

Political in-fighting escalates as Cape Town, South Africa approaches “Day Zero” water shutoff

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The mayor of Cape Town, South Africa, Patricia de Lille, has come under vicious attack from members of her own party, the Democratic Alliance (DA), against the backdrop of one of the most severe water crises in modern history.

Over the past three weeks the DA has laid multiple charges against de Lille, which include bringing the party into disrepute, refusing to comply with party decisions, undue interference, and failing to perform duties and responsibilities. The DA escalated the attack late Friday afternoon when criminal charges were laid against the mayor for bribery and corruption.

The latest charges stem from claims laid by a Vanderbijlpark, Gauteng businessman, Anthony Faul, that the mayor asked for a payment in relation to a potential deal involving fire extinguishers. De Lille allegedly sought R5 million (\$415,000) in exchange for her support of a contract with Faul’s company to supply fire extinguishers to Cape Town’s informal settlements.

That Faul’s complaint dates to 2012, but is only now being brought to light, underscores the deeply rooted corruption of the entire DA leadership who have clearly only made an issue of the bribery as it became politically useful.

In addition to the legal charges, the party has also passed a motion of no confidence in de Lille which will be debated in the City Council on February 15. In another highly controversial move the city council also opted to remove the mayor’s powers to handle the water crisis, handing responsibility over to party leader Mmusi Maimane.

The DA’s attack on de Lille has nothing to do with genuine concern over corruption for which both the DA

and the ruling ANC themselves are infamous. The expulsion of de Lille is instead a desperate attempt at damage control amid growing social unrest in the city. The DA fears their inability to address the water crisis will lead to a loss in support ahead of the 2019 elections, if not total loss of political and social control if the city water shutoff becomes a reality. De Lille is being sacrificed as the scapegoat for the historic water crisis for which the entire DA leadership along with South Africa’s current ruling party, the ANC, are responsible.

The immediate source of the water crisis in Cape Town is a historic three-year drought, combined with significant population growth in the city causing the dam levels to drop to dangerously low levels. Despite knowledge of the possibility of such a crisis for years, no viable or practical measures were taken by the local or federal government to address the impending life and death crisis in the city of nearly four million residents.

By the time the full-scale reality of the crisis was acknowledged in January the city government was positioned to do little more than issue contemptuous condemnation of “irresponsible” water usage by the working class and poor.

Officials have placed the burden of the water crisis squarely on the backs of the working class in Cape Town with relentless demands that residents consume just 50 liters of water per day—less than one-sixth of what the average American uses. In what can only be described as a deliberate effort to incite a lynch mob mentality among the population, the local government recently made public the identities of all customers who paid admission-of-guilt fines or who appeared in court regarding contravention of water restrictions, as well as

an interactive online map showing water usage by household.

Without a drastic drop in consumption the city will confront what officials are calling “Day Zero,” the day that the majority of city taps will be turned off and residents will have to queue for hours to receive their daily ration of 25 liters of water from one of 200 water distribution points around the city.

Health officials say that 25 liters is the bare minimum amount of water needed to maintain basic hygiene. It is less than typically used in four minutes of showering.

The logistics required to carry out such a large-scale distribution effort are incredibly complex and would require months of planning and massive resources—neither of which has been undertaken by the local or national government. There are about 3.74 million people living in Cape Town. To service all the residents of the city through the 200 water collection points would mean that the 25 liters of water would need to be dispensed every 20 seconds, 24 hours a day.

For the working class, a daily collection of 25 liters of water is a near impossibility. The cost of transporting oneself to and from the collection point and carrying a 25 kg canister is completely unreasonable. When will those who remain employed through the water shutoff have time to stand in such lines? Where will children be kept if the schools are shut down? What if there is a leak, a spill, a medical emergency, or a fire?

The class character of the water crisis in Cape Town is most openly expressed in the preparation efforts. The ruling class is actively arranging the local police and South African National Defence Force (SANDF) to violently suppress opposition to the impending dystopian life post-“Day Zero.”

Additionally, the ration plans will not affect those who can afford to leave the city, nor those who choose to stay who can afford to invest in expensive alternatives, such as boreholes to extract ground water.

However, for the vast majority of the population these are not options. Instead, the working class is left to endure obscene price gouging of bottled water and water containers, placing an enormous strain on the most vulnerable layers of the population. A run on bottled water last month has caused supermarkets to introduce limits for each customer. Hardware shops have sold out of water tanks. Even

dehumidifiers—which are being marketed as “water from air” devices—are out of stock.

To add insult to injury, the city government has recently floated the idea of a “drought charge” to fund desalination projects and to go towards making up for lost water revenue. It is estimated that 460,216 households would be affected by the charge.

The proposition to extract lost revenue from the water crisis from the working class must be rejected with the contempt it deserves. South Africa is one of the most unequal countries in the world, with eight billionaires owning a collective \$26.6 billion. Mirroring the global trend, Oxfam reports that the three richest of these South African billionaires own as much wealth as the bottom half of the country combined.

Furthermore, the claim that this disaster is purely the result of a natural phenomenon that cannot be dealt with is a lie. The technology, science, and resources needed to address this crisis exist, but are monopolized by and subordinated to the capitalist profit system. Ensuring basic human rights such as access to water requires the unleashing of all the scientific tools and resources from the stranglehold of the capitalist system and putting them under the democratic control of the international working class.



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