



# MWRO People's Bulletin

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Commissioners make strong recommendations . . .

## People testify on living and suffering without water

Nearly 100 people heard testimony from those whose water was cut off at the first Truth Commission for Water Rights held in Detroit May 3.

Sponsored by Michigan Welfare Rights Organization (MWRO), the Truth Commissioners heard from senior citizens, poor people, environmental justice activists, union presidents and city council members. People testified to huge, unjustified water bills and the shutoff of water. They testified about the dire health effects on themselves and their families. They told of long-running, unattended water leaks from broken mains, of exorbitant bond payments for the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD), and other stories about water not reported in the mainstream media and ignored by the city leadership. The Commissioners saw videos of taped testimony. They saw the film, *The Water Front*, which tells the story of the people in Highland Park fighting to keep their water on and keep the water system publicly owned.

After listening for 4 hours, the Commissioners met and made initial recommendations back to the meeting (see page 3). The testimony will be delivered to the United Nations as part of an effort

to get the United States sanctioned as a violator of human rights.

The hearings also pointed to the road forward. People told of their struggle against Victor Mercado, head of the DWSD, and privatization, the struggle for the MWRO-proposed Water Affordability Plan to keep the water on, and the struggle to keep healthy water flowing.

Maureen Taylor, chairperson of MWRO, testified that 45,000 people lose access to water each year. She explained the Water Affordability Plan, passed by Detroit City Council. She explained how the plan was sabotaged by the DWSD and replaced with the severely underfunded "water assistance plan."

John Riehl, president of AF-SCME Local 207, representing water, sewage and public lighting

employees, testified to attacks on union members who are systematically losing work to private contractors. The contractors are awarded contracts despite the fact that work done in house would be cheaper with better quality control.

We learned that DWSD, a publicly owned utility, paid contracts with consultants determined to privatize the water works. These payments are ordered and authorized by Judge Feikens, a federal judge. He maintains control of over DWSD, not to enforce compliance with the Clean Water Act, but to implement his own brain-child of privatization and suburban control. He is out of line and an enemy of all Detroiters.

The Utilities Committee next meeting is Monday, July 7, at 5:30 pm and members will be mapping out the next phase of the struggle to win water as a human right in Detroit. □



Marian Kramer, president of NWRU, talks with the Truth Commissioners.

# 'Cipients Speak

By M.D. Taylor, chairperson  
Michigan Welfare Rights Org.

Detroit, MI continues to sink under the weight of mismanagement, corruption, and greed at the hands of despots seen when the Declaration of Independence was being written. Just when we believed that nothing else horrible could happen, we are again jolted by yet another attack on the quality of life poor people are trying to hold on to. Dig this!

In 2007 in Detroit alone, over 70,000 homes were foreclosed on in that one year. These devastating numbers come as a result of the "local" Katrina we suffer because Detroit is tied to the auto industry. Because the "Big Three" must maintain maximum profits at all costs, workers have to suffer. Plants have disappeared...Mack Stamping, Fleetwood Assembly, Huber Ave. Foundry, Lynch Rd. Assembly, Dodge Main, Ford Glass, and others have all gone the way of the wrecking ball. The number of cars being produced however, is the same. What is different is the number of hands needed to produce those cars, have been replaced by robots and in many cases, off shore workers. Technology that used to enhance labor, now has replaced labor, so what does that mean? It means that you had better figure out how to say, "poof" and turn yourself into a computer!

For Detroiters who used to believe that they, they children and their children's children would always have good paying jobs with the auto industry are under-



**A Detroit family, whose possessions were thrown into dumpsters by bailiffs, put their things back into their home with the help of MWRO, Call 'em Out and Moratorium Now! activists.**

going a transformation. Further evidence of what we are all in store for came to light in the following example. With so many evictions, the community has decided that enough is enough, so they are moving families back into their homes all over the city. Speculators like the Deutsch Bank of Germany are purchasing properties listed on tax foreclosures internet screens, buying homes sight-unseen. Bailiffs can't keep up with the demand for 8-10 set-outs per day! Now comes the depth of treachery – mortgage companies and banks are not willing to wait, so they have resorted to hiring "street thugs" to evict families. The highest Judge in one of our local Courts verified this information saying that the Courts are actively looking for these "thugs" who are performing a to-

tally illegal act. Everything owned by these unfortunate families is summarily tossed out into waiting dumpsters - children's pictures, the family Bible, grandma's wedding photos, all thrown away. Roving highwaymen come by in cars and take unattended bits of furniture and appliances. We are under siege.

Some are like frogs in a pot of water. Turn up the heat slowly, & they stay quiet as they boil to death not noticing the change. Some of us have noticed, and have decided that it is time for Detroit to change. It won't be pretty, but the government here must be overthrown, jailed and tried for crimes against humanity. □

# Recommendations of the Truth Commission

## By Cynthia McKinney, on behalf of the Truth Commission

I have been asked to relay some remarks on behalf of the Truth Commission by the co-chairs, Bankole Thompson and Willy Baptist. We, the members of the commission, would like to thank those of you who have remained through our deliberations in order to hear what we have decided to come up with and, please note that these are preliminary findings of actions that will ensue but this is not by any means a comprehensive list of the things that we discussed as a result of the tremendous testimony that we received today.

### Every level of government is involved

We understand that there are problems as well as responsibilities that arise at every level of government. Therefore we understand that while this is a local Detroit issue, we also understand that this is a Michigan issue, this is an issue for the United States and indeed, as one of the testifiers commented, this is an international issue.

