

One third of American households cannot afford water bills

Mass water shutoffs continue for Detroit households

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A report released in January by Michigan State University (MSU) projects that over one third of American households will not be able to afford their water bills over the course of the next five years. Another report shows a 4 percent increase for the average US household just last year alone, the slowest rate since Circle of Blue began the study recordings seven years ago.

“Mass shutoffs in Detroit, Michigan have resulted in the termination of service for 50,000 households since the start of the campaign in 2014 to shut off water for delinquent residents,” the MSU report states. The city of Detroit has implemented a 10-30-50 payment plan scheme, forcing residents who are behind on their water bill to actually pay more than what they owe or face immediate shutoff.

The Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD) announced its resumption of mass shutoffs for nearly 18,000 households in April this year, a DWSD spring tradition once the danger of freezing has passed. One in six homes in Detroit do not have running water.

A large part of the affordability crisis facing many major American cities is a lack of resources allocated to funding infrastructure repair, maintenance and replacements. “Estimates of the cost to replace aging infrastructure in the United States alone project over \$1 trillion are needed in the next 25 years to replace systems built circa World War II, which could triple the cost of household water bills,” the MSU report states.

However, this same report notes that it is not a lack of willingness of average people to pay for infrastructure updates, but rather “this willingness to pay [taxes for better infrastructure] may conflict with their fundamental ability to pay for water.”

The poisoning of the water supply in Flint, Michigan has garnered international media coverage over the last three years. Since then, it has come to light that other cities have placed their residents at risk of lead and other toxic poisoning in the name of profit. But the problem of water affordability is the major issue looming on the immediate horizon for millions of US households.

“Prices could go higher if cities look to private providers for water services, who have a tendency to charge higher rates than public providers. ... More dramatic rate increases could place an even larger segment of the population at risk. The privatization of water services could also mean much higher rates for water customers. The privatization of water services is one of the factors behind the high water costs in Atlanta, Georgia, which at \$325.52 per month has the most expensive water rates in the nation,” the MSU report states.

Over 8,000 residents of Cleveland, Ohio were foreclosed on last year due to tax liens placed on homes over nonpayment of water bills. Authorities have attempted, and temporarily failed, to implement this policy in Flint.

Residents of Detroit are all too familiar with the struggle for clean and affordable water.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to workers on Detroit’s impoverished east side, one of the neighborhoods where mass water shutoffs are prevalent and a factor of everyday life for many people. “I work for the city of Detroit and my water got shut off last year,” said Joe, a 12-year resident of the city’s east side. “I’m still paying for it.”

He explained the financial scheme he and his family

have witnessed in their neighborhood. “What happens is, they [DWSD] won’t send you a bill for a month. That’s the trick to it, that’s how they get you. So if you don’t follow up on it, they say you never paid your bill, because you never got one! So you’re looking for a water bill that never came in, and the next thing you know, they’re in your front yard shutting your water off.

“Then they put you on this payment plan where you have to pay 10 percent, then 50 percent, and the third bill you have to pay it in full. I owed \$1,500 the first time they shut me off. Same thing happened to my sister and she pays her bill every month.”

As a city worker, Joe also explained that he knew how to turn his water back on after it was shut off by DWSD. If residents get caught turning their own water supply back on “illegally,” they face arrest, jail time and fines.

Edna and John have lived in Detroit for over 20 years. While discussing the water crisis in Detroit, they immediately raised the situation facing residents in Flint. “I heard they’re going to try and lift that moratorium,” John said, referring to the temporary concession the Flint city council was forced to make after an explosive town hall meeting. “They shouldn’t be forced to pay for that. They shouldn’t have to pay for water that’s poisoned.”

“You know that poisoning came from General Motors and their toxic dumping, right?” Edna said. “But why is no one saying that? It’s all financial.”

Both were critical of the “comeback” in the city of Detroit, largely touted by the media as a renaissance, but at the expense of the poor and working class residents of the city who cannot afford to pay their water bills and get kicked out of the more profitable areas of the recently developed districts. “How does Gilbert get the chance to monopolize the whole downtown?” Edna asked. “Is that fair?”

While Edna and John themselves have not had their water shut off, most of their family members, neighbors and coworkers have struggled. “Our congress people, the city council of Detroit, they’re being paid to play,” she said.

Edna pointed reporters to a block of abandoned homes across the street. “These were once beautiful, immaculate areas,” she said. “Take a drive and see for yourself. Go to Outer Drive, to Gratiot. It’s

horrifying.”



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