

Water shutoffs continue in Detroit in the face of growing opposition

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Some 141,000 Detroit residences have had their water shut off since 2014, according to water records obtained by *Bridge Magazine* through the Freedom of Information Act.

This figure corresponds to the payments collection campaign initiated after the July 18, 2013 Detroit bankruptcy filing. In 2019 alone, water was cut off for 23,500 Detroit residences that were in arrears on their payments. As many as 9,500 still remain disconnected.

Each year a similar number of homes are cut off in a calculated effort to force impoverished residents to come up with enough cash to get their faucets turned back on.

According to the US Environmental Protection Agency, an affordable water bill is about 4.5 percent of a household's monthly income. A recent University of Michigan study revealed that the average low-income Detroit household pays 10 percent of its income, or \$45 a month more than it can afford. Keeping the water running often requires sacrificing other necessities such as gas, electricity or food.

The payment assistance plan offered by the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD) is onerous. It is called the 10/30/50 plan. Water can be reconnected with payment of as little as 10 percent of back debt, but the balance is then added to newly-incurred water bills and spread over six to 24 months, depending on the total owed. Any failure to make regular payments raises the down payment to 30 percent the next time and 50 percent for a third reconnection.

Nearly 40 percent of Detroit household incomes are below the official poverty line. As a result, the city's policy of water shutoffs drives a large part of the population into an unhealthy and demeaning cycle of scrambling just to provide running water, electricity and heat for their families.

The cutting off of water service has provoked public opposition since the policy began in 2014. In June of that year, as the cutoff of 30,000 homes made international news, the Human Rights Office of the United Nations issued a press release calling the practice of "disconnecting water from people who cannot pay an affront to human rights."

The *World Socialist Web Site* wrote at the time: "That the social conditions in Detroit have become the subject of a

declaration by a UN human rights panel, made in response to an appeal from various local organizations, is an expression of the staggering decay of social conditions in the city, once the center of American manufacturing."

Last July, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), along with several NGOs and pseudo-left groups, launched a legal initiative to pressure the Democratic administration of Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer to declare a moratorium on water shutoffs in Detroit. The nine-page legal document was submitted to the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) to "seek voluntary restraint or injunctive relief to stop the termination of water services to thousands of Detroit households," based on "imminent danger" as defined by the Public Health Code.

Within two months, the MDHHS director denied the request, saying "there is insufficient data to show that water-borne diseases are specifically caused by water shutoffs..."

The *Detroit News* reported earlier this month that City Council President Pro Tem Mary Sheffield is drafting a similar resolution directly to Whitmer, saying, "We have a governor that is willing, I believe, to address the issue. The timing is right."

These efforts are designed to channel public anger over the shutoffs behind the Democratic Party. The 2018 election replaced the hated Rick Snyder, whose Republican administration created the water disaster in Flint and engineered the forced bankruptcy of Detroit, with the Democrat Whitmer.

However, the bankruptcy proceedings against Detroit were the result of a bipartisan effort. Among the leading figures were State Treasurer Andy Dillon and Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr, both Democrats. The Obama administration backed the operation with a friend of the court brief. The city itself has been under continuous Democratic control since 1962.

In late September 2014, US bankruptcy court Judge Steven Rhodes threw out a lawsuit against the water shutoffs in a ruling that explicitly denied any "fundamental right" to water. Rhodes acknowledged that "water is a necessary

ingredient for sustaining life.” Nevertheless, he insisted, a finding of irreparable harm “does not suggest that there is a fundamental enforceable right to free or affordable water.” He added, “There is no such right in law. Just as there is no such affordable right to other necessities of life such as shelter, food and medical care.”

Mayor Mike Duggan and Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD) Director Gary Brown—both Democrats—are opposed to the proposal to ban shutoffs. In an op-ed column in the *Detroit Free Press*, Brown adamantly defends keeping the shutoff policy in place. He writes: “What we can’t support—and we believe most of our customers and Detroiters will agree—is to allow water and sewer services to go unpaid by ending the ability to use service interruptions as a collection tool of last resort. This essentially passes their debt on to other customers, usually resulting in double digit rate increases. Most water utilities in America use service interruptions as a tool to collect unpaid water bills.”

As an alternative to ending shutoffs, Brown has proposed that the Water Residential Assistance Program (WRAP) run by the Great Lakes Water Authority (GLWA) provide more money and broaden the threshold for availability to 200 percent of the official poverty line. WRAP is a totally inadequate regional program operated by the regional water system, the GLWA, which was spun off as part of the city’s bankruptcy and is not under the city’s control. The GLWA has not officially agreed to Brown’s proposal, and if it does go into effect, it will not be until July, after the height of the shutoff campaign for 2020. WRAP, moreover, runs out of money every year.

Brown and Duggan repeatedly make public statements blaming the victims of the shutoffs. No one would be cut off, they say, if they came to the DWSD and made an arrangement to pay. The problem, they would like the public to believe, is that some people just won’t do that.

This is a difficult lie to sell. Last summer, a *Detroit Free Press* commentary by Nancy Kaffer, headlined “Detroit has 5,000 homes without water: New pilot program only helps 70,” made the connection to the Detroit bankruptcy. She wrote: “And for decades, the department tolerated unpaid bills, signaling to water customers that other financial needs could be met first. Former Detroit emergency manager Kevyn Orr changed that in 2014, citing roughly \$90 million in overdue accounts owed by 90,000 customers.”

In a January column exposing the water department’s assertion that the shutoffs weren’t as dire as the numbers indicated, she wrote, “I’m getting tired of writing it, but: This is nuts.”

In a recent tweet, Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders called the shutoffs “a moral outrage.” Political

grandstanding notwithstanding, however, the official position of the Democratic Party is to adhere to the policies laid out in the bankruptcy proceedings. The insistence that the working class be held responsible for every penny potentially “lost” by the financial elite is a fundamental axiom of both capitalist parties.

The Socialist Equality Party conducted a campaign culminating in the February 2014 “Workers Inquiry into the Bankruptcy of Detroit and the Attack on the DIA and Pensions.” In the opening report to the meeting, WSWs labor correspondent Jerry White said, “The purpose of this inquiry is to cut through the lies, to reveal the class interests behind the bankruptcy of Detroit and outline a political program on the basis of which the working class can conduct a struggle.

“The bankruptcy of Detroit is a major turning point in class relations. It sets a precedent for an escalation of the war against the working class in the same way that Reagan’s firing of 13,000 striking air traffic controllers did in 1981.”

White called Orr’s “plan of adjustment” a euphemism for a slash-and-burn policy and described its basic content: “The working class is to pay for the financial crisis it did not create.”

Social crimes such as water cutoffs cannot be stopped by appeals to the ruling class and its two political parties. The defense of the basic social rights of the working class, including the right to water, electricity, heat and all of the elements of civilized life, requires the independent mobilization of the working class against both parties and the capitalist system they defend.

Basic utilities must be guaranteed to all through the expropriation of the private utilities and the banks that control them and their transformation into public institutions democratically controlled by working people.

This is the socialist program that is being advanced by the Socialist Equality Party’s candidates for president and vice president in the 2020 elections: Joseph Kishore and Norissa Santa Cruz. All those looking to a way to secure the social rights of the working class should contact our election campaign and actively support it.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact