

Detroit begins new round of water shutoffs

By Andre Damon
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The city of Detroit began a new round of water shutoffs Monday, hanging shutoff notices on the doors of hundreds of residents who are unable to pay their water bills. As many as 25,000 households, or one in ten in the city, are threatened with losing one of the most basic necessities of life.

Residents who are two months behind on their bills or owe more than \$150 will receive shutoff notices. They will be allowed only 10 days to apply for a payment plan or pay their bills before their water is turned off.

Last year the city carried out tens of thousands of shutoffs, prompting worldwide condemnation, including from the United Nations, which called the water shutoffs a human rights violation. The city had temporarily suspended water shutoffs over the winter, as freezing temperatures made the procedure impracticable.

The city has already begun shutting off water to accounts that it claims are illegal, of which there are some 8,000.

Residents visiting the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD) payment center on the city's west side said that the department has been sending shutoff notices for weeks before the official resumption of shutoffs, prompting workers to scramble to catch up on their water bills.

For many, this means falling behind on other bills. "You're robbing Peter to pay Paul," said Charlene Paris, a full-time caregiver for her disabled daughter. Charlene had to borrow money to even sign up for a payment plan to keep her water from being shut off.

While authorities claim that assistance is available for those who are unable to pay their bills, residents are required to pay a significant portion of their bills up front to even qualify for a payment plan.

"In order to get on a payment plan, I had to bring in \$179," Charlene said. "It was a struggle to come up

with the money... I had to hustle, bustle, and borrow." While the total amount of unpaid water bills in the city is estimated at over \$42 million, only some \$4.2 million in assistance is available.

Charlene's daughter, who lives with her, has cerebral palsy and requires constant care. "My daughter is on an electronic feeding tube, and water has to be mixed with that," Charlene said.

Residents were outraged over the vindictive character of the mass water shutoffs, even as billions of dollars are being handed over to well-connected speculators and corporate CEOs such as Mike Ilitch and Dan Gilbert.

"They're threatening to shut my water off over a \$250 bill," said lifelong Detroit resident Jaqkia Lasenby. "There's billions for this and billions for that, but when it comes to the working class, there's no money."

Jaqkia lost her job as a preschool teacher in June after government funding for the Head Start program she worked for was cut. She has recently been rehired at another preschool, but has found it hard to keep up with the bills. The preschool where she works starts teachers off at or near minimum wage. "Teachers do everything: we're nurses, we're parents. But we're treated worse than anybody."

The payment center is heavily guarded by city police, and residents were forced to go through a metal detector to pay their water bills. "It's like you're going to jail to pay your bills," said Lasenby.

Some residents said they received shutoff notices even though they were not personally behind on their bills. Dwayne showed a past due bill totaling \$467.99, even though he and his girlfriend had just moved into their house a month ago. They received a shutoff notice on Thursday. They have so far been unable to go through the legal hurdles to even be allowed to pay the previous renters' back water bill, and are threatened

with having their water shut off within days.

The resumption of water shutoffs takes place after a sharp increase in water rates, with the sewerage portion of the bill up by sixteen percent this year. Detroit's water bills are already among the highest in the country, and working-class residents are essentially made to subsidize the city's crumbling infrastructure.

The fee hikes follow the Detroit bankruptcy, which included a provision transferring the DWSD to a regional authority—a prelude to privatization. The shutoffs and fee increases are seen as a means for making the department more attractive to private investors.

Darryle Sykes, a 59-year-old truck driver, said the majority of his water bill consisted of various fees, particularly for sewerage. "I'm never home, so I only use \$4 of water per month, but they charge me \$40. The bills have definitely gone up recently."

Kuan Bey, a journeyman carpenter, said he was behind on his water bills after a car accident. "The people who run the city want to make it a ghost town, so it can be turned over to the rich: they want it back."

Kuan declared that the city is in full-blown crisis—not for the reasons given by the political establishment, but because of unemployment, hunger and homelessness. "There should be a state of emergency: give all the houses to the homeless; turn everyone's water back on. Give everything back to the poor."

Many residents visiting the payment center to pay their bills on time said they were themselves only a few months from being shut off. Tyra, who was paying her bill on time, said she recently got laid off when Northland Center, one of the United States' first shopping malls, announced its closure. She called the water shutoffs cruel and inhuman: "Kids shouldn't be in a house like that."

Donna Hunt, a retired cosmetologist, expressed a broadly felt sentiment when she declared, "They're trying to keep a certain class of people, not a race of people, but a class of people, down."

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