



Turning on the Taps: The Blue Planet Project fights for the right to water in Detroit

A convoy of Canadians, including Maude Barlow (centre), National Water Campaigner Emma Lui, and members of the Council's Windsor chapter brought 1,000 litres of drinking water to Detroit in an act of solidarity with the thousands of people who have had their water shut off.

Imagine not being able to turn on your tap for water to drink, to wash dishes, do laundry, take a shower or brush your teeth in your own home. You turn the handle on the faucet, but nothing comes out – your taps are dry and empty.

Thousands of people in Detroit, Michigan, living next to the largest group of freshwater lakes in the world, have been without water for months as the city's Water and Sewerage Department implements its crack-down on residential account holders with unpaid water bills.

Most of these families simply can't afford the rising costs.

The Council's Blue Planet Project joined with the Detroit People's Water Board to send a submission to the United Nation's Special Rapporteur on the Human Right to Water and Sanitation outlining the water crisis in Detroit and pointing out the fact that thousands of people are being denied access to water because they are unable to pay their water bills.

"This situation highlights the deep social injustice in Detroit," says Maude Barlow, Blue Planet Project

founder and National Chairperson of the Council of Canadians. "Water is a human right, and it is unacceptable in a country of plenty, surrounded by the Great Lakes, the largest source of fresh water in the world, that people should go without."

A crumbling city

In Detroit, decades of policies have put corporate business and profit ahead of the public good and human rights. Social programs and investments in essential infrastructure have been slashed. According to the *Detroit News*, the City of Detroit's water department

runs a chronic deficit, like many other public water infrastructure systems, and needs more than \$5 billion for urgently needed upgrades.

With globalization and the hollowing out of the once mighty auto industry, wealthy individuals and businesses fled to the suburbs in Detroit, draining the city's core of its tax base and the water department of its revenues. There are now 1 million fewer people living in Detroit than there were in the 1950s.

Until recently, every winter hundreds of aging pipes spewed water from leaks where the water had not been turned off in thousands of abandoned houses and boarded-up businesses. While there have been efforts to address this recently, it continues to be an ongoing problem.

Nothing off the chopping block

The City of Detroit declared bankruptcy in the summer of 2013. A high-priced bankruptcy lawyer was named its Emergency Manager with a mandate to get the city back on its feet financially by imposing a savage austerity regime. Nothing is off the chopping block, not even water utilities, which are being considered for regionalization, sale, lease, and/or a public-private partnership, and are currently subject to mediation by a federal district judge.

In March 2014, the water and sewer department announced it would begin shutting off water service for 1,500 to 3,000 customers, with bills owing more than \$150, each week.

According to a document obtained by the Sierra Club, there are more than 179,000 residential water accounts in Detroit. By April 30, 2014, more than 83,000 of them were past due. The average amount owed per household was just over \$540. Media reports over the summer said water had been shut off in more than 17,000 homes.

Deep racial divides

The case of water cut-offs in the City of Detroit speaks to the deep racial divides and intractable economic and

social inequality in access to services within the United States. The burden of paying for city services has fallen to the residents who have stayed within the economically depressed city, most of whom are African-American. These residents have seen water rates rise by 119 per cent within the last decade. With unemployment rates at a record high and the poverty rate at about 40 per cent, Detroit water bills are unaffordable to a significant portion of the population. And costs keep rising. This summer the city agreed to an almost nine per cent increase in water rates.

The Michigan Welfare Rights Organization (MWRO) argues that the water cut-offs to Detroit households need to be understood within a broader context of Detroit's appeal in the real estate market. With its proximity to the Great Lakes and the Canadian border, the city is considered prime real estate, and is available at fire sale prices. People's overdue water bills are being transferred to their property taxes and people are losing their homes as a result. Given the water department's lack of interest in cutting costs or generating revenues by collecting on the arrears of business users, fixing leaking pipes, and cutting off services to abandoned homes, the organization sees the crack-down as a ploy to drive poor people of colour out of the city to facilitate gentrification – what the organization refers to as a “land-grab.”

High water costs

The MWRO has heard from people who are being charged as much as \$500 per month for water. The estimated average water bill for a family of four is \$150 to \$200 per month. One MWRO volunteer said, “For thousands of people in this city – and in the surrounding suburbs as well – this represents as much as 20 per cent of their monthly income.”

Another MWRO volunteer explains: “Many poor people are forced to accept payment plans that they know they can't afford just to keep their water on (or lights, gas, telephone) until the next shut-off notice. They end up defaulting on these agreements, try to set up

new ones and the next one is worse. The utility companies ask for a higher deposit and higher payment plan.”

The Blue Planet Project, Food & Water Watch, the Detroit People's Water Board and the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization have called on state and U.S. government officials to take immediate action to restore water services and stop further cut-offs.

In a joint statement the groups said: “This is a major crisis. When 45 per cent of water customers struggle to pay their water bills, it is clear that this is not just a problem with delinquent payment. It's indicative of broader, systemic issues resulting from decades of policies that put profits before people.”

In July, the Windsor chapter of the Council of Canadians raised awareness about the issue by delivering 1,000 litres of water across the Canada-U.S. border. “We are doing this because as good neighbours we need to show our solidarity,” said Doug Hayes from the Windsor chapter. “But while these jugs of water will help, it is not the solution. We need President Obama to get involved and ensure human rights are restored.”

As international awareness and pressure continued to grow, in July the City of Detroit announced it was stepping back from its aggressive plan to shut water off in the homes of tens of thousands of families for a three-week period. Soon after, an announcement was made that the water department was being put back under Detroit City Council's control.

What is key now is for the city and other levels of government to commit to a just long-term solution for the people of Detroit. This will include affordable water rates, a plan to support lower-income citizens, and strong public funding for a democratically operated utility.

Water is a human right and must be available to all. The struggle to keep the taps flowing in Detroit continues.