

Snowfall cripples public services

Detroit schools close indefinitely

By Walter Gilberti
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Detroit School Superintendent Eddie Green announced January 13 that Detroit public schools would be closed "until further notice" as a result of the accumulation of snow on the city's sidewalks and streets over the past two weeks. He said the schools would not reopen until city residents turned out to clear away the snow, even if that meant extending the school year late into June.

More than a foot of snow fell on January 2, and at least a foot more has come down since then, leaving most school buildings inaccessible to children walking from their homes. Cold temperatures and high winds have meant wind-chills of 25 to 35 below on many school mornings.

But the closure of the Detroit public schools is not an act of nature. The severe weather conditions have only revealed the enormous deterioration of public services in one of the biggest US cities, and the complete indifference of the political and corporate establishment to the conditions faced by Detroit's largely working-class population.

The Detroit city government limited its snow-removal effort to major thoroughfares for the first four days after the blizzard. Mayor Dennis Archer--who is about to be elevated to national co-chairman of the Democratic Party--angered many residents with his arrogant refusal to take any responsibility for the conditions in the city. The policy of not removing snow on residential streets had been in effect for decades, he said, he could not be held accountable for what "the Almighty" had done to Detroit.

Schools throughout the Detroit metropolitan area closed Monday, January 4, as a result of the blizzard, but except in the city they reopened the following day. Detroit's school shutdown dragged on for four days,

compelling Archer to reverse himself and declare a snow emergency January 7, one day before the arrival of President Clinton to address the Economic Club of Detroit. The schools were reopened January 8, but without school bus service, then closed again January 14, this time with no date set for reopening.

The school shutdown is only the most far-reaching example of the breakdown of all public services in the city.

The US Postal Service has suspended delivery to more than 20,000 homes in the city because streets are blocked and mailboxes are inaccessible. Thousands of elderly people dependent on Social Security and pension checks have been deprived of income, and many are concerned that they could lose utility service because they have not received their bills.

Detroit Postmaster Lloyd Wesley announced Thursday that mail carriers would begin servicing these homes by driving to the blocks where delivery has been halted, honking their horns, and waiting 60 seconds to see if any resident emerge from their homes seeking mail. If no one come out, they will drive on. This policy would force people to wait all day inside their homes for the arrival of the mail.

The Postal Service has rented 20 four-wheel-drive vehicles to attempt delivery to particularly difficult locations. Wesley said he had urged Detroit Mayor Dennis Archer to have the National Guard sent in to assist in snow removal.

Other public services have been crippled by the city's failure to remove snow from residential streets. Firefighters and EMS workers have complained that it is difficult to drive their vehicles down side streets on emergency calls. In one instance the snow was so deep that a fire engine became stuck. Firefighters dug the truck out before a heavy-duty tow truck could be found

capable of pulling the vehicle.

During the last three weeks 381 water main breaks have been reported in the city, and one third of them, some 139, are still awaiting repair. Water service further is threatened in hundreds of older homes which have water pipes in open crawl spaces under the structure. The 25 inches of snow on the ground mean that most of these pipes are now snowbound.

Homeless shelters and soup kitchens have been filled to capacity by people seeking refuge from the savage weather conditions, and dozens of victims of frostbite and exposure have been taken to hospital emergency rooms. At Detroit Receiving Hospital, one man's feet were frozen solid after he passed out and spent a night outdoors with the temperate hitting two degrees above zero. A homeless woman who had been living in a shelter had five left toes amputated because of gangrene.

The superintendent's announcement that the schools will remain closed until volunteers from the community come to dig them out is a provocation, and an attempt to deflect responsibility for this debacle onto Detroit residents and school employees--who were falsely accused by some media commentators of causing the shutdown by failing to come to work. It is tantamount to declaring--to a population already inundated by hardship--"You want open schools? Here, grab a shovel!"

The crisis in the schools will undoubtedly be taken advantage of by those who advocate privatization, vouchers and charter schools to further undermine the city's public school system. Already there is talk of a major disruption in the administering of the standardized MEAP Tests, now virtually the sole criterion for judging student and school performance.

For the most part, the American news media has ignored the spectacle of one of the largest US cities virtually collapsing in the face of a snowstorm. Comments did appear in the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*,

expressing a mixture of astonishment and incredulity, while noting the disparity between Chicago's 750 snow plows and Detroit's tiny fleet of 59--the end result of decades of budget cuts.

While basic services have deteriorated, under Mayor Archer the city has pumped vast sums of money into the rebuilding of Tiger Stadium, to be renamed

Comerica Stadium after the bank, and has focused its economic development plans on the advent of casino gambling and the establishment of a federally backed enterprise zone in which businesses will receive subsidies to employer Detroiters as cheap labor.

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