

New Orleans mayor refers to residents as “bad actors” amid looming water cut-offs

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Dozens of protestors gathered at New Orleans’s Democratic Mayor LaToya Cantrell’s office on Tuesday July 31 to speak out against the proposed plan by the city’s Sewage and Water Board (SWB) to cut off the water to some 17,000 homes.

The utility shut-offs are being implemented after the SWB has for months faced criticisms and complaints from residents stemming from incorrect billing and other irregularities. Thousands of complaints and disputes were filed against the Board in the recent period protesting its failure to send bills regularly, unusual spikes in charges, or sometimes never sending a bill at all.

A moratorium on shut-offs went into place in November of last year, but the time has elapsed and Mayor Cantrell, who is also the president of the SWB, is calling for the cancellation of water service for those who have delinquent payments.

Cantrell, an African American, has been hailed as a hero of the Democratic Party for being the first woman elected as Mayor in the history of New Orleans. Yet since she came into office earlier this year conditions in the city have only worsened. Cantrell, who was a prominent member of the City Council before becoming Mayor, defied their request for a delay in the cut-offs.

For her part, Cantrell places the blame for water shut-offs solely at the feet of the poor and working class of New Orleans who have for years been struggling with billing irregularities and overcharging. Speaking to *Nola.com*, a spokesperson for Cantrell expressed her thoughts on the matter: “Mayor Cantrell supports bringing accountability to delinquent bad actors who have taken advantage of the billing problems to avoid paying their fair share.”

In other words, there will be no more leniency for any

delinquent payments, with the Mayor barely able to disguise her disdain for the city’s working poor who cannot pay their bills.

According to a report from 2014, 52 percent of households in New Orleans are below the poverty line. Health and education programs are routinely cut as roads and bridges crumble and heavy seasonal rainfall threatens flooding for half of the city.

Officials of the Sewage and Water Board remained evasive in their explanation of the plan and could not give a clear telling of just how many households will be cut off or when. The Board has issued threats of cut-offs for months while there are still over 30,000 unresolved billing disputes. Despite this, the Board claims that the billing issues have “been resolved” and that collection will begin.

On Wednesday, the offices of the SWB were flooded with residents hoping to settle these disputes before having their water cut off. Many of them have received incorrect bills for months and are now facing the prospect of a loss of water service.

Several residents spoke to *World Socialist Web Site* reporters about their issues with the impending water cut-offs.

Enid, a resident of the devastated Lower Ninth Ward, told reporters of her wildly inconsistent water bills. “It’s just me living by myself and I have an outstanding balance of \$1,400. I’m on disability and can barely afford the minimum payments.” A brief glimpse at Enid’s bill shows wildly varying charges totaling hundreds of dollars each month.

The “billing issue” that has supposedly been fixed has clearly left many residents demanding answers. “I haven’t received a bill in over a year and just today they’re charging me \$700,” one resident told reporters. “We haven’t seen a meter reader in a year, but we still

pay our water every month. Where are these charges coming from? It's not our problem [the SWB has] billing issues, yet we're being gouged."

Cantrell's designation of delinquent residents as "bad actors" was met with outrage by protesters lining up outside the Board offices. One woman there told an official that she felt the Mayor's comments were a deliberate attack on the thousands of people in New Orleans who could face cut-offs: "If you shut off people's water that is a form of violence."

As a former member of the Criminal Justice Committee, Cantrell has a history of criminalizing poor and working class neighborhoods around the city. Over the past two years, hundreds of surveillance cameras have been put up all over the city in an effort to spy on and arbitrarily detain residents, fleecing them with arbitrary traffic fines in the hundreds of dollars. Cantrell also backed a program to expand the city's police force. The implementation of police-state measures is in direct preparation for the further backlash that is sure to come from the city's poor and working class population as the city government threatens further cuts to services.



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