So we would like to identify these various levels of interest as well as those who are responsible to all of us. Recognizing that there are many sectors of the population who are responsible from clergy as well as elected officials, we also understand that elected officials are the ones who

have ultimate responsibility over making public policy. And these are policy questions. This is not an accident that when we have this kind of a discussion and at the same time, we do not have representatives from all levels of government. Because all the levels of government have a role to play in what happens in Detroit, what happens with water, what happens with Michigan, and you have federal representatives who could provide necessary funding as well.

With respect to local initiatives, it is our understanding that the city charter has something to say about water as a right, and providing for the rights of citizens or residents of Detroit. So the city charter has to be investigated with respect to the legality of the water shut offs. A recommendation has been made to put before the Detroit Health Department (or the City Council Health and Safety Committee) to make water shutoffs illegal with accordance with the commission's reading of the city charter.

### Judge Feikens

There is an interest in investigating Judge Feikens' role and the legality of the decisions that are made by him. We also recognize that there are certain corporate entities that have an interest in privatization, and those corporate entities include but are not consisting only of Ford, DTE, and General Motors. Generally they have

not been supportive of sustainable development but have been supportive of privatization.

I believe it was our very first witnesses who talked



about the bond sales. It is important to understand the relationship between the bonds sales and our elected officials and the role that the bond sales play in the depletion of the resources that are made available for providing water to the residents of Detroit.

At the same time that we have to consider local action, this is also a state problem. The Michigan Department of Environmental Quality should have a role to play and the commission believes it should research the MDEQ's authority in this regard. Also the Michigan Health and Service Commission should have their role investigated.

### \$720 million a day for war and shutoffs for us

At the same time we also understand that not very far away from here is the City of Benton Harbor where Rev. Pinkney is in jail and has been in jail for 6 months now and the problem in Benton Harbor is that some people have decided that they would like to steal the land that belongs to the people and turn Benton Harbor into a playground for the wealth. Is that perhaps what is in sight or in store for the city of Detroit?

And so therefore we can not ignore what is going on right next door. We understand that the state of Michigan has responsibility and the Commissioners would like to explore what those responsibilities are and hold state elected officials accountable as we also seek to hold local

*(Continued on page 4)*



Truth Commission report back.

(Continued from page 3)  
elected officials accountable.

There is also a role for federal officials in this as well. It is incomprehensible and perhaps unconscionable that our elected officials on the federal level in the United States Congress continue to fund a war to the tune of \$720 million a day when people are getting their water shut off. It is unacceptable. And so federal funding is available. There are members of the Michigan delegation that sit on the Appropriations Committee and if they can divvy up \$3 trillion then certainly the folks in Michigan ought to be able to get their fair share.

Then there is also a national issue because as one testifier mentioned, there are 36 states, according to the article that he presented, that also are going to experience water wars. I can tell you that in the city of my birth, the city of Atlanta, just this week it was announced that water rates are going to increase by 170 percent. So not only is it Detroit, it is all over the country.

The film you showed to us, *The Water Front* by Liz Miller is a poignant and touching chronicle of the pain and suffering that people are experiencing in the city of Detroit. But is Detroit a metaphor for all of America? Is Detroit what is in store for my home city of Atlanta? Is Detroit a victim of Hurricane America as Hurricane Katrina wiped out a whole city of people and their culture? There has been no acceptable response from

any political party and none from the political leadership.

And, just as the survivors of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita formed an international tribunal to take their issues to the UN, so too has this Truth Commission decided to work in conjunction with other organizations in the United States that seek to define and characterize and have the General Assembly of the United Nations describe the United States as a Human Rights Abuser.

This very powerful film provides us an opportunity to launch an education campaign. We are hopeful that this Truth Commission will travel all across the state of Michigan and then will be replicated in other communities all across our country. With the help of this film we can highlight not only what is happening in Detroit but all over our country. And not only just all over our country. I just recently came back from a city in Mexico where 100,000 Briquadsta women marched in the city plaza, and they said they would not allow for the privatization of their electricity and their oil because their greedy neighbor to the North wants to steal their oil resources, wants to steal their electricity, and they have said that they don't mind launching, not just a protest, but moving from protest to resistance.

The Truth Commission acknowledges that there are people in the City of Detroit who have moved from protest to resistance to protect and defend their right to water and the Truth Commission supports them. □

## Private water companies kicked out of Atlanta, Indianapolis, now Paris

Corporate water barons are on the run everywhere. In a fitting round of justice, French water giants Veolia and Suez are getting kicked out of their own capital city. The Paris city council announced in early June that the city's water system would revert to 100 percent public control at the end of 2009. The aim is to keep water prices in the city stable.

The subsidiaries of these companies have had numerous problems. For instance, Veolia contracted to provide water service to more than 1 million people in Indianapolis in 2002. But just three years later, news emerged that Veolia's local subsidiary had cut back on employees, water testing and maintenance. Some even alleged that the corporation cooked the books in order to collect financial incentives. In 2003 the city of Atlanta, Georgia ended its contract with Suez subsidiary United Water 16 years early because of staff cuts, delayed repairs and corruption.

Wenonah Hauter, executive director of Food & Water Watch., said, "this decision in Paris illustrates that communities suffering from the effects of corporate water privatization can fight back to take control of their water infrastructures."

(From *Food and Water Watch*)

[www.foodandwaterwatch.org](http://www.foodandwaterwatch.org)



Volunteers Lucille Jones and Gwen Gaines show off the fine food served.

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