

Temporary halt to Detroit water cutoffs extended until 2022 due to COVID-19

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Last Tuesday, Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan extended the moratorium on water shutoffs that the city began in March due to the COVID-19 pandemic until 2022. The abatement had been scheduled to end on December 31, but it has now become clear that the coronavirus outbreak is out of control and will continue to rage well into next year.

The respite in the city's cruel water cutoff policy is a welcome development for thousands of Detroit residents, especially in the midst of the pandemic during which basic hygienic practice and frequent washing of hands are essential in the prevention of the spread of the disease. It is, however, in no way a commitment by the city administration to anything of substance. The tiger has not changed its stripes.

As President-elect Joe Biden casually announces that another quarter million people will die in the US by February, the Democrats, along with the Republicans, refuse to take any measures to prevent the massive spread of the virus. The bipartisan demand that workers accept the opening of schools and workplaces is a program of social murder.

While the severity of the pandemic has compelled Duggan to enact a hiatus on the most egregious of offenses against the population, workers should have no illusions that this represents any real solution. He declared his goal "is to stop water shutoffs to low-income Detroiters once and for all," yet this amounts to an empty promise.

Just six months before Duggan and Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer had implemented the emergency moratorium on cutoffs, the health department under Whitmer denied a legal appeal to prohibit water shutoffs for the health dangers lack of access to water creates. There is no commitment to protect the social rights of the working class.

Middle-class radicals, pseudo-lefts and self-described water activists who operate firmly in the orbit of the Democratic Party work might and main to sow illusions that protests and legal campaigns are all that is necessary to resolve what are the most foul examples of class oppression. These layers end up collaborating with kleptocrats like Duggan.

The Detroit coalition that calls itself the People's Water Board issued a statement the day the mayor made his announcement declaring, "The People's Water Board Coalition applauds Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan and the Detroit Water

and Sewerage Department (DWSD) for following the long-standing recommendations of water advocates, public health experts, and impacted residents to end the practice of DWSD water shutoffs."

The People's Water Board Coalition describes itself as "a coalition of three dozen grassroots groups, NGOs, faith-based, community-based, and labor organizations." Such disparate groups, which include Moratorium Now, of necessity have to confine themselves to the most "achievable" of goals and, more importantly, base themselves on the racial political outlook of the Democratic Party. A group calling itself We the People of Detroit has as its exclusive focus the racial inequities in every social concern facing the working class.

Professor Peter Hammer of Wayne State University's Law Department has dedicated himself for years to promoting a racial analysis of the all the deprivations inflicted on the population. Hammer attended the Michigan Civil Rights Commission (MCRC) hearings held in Flint over the lead poisoning of the population through their water supply with his paper declaring that the capitalist crime against the city's multiracial population of 100,000 was a case of "strategic-structural racism." The MCRC issued a report, largely based on Hammer's contribution, called "The Flint Water Crisis: Systemic Racism Through the Lens of Flint."

Before celebrating the extension of the temporary halt of water shutoffs as a great stride forward, some background to the issue must be examined.

The policy of water shutoffs had been in effect continuously beginning with the forced bankruptcy of Detroit in 2014, affecting more than 141,000 Detroit residents. Despite widespread opposition to depriving impoverished residents of access to the most basic human need, Duggan, along with the Department of Public Works and DWSD Director Gary Brown, adamantly maintained the position that the cutoff of water service was the city's most effective "collection tool of last resort" and could not be halted.

In June 2014, the United Nation's Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights issued a statement declaring "disconnecting water from people who cannot pay an affront to human rights."

The *World Socialist Web Site* noted at the time:

The OCHCR concerns itself with gross violations of human rights, including torture, capital punishment, racial oppression and the abuse of women and children, as well as mass starvation, epidemics and the social consequences of flood, drought and other natural disasters. Most of its reports and statements deal with the impoverished countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America. It is rare for this agency to issue a statement about conditions of daily life in one of the wealthiest countries in the world.

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.

There is a significant history behind the criminal shutoff policy by the city of Detroit. After the 2008 financial crash, the newly installed Obama administration oversaw the massive bailout of Wall Street and the rapacious eyes of the American financial oligarchy were turned to the working class. The fictitious paper value, to the tune of over \$1 trillion, injected into financial markets had to be paid for by extracting real value, which only comes through the exploitation of the labor of the working class.

First, autoworkers were targeted by President Barack Obama's Presidential Task Force on the Auto Industry using bankruptcy courts to force GM and Chrysler into bankruptcy and slash the pay and benefits of all autoworkers. New hires would thereafter start at half the pay of their predecessors. The city of Detroit had long been devastated by the decades-long process of deindustrialization, so plans were hatched to make use of its nominal budget crisis to force it into bankruptcy and open all its assets to the plunder of corporate vultures.

The political representatives of both political parties, up to and including the highest levels of the Obama administration, used all the pressure at their disposal to enforce their reactionary attacks on the working class in the municipality known internationally as "The Motor City."

Duggan, the inveterate corporate cost-cutter first elected in 2013, was backed by the corporate oligarchy even before the appointment of Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr. Throughout the period of the bankruptcy and to this day, he has personified the unbridled rule of the financial elite in Detroit. Six years ago, the declaration of bankruptcy allowed the courts to rescind the pensions and health care coverage of municipal employees, the protection of city-owned artworks at the Detroit Institute of Arts and any legal protections that protected the population against profiteering by the DWSD.

To "return lost revenues" to the city, after 2014 water shutoffs were aggressively pursued. The federal judge assigned

to the Detroit bankruptcy, Stephen Rhodes, ruled in September 2014 that there existed "no fundamental right" to water service.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) responded to the looting of the city by the ruling class by convening the Workers Inquiry into the Bankruptcy of Detroit on February 15, 2014. WSWS Labor Editor Jerry White introduced the proceedings:

In the next few days, the city's unelected emergency manager, Kevyn Orr, essentially a dictator for the most powerful financial interests, will release his "plan of adjustment." The word "adjustment" is a euphemism. It will be a slash-and-burn plan. The basic outlines are clear. The working class is to pay for the financial crisis it did not create. ...

The coronavirus pandemic is a trigger event, deepening all the preexisting contradictions of the capitalist system and stripping the veneer from existing social relations. In addition to worsening the conditions workers and young people have endured before February—unemployment, low wages, lack of health care and pensions, deteriorating education—millions are now forced to choose between risking their health and safety at workplaces and schools which are vectors for transmitting COVID-19 or starving with no source of income to feed their families.

The SEP is calling for the building of factory and neighborhood safety committees to conduct a fight for a program which is required to save the lives of hundreds of thousands during this pandemic. Workers and youth who agree with this perspective must join the SEP today and take up the fight for socialism.



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