

Detroit resumes mass water shutoffs with nearly 18,000 households at risk

By Shannon Jones
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Mass water shutoffs resumed this week in the city of Detroit. It is the fourth straight year that city officials have sanctioned the shutoffs, targeting the most vulnerable layers of the population in the Motor City, the poorest big city in the United States.

According to the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD), some 17,995 households are on its target list for service disconnection. Water shutoffs began Wednesday, and shutoff notices went out 10 days earlier.

The resumption of water shutoffs in Detroit is part of a broader annual spring offensive, the start of mass utility disconnections in metropolitan as well as rural communities across the US. Whether it is gas, water or electric service, the loss of utilities can have dire health consequences, particularly for children, the sick and the elderly.

The purpose of the mass shutoffs in Detroit are two-fold. City officials are determined to increase revenues, squeezing hard-pressed workers in the city for every loose dollar to bolster the finances of DWSD in advance of possible privatization. DWSD Director Gary Brown recently told the *Detroit News* that his office has collected some \$57 million as a result of the program.

At the same time, the mass water shutoffs are aimed at effectively driving tens of thousands of impoverished residents out of the city to make way for upscale developments by billionaires such as Quicken Loan CEO Dan Gilbert, who is buying up properties in the city right and left. This is in line with plans for the “return” of Detroit based on gentrification. Upscale development in the city center is combined with the shutdown of entire working class neighborhoods that are deemed no longer viable. This entails the mass closure of schools and the denial of basic services like

street repairs.

Since 2014, some 50,000 Detroit households have been disconnected from water service, and there are currently 10,000-20,000 Detroit homes still without water. The city, which is located next to the Great Lakes, the largest bodies of fresh water in the world, has seen recent double-digit increases in its water rates, which have doubled over the past decade.

A survey two years ago of 30 major US cities found that water bills rose by 41 percent between 2010 and 2015.

The continuation of the brutal water shutoff policy in Detroit follows in the wake of the Detroit bankruptcy, which gutted the pay, pensions and benefits of city workers and led to the sale of valuable city assets to private interests. The administration of Democratic Mayor Mike Duggan has continued the policy in the face of mass public opposition and a finding by a United Nations Special Rapporteur that it violates basic human rights.

While city officials and the news media claim that many resources are available to help residents pay water bills, the reality is that the money offered is only a fraction of the need. The Water Residential Assistance Program (WRAP) offers limited assistance to residents who are at or below 150 percent of the official poverty level by covering one-third of monthly payments and freezing overdue amounts. Just 5,766 Detroit households are enrolled in the plan that last year provided \$5 million in aid, only a fraction of the total outstanding water bills. The main purpose of such schemes is not to help victims of shutoffs, but to extract as much as possible from those facing disconnection by requiring large up-front payments to qualify for the programs.

Nakiya Wakes, a Flint resident who has been active

in protesting the poisoning of the city's water with lead, spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the water shutoffs. The city of Flint recently began cutting off residents over past due water bills.

“This crisis has had a major impact on my family. We are paying the highest water bills in the US, and we are paying for drinking poison. We have been living on bottled water for the past two years. I am not paying for anything after being lied to this long. Everyone is furious.

“In Detroit it is the same, except they have been shutting off the water for years. There are already a lot of people living without water in the city.”

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