

Cape Town, South Africa to become first city in the developed world to run out of water

Genevieve Leigh
29 January 2018

Authorities in South Africa's drought stricken city of Cape Town are predicting that only 74 days are left until it becomes the first major city in the developed world to run out of water. The countdown to what is being called "Day Zero" is based on calculations for when the water supply in the dams will collectively drop below 13.5 percent, rendering the water system unusable.

While the city has been in a severe drought for three years, the reality of the impending shutdown hit home on January 18 when the mayor announced in a press conference that, "We have reached a point of no return." The water level currently stands at only 17 percent.

Over the last year, increasingly drastic measures have been taken to delay the water shutoff. Collecting the water used during a shower—known as "grey" water—for reuse, for example, has become common practice. Western Cape Premier Helen Zille said in a statement last week, "No one should be showering more than twice a week at this stage. You need to save water as if your life depends on it because it does." Dirty cars, and oily hair from limited showers, are now symbols of social responsibility. Signs litter the city reminding residents, "Every drop counts!" and the new slogan adopted for restroom use has become: "If it's yellow let it mellow, if it's brown flush it down."

A bucket and jug are essential items for completing every basic task that requires water, including the 90 second showers residents are discouraged from taking. Businesses which provide alternative water sources, such as borehole drilling and rainwater tank suppliers, have waiting lists running into months. The water scarcity has affected nearly every aspect of life.

The burden of the crisis has been placed squarely on the backs of the working class, who are callously reprimanded on a regular basis by local authorities. The attitude of the local ruling class was best expressed at a recent press conference by Mayor Patricia de Lille. "Despite our urging for months, 60 percent of

Capetonians are callously using more than 87 liters per day," she stated, ominously adding, "We can no longer ask people to stop wasting water. We must force them."

As "Day Zero" approaches, efforts by local officials to avoid the shutdown have taken on a more frenzied and reckless character. At the height of these measures is the extraordinary move to make public the identities of all customers who paid admission-of-guilt fines or who appeared in court regarding contravention of water restrictions, which is planned for release today. This action can only be interpreted as a deliberate effort by the local government to turn workers against each other by inciting a lynch mob mentality under incredibly tense life and death conditions.

The desperation produces more extreme measures with each passing day. As of February 1, Capetonians will be limited to 50 liters (about 13 gallons) of water per person a day. To put this in perspective, it is estimated that the average American uses 88 gallons of water per day at home. If a person were to take a 10-minute shower, it would use 100 liters of water—twice a person's daily water allowance starting February 1.

Meeting the city's new limit of only 50 liters a day will require sacrificing not only basic amenities of modern life, but could also lead to a major public health crisis. The average day living on 50 liters of water would require individuals to limit themselves to one shower of no longer than 2 minutes, flushing the toilet only once per day, washing dishes or doing laundry in a sink only once a day, only washing their hands twice a day, and cooking only once.

The experiences of workers in Flint, Michigan, who have been living with poisoned water for almost four years, have shown concretely the potentially devastating physical and mental consequences that come from living without access to water. Diseases and infections long thought eradicated from modern society reemerged as

residents became frightened to wash their hands. Teachers began to notice the foul smell coming from children who were too scared or unable to shower because of the water quality at their homes. These potential health risks and more for workers and youth in Cape Town are immense, though very few if any official reports on the subject have surfaced.

Thousands of workers living in the poorest areas of the city are already living with extremely limited access to water. In historically poor neighborhoods, such as Blue Downs on the Cape Flats, communal taps are used where people wash clothes outside and carry buckets of water to shack dwellings. How these communities, which are already on the edge of existence, will survive past “Day Zero” is yet to be determined.

According to the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), if the city does go through with the disaster plan and shuts off the water, service will only be turned on again when the dams recover, which could take several months.

Politicians have publicly bickered over alleged failures to offset the looming disaster. Most reports say the crisis was brought on by explosive population growth over the last two decades, coupled with the region’s most extreme drought in over a century. While the cause of the water crisis is being attributed to mostly “natural” causes, responsibility for the inept handling of the situation lies fully with the local and federal government.

When the city arrives at “Day Zero” on April 12, the taps to residential supplies will be turned off, leaving about 4 million residents reliant on daily queues at collection points across the city. Each resident will then be allocated only 25 liters (just over 6 gallons) of water a day. Unconfirmed reports suggest that some central and downtown areas could be exempt from the cut-off for “the sake of tourism and business.”

The ongoing water crisis has vastly intensified already explosive social relations in the city. More than half of South Africans are reported as living below the upper bound poverty line (UBPL) in 2015, with 55.5 percent of the population living on less than 992 rand (about \$75) per person per month. The ruling class, acutely aware of the threat of massive social upheavals which the water crisis will undoubtedly set off, is busy preparing their police and military forces to crush any resistance from the working class under the well-worn guise of “maintaining order.”

While plans for how water and other resources will be provided to the people after “Day Zero” are vague and hard to find, the plans for who will guard and dispense the

resources have clearly been given much thought. Premier Zille announced last week that a strategy meeting was held between top generals and the cabinet on how the armed forces would keep the province “secured.”

Zille’s spokesperson reported that the strategy plan included the deployment of forces at the 200 planned water distribution centers across the city, regular patrol units, and a 24-hour monitoring of crime hotspots. Once “Day Zero” arrives, all water reserves will travel with heavily armed guards.

The impending conditions of life in Cape Town after “Day Zero” read like a post-apocalyptic novel. Imagine for a moment what the daily life of a worker will be like: He or she will line up for hours with jugs and bottles to collect water for the family to drink, wash, cook and clean, while armed men patrol their communities ready to violently suppress any sign of unrest or “disorder.” Modern society will be brought to a screeching halt as thousands if not millions of jobs are lost, and businesses and schools close their doors. Fire hydrants will be unusable in cases of emergency. Medical facilities, unable to clean their instruments or provide basic care that requires running water, will be thrown back nearly 100 years, if they are able to function at all.

Access to the most basic necessity of life, clean safe water, is no longer a guarantee even in the most “advanced” capitalist society. In Martin County, Kentucky, workers have no water or only intermittent service because of the collapse of their aging water system. To add insult to injury, officials are demanding residents pay 49 percent more for water, which is laced with cancer-causing chemicals from coal mining and other industries.

After nearly four years, residents in Flint continue to suffer the catastrophic consequences of lead contamination of their water, including a massive increase in fetal death rates, skin rashes, cancer, and even multiple deaths from legionnaires disease.

In Puerto Rico, now four months after Hurricane María destroyed the island, half the population is surviving on bottled water and nearby creeks. Such is the state of the global capitalist system from Cape Town to Flint in the year 2018.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact