

## **United States: Refusing to Back Down<sup>1</sup>**

*by Maureen Taylor, Michigan Welfare Rights Organization*

During the summer of 2002, while protesting gas and electricity cutoffs in Detroit, the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization (MWRO) was informed of something very disturbing: tens of thousands of residents had been cut off from the basic necessity of water. The MWRO (which is an advocate union for welfare recipients, the low income bracket, and the homeless) sounded the alarm, agitated, solicited partners, and revealed this practice for what it was – a human rights violation which bears most often on the backs of poor women.

According to the Detroit Water and Sewage Department (DWSD), between July 1, 2001, and June 30, 2002, the utility cut off water to 40,752 residences in the Detroit area. As of Jan. 13, the DWSD reported that it had cut off water service to 4,523 residences over the past 79 business days.

In Detroit, as in other affected Michigan municipalities and communities across America, women-led households are often poor. This is the dynamic of the country. Men earn more money. When the layoffs come, women – often black women – are the first to go.

Thus, it was fitting that in the case of Detroit, organizations led by women (and the many individual women who joined them) were those who stepped up to oppose human rights violations in Detroit. The Sweetwater Alliance (a coalition dedicated to keeping essential resources out of corporate control) joined the MWRO in pickets, and then the two set off on a circuitous journey through the Detroit water bureaucracy which would eventually reveal the malevolency at hand. Their first step was to go to privately scheduled meetings of Detroit's water commissioners with the information about cutoffs in-hand, where they were greeted with ignorance to the problem. So the MWRO and Sweetwater took up their cause with the powerful Detroit city council. The council president – Maryann Mahaffey, a woman – was outraged. She convened an emergency utility task force, with representation from the MWRO, the Sweetwater Alliance, and other organizations. At a televised session of the task force, MWRO head Maureen Taylor and others spoke of the obscene number of people without water. They also met their nemesis. Joining them at the session was the new chief administrator of Detroit's water department, Victor Mercado. Mercado, it turned out, was newly arrived from high-level positions with the Thames Water corporation, one of the largest private water companies in the world. He had recently instituted the aggressive policy of debt collection and cutoffs for non-payment, which included the practice of DWSD workers cementing areas around the shut-off valves to prevent residents from turning their water back on. The women fighting the cutoffs now realized their fight would be about more than cutoffs.

It now seemed, with the water cutoffs, that after years of starving city services and infrastructure, the goal was to improve DWSD's revenue stream just enough to place it on the auction block for a corporate takeover; Detroit water rates rose nine percent in 2002 accordingly. Meanwhile, the water company had been starving its own capacity at the rank-

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and-file service level – opting instead for less efficient subcontracts – and inflating its management ranks, creating an atmosphere ripe for public divestiture. The crisis over cutoffs was now accompanied by the specter of privatization.

The plotters of privatization were counting that the citizen angst over the state of the water company would translate into an anything-would-be-better attitude concerning the fate of their water, at which time the privateers and their advocates would be able to jam privatization down Detroit's throat. The women at MWRO, Sweetwater, and other organizations were not going to stand for that. They instituted a campaign of education, a part of which was the Resurrection Marches. On three Mondays, citizens were invited to join pickets around water department offices, to come with their water bills in hand, and go into the building with a MWRO or Sweetwater representative to get their water turned back on or avoid having it turned off. This developed a civic conversation which shamed water officials.

Today, the campaign continues. Many are still without water, and Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm is proving an unresponsive leader with regards to this human rights issue. But for the women involved with this effort, everyday is a lookout.