

# As Detroit mayoral election approaches, water shutoffs continue amidst pervasive poverty

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Once again this year the US Census Bureau reported that Detroit, Michigan is the poorest “large” city in the US, with an overall poverty rate of 35.7 percent, belying the narrative that is central to the re-election campaign of incumbent Mayor Mike Duggan that Detroit has experienced a “comeback.” According to the September Census report, more than half the children in Detroit live in families below the poverty level.

Duggan is up for re-election in early November. He has spent most of his four-year term arranging hundreds of millions in tax breaks for real estate speculators and billionaires like Dan Gilbert and the Ilitch family, heirs to the Little Caesar’s Pizza empire, and to various business and real estate ventures in the city’s downtown.

A mass campaign of water shutoffs began in earnest in 2014, following Duggan’s election in 2013. It coincided with the massive attack on pensions and wages and benefits of Detroit city workers mandated by the Detroit bankruptcy, which was supported by Duggan, the Obama administration and the entire Democratic Party establishment.

The Detroit bankruptcy gutted the pensions and health benefits of Detroit city workers and set a precedent for attacks on public worker pensions nationwide. As part of the settlement the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD) was placed under control of a regional water authority, a step toward the privatization of the system.

It is now four years into the residential water shutoff offensive by the DWSD. By January of this year 83,000 residential water accounts had already gone through the shutoff process. By the beginning of the summer of 2017, ten thousand Detroit households faced water shutoffs.

Instead of declining, as the city claimed would happen as they signed up more people for payment plans, the number of shutoffs kept piling up under the Duggan administration.

Duggan’s opponent, Coleman Young II, a Michigan state senator and the son of the long-time former mayor of Detroit Coleman Young senior, has demagogically attacked Duggan for ignoring Detroit’s neighborhoods outside of downtown. However, Young is part of the same Democratic Party establishment that has overseen the deindustrialization and impoverishment of Detroit dating back to Coleman Young senior’s election in 1974. His attacks on Duggan are a transparent attempt to revive the discredited program of racial politics promoted for decades by the Democrats to divide the working class.

It is a measure of the relentless march to the right of the Democratic Party that there have been no calls by either Duggan or Young for any programs to confront the poverty so many Detroit households face on a daily basis in a city that at one point enjoyed the highest standard of living in the United States.

Double digit rent increases are driving the remaining poor out of the city altogether. Detroit, which once boasted the highest home ownership rate in the country, has now, for the first time in the post-World War II period, become a majority renter city. According to an October 5 report in the *Detroit Free Press*, one in five Detroit families in rental units face eviction every year.

Behind the water shutoffs is a social assault, overseen by Duggan and DWSD head Gary Brown, a former cop and lieutenant of hated former Detroit Emergency Manager Kevin Orr. To satisfy the rapacious greed of Wall Street lenders, the threat of living without running water is used as a punishment to extract tribute from Detroit’s impoverished residents.

Fifty percent of every dollar DWSD collects goes to creditors and bondholders as a part of political arrangements made at the time of the Detroit bankruptcy. When the last dime is extracted, poorer residents of the city are to be pushed out.

Partly to deflect criticism and partly to assist in extracting back debt from customers, schemes were expanded in early 2016 that put more low-income households on payment contracts. These payment plans are often nothing but a sham, limiting eligibility to a pre-specified number of months and creating bigger bills by tacking on arrearage charges.

One in four of Detroit's residential customers—defined as households with incomes under 150 percent of poverty—ended up on various temporary and often onerous—payment plans. The number of people enrolled in some water assistance program had gone from 9,000 in 2015 to 44,000 in early 2016.

The WRAP program was one such program, ostensibly set up to help water customers, but resulting in future bills low-income households struggled to afford.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with several Detroit residents trying to avoid shutoff who had come to the city's east side water payment office.

Jay Harris, a painter, was rushing out to get back to work. He told our reporters:

“I don't think anything of this mayoral election. The only thing I notice is the downtown getting bigger and greater and since it is around election time of course they are fixing up some parks to get the vote. Why did they not do that right away?”

“I notice that instead of them tearing down burnt up houses, they are tearing down the one or two brick houses on a block and leaving the burnt ones alone. That is the craziest thing I ever saw. Why not keep the houses that someone could live in?”

“I have been renting my home for seven years. The last time I called on my water bill they told me \$120 was due on the 20th. I paid that bill. Now they are telling me I have to find that money tomorrow somehow or I will be cut off. I already lost \$100 by taking off work and coming down here to pay a bill I already paid.

“I have been on the WRAP program for 12 months and now they say it is over. I come down here and they ‘counsel’ me and tell me I missed a payment and now

I have to come up with \$420.”

Kathy and Steve Petty charged that the water department still does not have correct accounting. “I hope everyone hears what I have to say,” Kathy told our reporters. “They are terrible in there. Terrible! I get a balance due bill every month and I regularly pay my bill. Now they are letting me know that even though I just paid all this money, they have no record of the payment.”

“I also had a problem last month because they double-billed me. I came down here then and they told me just pay half the bill because someone made a mistake down here. So I did that. Then all of a sudden the bill was over \$200 and they are threatening to shut me off.”

*World Socialist Web Site* reporters also spoke to a local owner of some rental properties who had come down to pay some of her tenants' water bills.

She said, “Why are people being victimized? I don't like Duggan or Young.

“It is sad! I am pressed, oppressed and depressed. Rights are not rights anymore. Water usage should not cost that much. We are paying more now under Duggan than under [former Mayor] Kwame Kilpatrick!

“People are being pushed out to the suburbs. The people are divided. I can't find someone who cares about the people. This country is not an opportunity employer.”



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