

Moratorium on Water Shut-offs in Detroit Long Overdue

Massive termination of services contributes to the present crisis prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic

By [Abayomi Azikiwe](#)

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Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer announced a halt to the ongoing water shut-offs in the state of Michigan in the midst of a global healthcare crisis spawned by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In Detroit the suspension of all terminations of water services to thousands of households under threat is important as well as restoring those previously shut-off at the cost of \$25 per month.

This was welcome news to millions throughout the state in light of an announcement just days before from Whitmer saying that there was no correlation between the lack of running water and public health. Such a statement represents the years-long denial perpetuated by elected officials and bureaucrats in an attempt to justify policies which do not guarantee basic amenities such as housing, heat, electricity, water services, education, healthcare and transportation.

Several community organizations including the Moratorium NOW! Coalition had signed an appeal to Whitmer calling for a policy shift which would recognize water as a human right. The appeal was by no means the first attempt to place a halt to water shut-offs.

During the period of a bank-engineered Emergency Management and Bankruptcy over the City of Detroit, an integral part of the “restructuring” of the municipality was the implementation of thousands of water shut-offs beginning in the spring and summer of 2014.

The policy mandated by the-then Republican Governor Rick Snyder was implemented by the corporate-imposed Mayor Mike Duggan and Emergency Manager Kevin Orr. These shutoffs were ostensibly due to delinquent bills over more than \$150 per household. As a conditionality of the declaration of a financial emergency in Detroit during April 2012, the City was obligated to turn over \$537 million stemming from credit default swaps mandated by some of the leading financial institutions in the world.

Nonetheless, there are large businesses and public entities which owe hundreds of thousands of dollars to the Detroit Water & Sewerage Department (DWSD) yet their services remain functional. This disparate treatment has been mirrored by other unfair practices such as tax captures by corporations for prestige projects at the expense of several billion in public revenue.



Detroit demonstration against water shutoffs downtown on July 18, 2014 which won the first moratorium during the bankruptcy

Civil Rights organizations and concerned legal professionals noted in their statement released on January 20, the federally-recognized holiday in honor of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., that:

“After years of fighting Detroit water shutoffs through litigation and advocacy, a coalition of civil rights lawyers and organizations publicly calls on Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer to order a moratorium on the interruption of water service to thousands of Detroit households to end a public health emergency. The coalition privately asked the Governor to end the water crisis in a letter nearly three months ago, but yet Detroit water shutoffs continue. The coalition approached the Governor because of years of Detroit city and state officials’ inaction, apathy or disregard.” (See [this](#))

It is important to reflect on the timeliness of this appeal even prior to the current concern over the spread of COVID-19 in the state of Michigan and throughout the U.S. The proliferation of diseases such as Hepatitis A which reached epidemic levels in the state during 2018 has been traced by some experts to the problems associated with water service terminations and contamination. (See [this](#))

This same January 20 statement goes on to emphasize:

“The DWSD has disconnected water to more than 112,000 households between 2014 and October 2018. After years of litigation, research, and advocacy, coalition partners continue to assess the physical and mental illnesses and distress caused and heightened by residents’ lack of access to running water in their homes.”

Between the period of this appeal and the declaration of a state of public health emergency during the second week of March by Governor Whitmer, the nexus between the spread of infectious diseases and the denial of water services had been officially denied. Although the orders issued by Whitmer are significant and a positive development for working people, the poor, children, seniors and the disabled, it is only a first step in the necessary struggle to guarantee a minimum standard of living for all residents of the state of Michigan.

Extending the Moratorium During the Present Emergency

Various reports from healthcare professionals and research scientists indicate that the community spread of COVID-19 represents a significant threat to the well-being of people residing within U.S. society. Many nations such as the People's Republic of China, Italy, Spain, France, South Africa, Kenya, Cuba, among others have enacted policies designed to identify and eliminate the source of the infections within their geo-political regions.

On March 18 the Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO), Dr. Tedros Adhanom, issued a statement updating the international community on the status of the spread of COVID-19. The DG recognized the advances made in combatting the pandemic in Asia and Europe, however, he stressed that the crisis is still unfolding.

Dr. Tedros Adhanom said [in his report](#):

“More than 200,000 cases of COVID-19 have been reported to WHO, and more than 8000 people have lost their lives. More than 80% of all cases are from two regions - the Western Pacific and Europe. We know that many countries now face escalating epidemics and are feeling overwhelmed. We hear you. We know the tremendous difficulties you face and the enormous burden you're under. We understand the heart-wrenching choices you are having to make. We understand that different countries and communities are in different situations, with different levels of transmission. Every day, WHO is talking to ministers of health, heads of state, health workers, hospital managers, industry leaders, CEOs and more - to help them prepare and prioritize, according to their specific situation. Don't assume your community won't be affected. Prepare as if it will be. Don't assume you won't be infected. Prepare as if you will be.”

In preparation for the coming weeks and months, it will be essential for the interests of the masses to be upheld. The package approved by the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate on March 18 is largely designed to reassure the owners of the capitalist multinational corporations and financial institutions that Washington will provide the much-needed liquidity being lost daily on Wall Street.

Trump's appeal to the CEOs of corporations sends a grim message to working and oppressed peoples in the U.S. and internationally. The declaration of an emergency by the White House and Congress only came in the aftermath of the turmoil in the stock market and the threatened lay-offs due to the spread of COVID-19.

In Detroit all K-12 schools have been closed along with higher educational institutions for the next three weeks at minimum. Several universities have announced that classes will be offered online until the end of the present semester. Public libraries have shut down as well while restaurants and bars are prohibited from serving customers inside their establishments.

Nevertheless, a significant and growing segment of the workforce does not have the ability to carry out their employment task from home. Inevitably many service and production workers will lose their jobs.



Detroit demonstration against water shutoff on July 18, 2014

Members of the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 26, representing bus drivers in Detroit, staged a one-day strike on March 17 saying that the City government had not taken the necessary measures to guarantee the health and safety of the workers and passengers. Immediately the administration of Mike Duggan suspended bus fares and ordered all riders to enter the vehicles at the rear door. Bus services resumed the following day on March 18 at 3:00am.

This labor action represented the first of its kind in the entire U.S. where workers took direct action on the question of implementing guidelines to protect the health of its members. A report on the Detroit general strike organized by bus drivers noted:

“Over 90 percent of Detroit bus drivers called out of work en masse today after they said the overcrowded Detroit Department of Transit buses were not adhering to Center for Disease Control guidelines for prevention of spreading Coronavirus, as the state shut down all schools, bars, and restaurants. Detroit public transit was hanging on by a thread during easier times, but now that the world has been turned upside down, the overstressed service has given way.” (See [this](#))

The President of the UAW Rory Gamble issued a statement on March 17 requesting the closing of production for two weeks. This letter was undoubtedly a result of the protests launched against the company by several union locals. At the FCA Warren Truck Plant some workers walked off the job on March 17 due to safety concerns. Several employees at General Motors, FCA and Ford have been diagnosed with COVID-19. The auto companies relented on March 18 saying that they would conduct an assembly line shutdown to ensure safety concerns. Some of the European operations such as in Italy have been closed as a result of the magnitude of the crisis.

In response to the crisis as well, the 36th District Court in Detroit has announced a moratorium on all evictions. In the same vein, the Wayne County Treasurer’s Office declared a moratorium on property tax foreclosures which have been a major issue in the city of

Detroit for the last four years.

On a community level, the Moratorium NOW! Coalition held its weekly organizing meeting via conference call on March 16. A wide-ranging discussion on how to respond to the current situation is resulting in the development of a comprehensive political program geared towards preparing people for the coming challenges.

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Abayomi Azikiwe is the editor of Pan-African News Wire. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research.

Featured image: Detroit demonstration against water shutoffs during the summer of 2014 outside the DWSD; all images in this article are from the author

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