

City of Detroit resuming brutal policy of mass water shutoffs

Debra Watson
5 April 2018

More than 17,000 Detroit households face having their water turned off as the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD) resumes mass water service shutoffs to city homes this month. Since the Detroit municipal bankruptcy devastated city workers' pensions and jobs in 2014, the DWSD has issued water shutoff notices to over 100,000 residences.

Between 2014 and 2017 Detroit saw more than one in seven of its 677,000 residents lose access to running water.

Because cold weather prohibits the smooth and cost-effective execution of water shutoffs, the annual culling waits for the spring thaw. Homrich Wrecking, a private contractor hired by the city to turn off water at the street, or rip out water connections when warranted, has just had their contract extended by the Detroit City Council to 2021, an indication that no one among the city's officialdom expects this annual horror to end any time soon.

It is common to hear accounts of households living without water for years in neighborhoods throughout the city. Detroit, Michigan is the poorest large city in the US, with an overall poverty rate of 35.7 percent, and over half of children in the city live in households below the severely inadequate official poverty line. The official unemployment rate is more than twice the national average, 9.9 percent, and the real unemployment is much, much higher.

The continuing mass water shutoffs belie the narrative of recently re-elected Democratic Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan that the city is experiencing a "comeback." Duggan's main focus over his first four years was to cater to a layer of privileged politicians and investors in the post-bankruptcy landscape of the city. This resulted in millions of dollars in deals for those at the top while workers in the neighborhoods

were cynically assured that he was "chipping away," as he said in his State of the City address last month.

Behind Duggan's platitudes one can follow the money to the pockets of those at the top, to downtown and Midtown real estate, while deprivation persists in the neighborhoods.

Duggan was backed primarily by billionaire real estate and entertainment moguls such as Dan Gilbert, founder and chairman of Quicken Loans, and the Ilitch family, owners of the Detroit Red Wings hockey team and Little Caesar's Pizza.

Duggan was a key player in negotiating tax subsidies to the Ilitches to build a new sports arena Midtown Detroit. The \$260 million state subsidy for the facility was more than the \$198 million cash deficit then faced by the city of Detroit that was used as a justification for slashing jobs, services and the pensions of retired city workers.

The brutal policy of water shutoffs flows out of arrangements put in place at the behest of these wealthy interests with the collaboration of trade union leaders, who agreed to sacrifice city workers' livelihoods and retirees' pensions as part of the bankruptcy deal. A key part of the bankruptcy settlement was plans to sell off or privatize city assets, including the lucrative DWSD.

Then Detroit Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr engaged in behind-the-scenes political machinations with financial and political elites to establish the Great Lakes Water Authority (GLWA). With approval from the state, hundreds of Water Department workers, the bulk of the workforce, were fired and the DWSD was subsumed into the new political entity to facilitate privatization of water in Southeast Michigan. The mass shutoff program began in 2014, after Duggan's election, in a drive to improve the balance sheet of the water authority to make it more attractive to investors.

One result of the creation of the GLWA has been a sharp rise in water bills in Detroit, which are now twice the national average despite the proximity to the world's largest fresh water supply.

Current DWSD Director Gary Brown, a Duggan appointee, was recently interviewed in the *Detroit Free Press*, announcing the new round of shutoffs. He pointed to the average past due amount of \$663, and said he expected many would be able to pay that off. This callous claim, used to deflect the growing opposition to yet another year of water shutoffs, ignores the financial reality facing thousands of city residents who face a choice between water and feeding their families. After all, over the past few years the Democratic politicians in Wayne County, the property tax enforcer for the city, have carried out the wholesale seizure of homes of retirees for lack of a few hundreds of dollars in back taxes.

Tasked with justifying the inhumane practice of water shutoffs, Brown callously told the *Detroit Free Press*: "We're trying to be compassionate about it but at the same time I'm bound by law to collect the services that are rendered."

This reference to the demands of bondholders signifies that the icy hand of the bankruptcy will continue to choke Detroit residents. Brown is a former cop, and worked as a close lieutenant of Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr during the bankruptcy. He was selected by Duggan to be the enforcer of this brutal program.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to several Detroit residents about the announcement of the resumption of mass shutoffs. Sabrina, a Detroit grandmother said:

"It is even worse for me now than when I went to the Water Department payment center two years ago. Since then my husband died. I had to enter into an agreement in which I pay a certain amount for my bill every month to make up for arrearages. I'm finally getting to the point where I think I can see the end of that extra arrearage charge.

"But me and my mom were just talking about how difficult it is with the water department. We never know what the bill is going to be. One month I will have to pay \$128 and then the next they will say it has jumped up to over \$200. There is no way that we used that much more water from one month to the next. It is so difficult because you don't know what your bill is

going to be. Again recently it went back down after going from \$120 to \$271 in one month.

"It's not like the gas company where they put me on a payment plan and you pay a set amount every month so you know what it's going to be.

"Things have become much more difficult because now I'm trying to survive on the \$772 a month I get for disability. I have gotten on every program I possibly can to get and I needed to do this because I'm taking care of my grandchildren as well.

"I own my own home and I have lived in Detroit for all of my 51 years. I'm thankful for the city property tax poverty hardship exemption that keeps my taxes at a low rate so I don't lose my home. Of course the problem with that program is that they don't advertise and a lot of people like me lose their homes because they don't know about it."

Valeria also related her recent encounter with DWSD. She had a remarkably similar story.

"I thought they were doing this to us to get us out of here because they know we are fighting foreclosure on our home. They sold it out from under us without notice according to recent eviction court hearing. We have a stay on that I hope as we explained everything to the judge. However, we face problems constantly with our water bill.

"They have threatened to shut off our utilities, saying we use more water than we possibly could. When my husband went down to the Water Payment Center they refused to listen to him. One month we see a bill in my husband's name, the next week in my name. We have asked for a hearing because they insisted the records showed that more water was used at the address on file."



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact