to shut off water for 1,000 households each week. The move to raise water rates will inevitably leave tens of thousands of additional families unable to pay their bills and face the concerted campaign of water shut-offs.

Detroit sits directly on the largest source of fresh water in the country. It is the poorest large city in America, where more than 60 percent of schoolchildren live in poverty and the median household income is \$26,000. Detroit water rates now take up nearly 5

percent of total yearly income.

Steve, a master plumber for DWSD, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that “Tampa [Florida] residents pay much less for water than people in Detroit, even though they have to desalinate all the water that comes through their pipes.” Indeed, Tampa maintains a rate of \$2.56 per 1,000 cubic feet of water, while Detroit now charges more than \$100 per 1,000 cubic feet!

The intensified attack on the right to water in Detroit is an indication of the ruthlessness with which the American ruling class will pursue its policies of social counterrevolution across the country, and internationally, with disastrous implications for the working class.

The policy of the ruling class was expressed with particular bluntness by bankruptcy judge Steven Rhodes, who oversaw Detroit’s recent bankruptcy proceedings. In response to claims by Detroit residents that there exists a fundamental right to water, Rhodes wrote last year: “There is no such right or law.”



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