

Detroit, Michigan resumes mass water shutoffs

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Following a temporary hiatus, the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD) has begun a new round of mass water shutoffs. Beginning today, thousands of Detroit, Michigan residents will lose access to one of most basic rights of life, the ability to have clean water.

Shutoffs were set to begin May 1, then subsequently pushed back to May 3 so that residents, already living in dire economic conditions, could set up a payment plan by 6:00 pm Monday. The phone lines of the DWSD were jammed as desperate workers borrowed and begged for money to pay the exorbitant bills charged by the City of Detroit.

Beginning April 24, notices were sent and placards placed on the doors of some 23,000 residents behind on their water bills. The newest round of shutoffs comes after 23,300 were shut off in 2015 and 30,000 lost service in 2014, amounting to 25 percent of the total of households in the city of Detroit. The mass shutoffs are to continue despite public outcry and UN officials declaring them to be “contrary to human rights.”

Earlier this year, it came out that \$41 million is owed by businesses and government-owned properties compared to \$26 million by homeowners. Attempting to contain public anger, DWSD Director Gary Brown announced on April 26 that a last-minute Water Assistance Fair would take place on Saturday, April 30.

About 1,000 Detroiters lined up outside the DWSD Eastside customer service center on Saturday in a desperate attempt to maintain service. The line went down the block, wrapping around the parking lot and into the back alley.

Two payment plans were available to those facing shutoffs, depending on household income level. For those at or below 150 percent of the poverty level, the Water Residential Assistance Program (WRAP) offers up to \$1,000 in assistance per household per year, \$25

in monthly payments toward current bills and up to \$700 toward arrears to be paid in two lump sums at 6 and 12 months. If two payments are missed, service will be shut off.

Those making over 150 percent of the poverty level must sign up for the DWSD’s 10/30/50 plan to maintain service. The plan mandates that they pay at least 10 percent of their overdue amount up-front. The remainder must be paid in monthly installments over a 12- to 24-month period while paying the current bill as well. If a payment is missed, they will then be obligated to pay 30 percent of the arrears up-front to reenter the payment plan. If another payment is missed, they will be forced to pay 50 percent of the amount past due to prevent a shutoff.

“It’s a ridiculous joke,” said Cassandra, who was still waiting in line at the Water Assistance Fair after 2 hours. “This is not a plan to help the people. It’s a plan to bankrupt the people.”

“The water rate is steadily going up,” she added. “They are trying to push us out of the city so the big-timers can come in.”

Sabrina added, “You have to still pay your current bill and pay on your arrears. Then if you miss a payment you are cut off. If you own your home, they put a lien on your house and put it on your taxes.”

“They have the same concept as Donald Trump. They want to build up barriers. You got the top people getting bonuses. How, when we get a pay cut?”

DWSD said at the announcement of the Water Assistance Fair that around 30,000 customers are now on payment plans, while another 23,000 had already defaulted due to inability to pay. Nearly all of those facing shutoffs this week had previously been on payment plans but were unable to keep up. Moreover, the new payment plans were only promoted publicly in

the local media a few days before shutoffs were to resume, leaving residents scrambling to prevent a lapse in service.

Residents are forced to jump through hoops by documentation of residency and income and either a deed for owners or a rental agreement outlining the renter's responsibility to pay the water bill. The majority of renters do not have written rental agreements, and few of those that do have details of the water payment explicitly written out.

Before starting a payment plan, residents must pay \$150 to get the bill tied to their name and social security number as opposed to the bill being tied to the residential address as had been done in the past.

WSWS reporters also spoke with Felicia and Marcus, both tier-one or "traditional" workers at Chrysler's Warren Truck plant.

"We have decent jobs and work every day and still have difficulty affording the water bill," Marcus said. "Detroit's bills are among the highest in the country and now they bill you every single month. The bill includes all types of surcharges because working people are being squeezed in every direction."

Felicia added, "The recent contract struggle at Chrysler was not just about workers being greedy or something; it was about fighting for equal pay for equal work. Why should the person I work with on the assembly line be making half the pay that I do when we are doing the same thing?"

Marcus agreed, asking, "Why shouldn't every worker who is there get a pension once they retire? Instead of pensions they now have a 401(k), and health care is being cut."

As the situation of Felicia and Marcus makes clear, the struggle to keep up with the basic needs of life affects all sections of workers. DWSD Director Brown, however, has sought to pit the 108,000 households that are caught up on payments against those that are unable to pay, stating, "If everyone paid their water bills, those customers could save \$120 each year."

The situation is particularly difficult for the elderly and disabled. One woman told the WSWS, "Water is ridiculous! Especially for seniors. I'm on a fixed income. My husband died and it's just me by myself. I have medication and sometimes I have to decide what comes first, the medication or the water."

The mass shutoffs began in 2014 as part of the

Detroit bankruptcy proceedings. Under the direction of Emergency Financial Manager (EFM) Kevyn Orr, city officials moved to collect unpaid bills as a means of making the DWSD more attractive to investors for possible privatization. This privatization plan was later scrapped as city control of the DWSD was leased to the Great Lakes Water Authority (GLWA), a regional body of the tri-county metro Detroit area.

Immediately prior to the first mass shutoffs in 2014, the city of Flint had shifted from DWSD treated water to Flint River water, leading to devastating poisoning of an entire city and the deaths of at least 12 people.

The two former industrial powerhouses of Detroit and Flint sit in the heart of the Great Lakes, which hold 21 percent of the fresh water on the planet. Yet, the working class of these cities has been squeezed dry.



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