

Detroit sewage plant workers without water after water main break

Dan Coles
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In the early morning hours of July 20, a three-and-a-half foot water pipe broke underwater in the Rouge River which caused a loss of water pressure for residents and businesses in southwest Detroit and downriver suburb, Ecorse.

In addition to supplying drinking water to local residents, the water main provided water to the Detroit Wastewater Treatment Plant (WWTP) for use in treatment processes, as well as for employees to drink and shower with.

The plant is run jointly by the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD) and the Great Lakes Water Authority (GLWA), the regional entity that was established out of the forced bankruptcy of Detroit in order to sidestep legal protections to residents and employees provided in the city charter.

The exact cause for the rupture is not clear. Possible reasons include the recent sweltering temperatures, which have increased stress to utility infrastructure such as electrical grids and water pipes. Also, multiple underground construction projects are in progress throughout the city. The ruptured main runs underground across the section of the Rouge River adjacent to the WWTP. The *World Socialist Web Site* has learned that this section of pipe is 92 years old.

When customers complained about the low water pressure resulting from the break, DWSD officials were quick to issue a boil water advisory as a precautionary measure to alert those affected in the area that the water was not safe to drink unless additional steps were taken.

As a public service, television and radio stations simply parroted the press release issued by DWSD without any investigative reporting as to the cause of the water main break, or comment on how the boil water advisory may have had an ill effect on residents

in the area. Other than this perfunctory report, little attention was paid by the media.

The only subsequent news update by the press since the water main break was on July 23 when the DWSD officials issued a public notice that the boil water advisory was no longer in effect. DWSD and GLWA officials managed to prevent reporting of the fact that the break also shut down the internal operations of its WWTP.

The Detroit WWTP is the largest single-site sewage treatment facility in the US, treating an average of 650 million gallons a day. Before it was ruptured, the water transmission line provided a significant flow of water which the sewage plant depends upon in order to properly function.

Fortunately, the sewage and stormwater coming through 96-inch pipes into the WWTP were able to be stopped by process flow control operators and redirected to catch basins which have the capacity to temporarily hold millions of gallons. Otherwise, the incoming flow of sewage would have increased to the point that the plant could have gone into a Michigan state or federal violation, risking the dumping of raw or improperly processed sewage into the Detroit River.

Workers told the WSWS that shutoff valves were found on either side of the river, allowing the ruptured section of water main to be sealed off from the system. The 42-inch main itself has not yet been repaired or replaced, so the water pressure to the area continues to be significantly reduced.

On condition of anonymity for fear of reprisals, GLWA employees spoke to the WSWS, describing inhuman working conditions at the plant.

During the length of the disruption, all plant personnel at the sewage plant had no access to drinking water, air conditioning or the use of washroom

facilities. In particular, operations and maintenance workers were not able to take showers at the end of their shift.

Instead, DWSD and GWLA officials rented several dozen portable restrooms which were brought on site.

Cases of bottled water were bought in as a substitute for drinking, which proved to be inadequate. To add insult to injury, GLWA employees reported that the shift supervisors rationed out bottled water from their offices rather than locating it in the assigned work areas.

A GLWA employee said, “The entire plant was shut down for three days. The pumps had no water and we had to turn them off. Some of us had to work overtime because other workers did not want to work in 96 degree weather with no air conditioning or showers.”

One female employee said, “I was not comfortable using the portable restrooms while on the job and waited to go home, instead.”

Even though the water pressure has been restored to the affected communities, the sewage plant is struggling to come back online.

Another GLWA employee said, “There are problems still with the water supply lines because the hot water is coming through the toilets. There is not enough [seal] water pressure to keep the motor shafts lubricated and we can’t get ice cubes from the ice machine.”

A maintenance worker described working without water at the plant: “Terrible! I brought in my own water, and I still do. I have not seen any signs posted that say everything is in the clear now. I had to ask my supervisor to see if it was okay to use the water.”

The near-disaster at the WWTP follows a series of sludge fires that occurred at the plant just five months ago. The GLWA, whose primary mandate is cutting costs and manpower, took over operations last January.



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