

Bursting of century-old water main floods Detroit neighborhood

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Hundreds of homes on Detroit's southwest side were flooded early Monday morning after a nearly century-old water main burst, inundating a square mile of this working class, largely immigrant neighborhood. With wind-chill temperatures near zero, residents were forced to evacuate as first responders used boats, rafts and diving equipment to rescue those trapped by the rising water and ice.

At a press conference, city officials reported that 54 adults, 22 children and 12 pets had been rescued by the afternoon, with emergency workers from several agencies going door to door to assist victims. Between 150 and 200 homes were damaged, along with an untold number of vehicles.

The city's 911 dispatchers reportedly began receiving calls about a loud boom in the area around 1:00 or 2:00 a.m. Monday morning. Residents posted videos of the fast-moving water and ice on TikTok and other social media platforms, quickly drawing widespread attention.

The rupture of the steel pipe sent a torrent of water into the streets, reaching car windows and disabling scores of vehicles. Inside homes, floodwaters rose several feet in basements, knocking out furnaces, and damaging hot water heaters, washers and dryers. Many residents living in basement dwellings lost their belongings in the flood.

A *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team spoke to residents in the neighborhood. Two young men and an older man, who were flooded out of a basement dwelling, said they escaped around 2:00 a.m. When they looked back, the water was nearly up to the ceiling. They managed to get out and returned in the afternoon to salvage whatever belongings they could.

Two other workers were trying to dry out their engine, which had been flooded by the water main break. They stopped to show WSWS reporters where the water reached on their car. "We are going to have to fix this ourselves," they said. "It can take weeks and months for the insurance companies to pay a claim, if they do at all."

Leo, a worker at a collision shop, described what happened after the water main burst:

My parents alerted me, and we rushed to grab stuff from the basement because there was about five feet of water. The water is still in my basement. Hopefully this mess goes down some more, so I can get back with my family.

When the water was coming into the basement, it sounded like a river, and you couldn't really do anything to cover up the leaks. It started about 1:00 a.m., and by 2:00 it was up to your knees. By 4:00 it was up to my waistline. It was up to the hoods of most of the cars in my neighborhood.

Hopefully the insurance will cover their cars. Some of my neighbors contacted the insurance companies, and they actually told them they don't cover main water breaks, only small water breaks inside the house. That's crazy because all these people are suffering. Hopefully, they get something from their home and car insurance. For those people who don't have insurance, it's going to be really bad.

The young worker added:

They say they haven't worked on that pipe since the 1930s. Why wouldn't they work on it? We are hard-working people here, and nobody deserves to have their homes flooded. I haven't seen anything like this in the 20 years I've been alive and living here. Everything should be updated and maintained. A lot of people who are laid off could do that work, but they aren't being given the opportunity.

The disaster is only the latest example of the breakdown of the city's antiquated infrastructure. According to the Great Lakes Water Authority (GLWA), the water main that burst was a 54-inch "steel pipe originally built in the 1930s."

The GLWA was established in the fall of 2014 as part of Detroit's federal bankruptcy restructuring, which privatized services and slashed the jobs and pensions of municipal workers. The transfer of much of the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department's operations to GLWA was touted as a way to fund improvements to the city's aging water infrastructure. Instead, it resulted in the workforce being reduced from 1,500 to around 500.

"I've been running DWSD for 10 years now, and we've never had a water main break this large in a densely populated neighborhood," DWSD Director Gary Brown said at a press

conference Monday morning. Last month, DWSD officials acknowledged that breaks along the city's 3,000-mile-long system were a regular occurrence, particularly in the winter months.

"The Detroit water system has perhaps five or six breaks a day during the winter, but when temperatures drop far below freezing, the system can experience 15 to 20 plus breaks in a day," DWSD Vice President Sam Smalley told a January 22 news conference, the *Detroit Free Press* reported. Repairs take longer in severely cold weather too, he said.

Asked about the antiquated infrastructure system, Albert, a construction worker and longtime resident of the neighborhood, said:

The pipes haven't been worked on for years and years. So this was bound to happen eventually. We've been having flooding on Wheelock [Street] every time it rained hard. But we can go out there, uncover the sewer caps and unplug all the sewers so the water would go down. That's how it's always been our whole lives. But it's never ever gone down like this.

Authorities claimed the pipe that burst carried fresh water, not raw sewage, but residents pointed to the danger of infection from floating garbage and the backup of the city's drainage system. Flooded basements also pose electrocution dangers if the power is still on. Residents have been forced to go to hotels or rely on family and friends to house them.

"I'm trying to help people and get them to safety," Albert said. "My house wasn't flooded, but my family members' houses were flooded, so they're all at our house. There are three families living with us, so basically four families at the house."

He dismissed claims by Detroit's Democratic Mayor Mike Duggan and the media about the city's so-called "revival," which is largely centered on the expansion of downtown office buildings, casinos and upscale housing—developments that remain out of reach for most workers.

Albert said:

That kills me. I've been here all my life. Detroit hasn't rebounded. It's a little better than it used to be, but not much. Back in the day, my dad used to work at the Cadillac plant. They closed that plant and the Fleetwood plant near here [in 1987]. That really messed the neighborhood up. Some good things have been happening, but not much.

Just last week, two young children, ages two and nine, froze to death while sheltering in a vehicle inside a casino parking structure in downtown Detroit. Their mother, 29-year-old Tateona Williams, a laid-off medical assistant, had repeatedly sought help from the city's homeless agencies, only to be ignored.

"They could have done something to help," Albert said of the deaths. "They needed help, and the city didn't help them. That's

wrong."

Leo added:

That's a horrible and sad story to happen. A lot of people are getting laid off right now from different companies, and it's hard for them to find a job around here. They show the positive side of Detroit, but they don't show the working class, what we go through around here. I'm glad you're out here showing what we go through.

Facing mounting public outrage over the deaths of the homeless children and the flooding in southwest Detroit, Duggan has claimed that the city and GLWA will cover uninsured home and vehicle damage and provide Uber rides to residents whose cars were disabled.

Meanwhile, the mayor continues to oversee the enrichment of real estate speculators like billionaire Dan Gilbert and the wealthy investors, who profited from the city's bankruptcy. Adding insult to injury, GLWA officials plan to impose the largest water rate hike in a decade on metro Detroit residents for Fiscal Year 2026. According to a *Detroit News* report, the proposed hikes would raise wholesale water rates by 7.73 percent and sewer rates by 5.39 percent, surpassing the 4 percent cap that has been in place for the past decade and is set to expire this year.

These increases will hit low-income residents the hardest in a city where 37 percent of the population—and 44 percent of children—live below the official poverty line. GLWA officials cynically claim that previous efforts to keep rate hikes low resulted in "underfunded maintenance and delayed capital projects."

The crisis in Detroit will only deepen as Trump and Musk move to slash federal programs, including Medicaid, public housing, education and health services.

Commenting on Trump's efforts to scapegoat immigrants for the social crisis, Albert said:

The problems have been here for years. [Immigrants are] just coming in and improving the place, if you ask me. Some of those houses the immigrants fixed up are beautiful. They don't come here to scam people. They come here to have a better life.

The wealthy don't care about us. They're the real bloodsuckers. They want the money, and they want us fighting each other over the scraps.



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