

# Water Rights March in Detroit

[Ruth Conniff](#) | [The Progressive](#) | July 18, 2014

On Friday, July 18, thousands of people marched through downtown Detroit to call attention to a major public health crisis as the city shuts off the water for residents who are behind on their bills.

Chanting, “Fight! Fight! Fight! Water is a human right!” and “Whose water? Our water!” about 5,000 Detroit residents and allies from across the country—including many who were in town for the annual Netroots Nation blogger conference—marched from the Cobo convention center to Hart Plaza near the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department.

Old R&B tuned blared from a mobile sound truck hired by National Nurses United, as a large, multiracial crowd gathered, carrying signs that said “Water is a human right” “Turn on the Water” and “Tax Wall Street”.

Actor Mark Ruffalo jumped onto the flatbed truck to address the crowd as the march began.



“The reason I’m here is for you,” Ruffalo told the crowd, praising Detroiters’ “resistance and resilience.”

“What’s happening in Detroit is a model for what’s happening in the nation,” Ruffalo declared. “Instead of a nation for the 0.1 percent, it should be a nation for all humanity.”

Located near two great lakes and the Detroit River, Detroit has access to the largest fresh water supply in the nation. But thousands of the city’s poorest residents no longer have water for drinking, bathing, cooking, or flushing the toilet, since the city’s unelected emergency manager began seeking to reduce the Water and Sewerage Department’s debt, cutting off residents who don’t keep current on their payments.

Meanwhile, General Motors and the city’s two sports arenas, which owe millions in unpaid water bills, have not had their water turned off.

The United Nations has called Detroit’s actions “a violation of the human right to water and other international human rights.”

One marcher, Janice McKinney, described herself as a “pissed-off grandma.”

“We’re not under democracy in Detroit, we’re under dictatorship,” she said.

McKinney said she got involved in the water battle after she received a \$600 water bill for one month, she said.

“I saw four different representatives of the water and sewer department, and each gave me a different story,” she said.

(Detroit residents’ water bills have gone up dramatically since emergency management was imposed on the city, and many residents have complained about overcharges and wrongful cut-offs.)

McKinney joined the People’s Water Board, which is fighting to wrest back democratic control over the water supply.

“If you don’t pay your water bill, there’s a lien put on your house,” McKinney explained. “In my exercise class, four seniors received \$300 water bills. They were all told it was because of a January bill that was past due, which means they could be shut off. If it’s happening in a small group like my senior exercise class, how many others are there?”

“They are finding a way to steal money and bully you,” she added.

One of McKinney’s biggest concerns was represented on her hand-made sign by a picture of a little girl holding up an empty cup. The city has begun removing children from households that have had their water cut off, she explained.

In a flyer handed out at the march, the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization accused Detroit officials of “torture” designed to drive poor people out of the city.

“My children left the city when they started ruining the

schools, so their children could have an education,” McKinney said. “We used to have a great school system before emergency management . . . my children all graduated from college summa cum laude.”

As the march reached Hart Plaza, police confiscated the sound truck, leaving 85-year-old Congressman John Conyers to climb gingerly up the pedestal of a park monument, where speakers perched to deliver their remarks by passing around a bullhorn.

“We’re all in this together,” Conyers rasped into the bullhorn. “My message to Detroit Water and Sewer is: ‘Keep your paws off the water!’ Water is a human right.”

The crowd booed when organizers announced that the sound truck had been taken, and that nine protesters were arrested.

Maureen Taylor, the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization state chair, told the crowd: “We live in the Great Lakes. All around us is water. We are not going to let their tricks take it away.”

“We are under occupation here,” said Abayomi Azikiwe of the Moratorium Now Coalition. “They’ve taken our homes, taken our public institutions and privatized them, and now they’re taking our water. Soon enough, it will be coming to a city near you.”

The nine people arrested were trying to form a blockade in front of Homrich, a private contractor being paid over \$5 million to turn off water to Detroiters whose overdue bills exceed \$150.

The Detroit Water and Sewerage Department is a public asset valued at \$6.4 billion. Forty-five percent of the utility’s annual budget goes to Wall Street banks to service its debt – a debt the emergency manager has the power to re-negotiate.

Detroit activists worry that their water utility, like other

public services, will be privatized.

Members of the crowd were asked to text the word "Detroit" to the phone number 69866 to sign a petition asking the Obama Administration to declare a public health emergency in Detroit and turn the water back on.

– See more at:  
<https://www.progressive.org/news/2014/07/187784/water-rights-march-detroit#sthash.DxmTvSxg.dpuf>