CHAPTER 6

A Case Study on Organizing: The Struggle for Water in Postindustrial Detroit

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Detroit and Highland Park, Michigan, have become the center of the struggle over access to water in the United States, with 40,000 to 45,000 families cut off water annually since 2001 and some of the highest water rates in the country. This chapter examines the drive to privatize water in the context of the shift from Fordism to flexible accumulation and "accumulation by dispossession" (Harvey, 1990, 2003) and the agency of those most impacted by water shut offs in challenging these privatization efforts. Postindustrial Detroit, with among the highest foreclosure and unemployment rates in the nation, anticipated the challenges of many areas of the country as the United States moved into the recession of 2008. As the fiscal crisis facing cities and towns across the United States is used as a pretext to impose austerity measures, Analyzing the experience of Detroit is important in understanding the trajectory of privatization, the erosion of democracy, and efforts taken to challenge them. In this chapter, I will examine how local groups have responded by building organization among those most affected and making powerful appeals to democracy and human rights.

WATER AND WATER PRIVATIZATION

Water is a $400 billion global business—it is 40% of the size of the oil industry and one-third larger than the pharmaceutical industry, and it is growing rapidly. Water privatization began in the 1980s in Latin America and East Asia; it spread to South Asia and Africa in the late 1990s and to the Western world in the 2000s (Varghese, 2007). In the early 2000s, the three largest water companies in the world were the French Vivendi, the German RWE, and the French Suez respectively. Ranking in the top 100 among Fortune's Global 500 List, Suez operates in 130 countries and Vivendi in

over 100; the combined annual revenues of the two French companies are over $70 billion. In 2003, RWE revenues were over $50 billion, the company having recently acquired British water giant Thames Water (Public Citizen, 2003). In 2006, however, RWE announced its divestment from the global water business (Varghese, 2007).

Despite strong support for water privatization from the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and others, water multinationals have faced a series of financial and political setbacks in their projects in the developing world. Led by Suez, with a self-declared mission to bring water to the world's poor, water multinationals began withdrawing their investments in the developing world. Suez announced in January 2003 that future investments will favor "the quickest free cash flow generating projects and contracts," avoid long-term investments, and concentrate on the soundest markets of Europe and North America (Hall, 2003b). Another element of these policies is a strategy of departure when an investment goes sour. When the currency collapse in the Philippines adversely affected their investments, Suez abandoned their concession in Manila and then sued the Philippines for $303 million to recoup their losses (Hall, 2003a).

As multinational water companies withdraw from the developing world, they are set to aggressively expand in the United States and Europe:

> Eighty-five percent of all water services in the U.S. are still in public hands. That's a tempting target for conglomerates like Suez, Vivendi, and RWE. Within the next 10 years, they aim to control 70 percent of water services across the United States. (Barlow & Clarke, 2003)

Vivendi, Suez, and RWE have each bought up the leading U.S. water companies, U.S. Filter, United Water, and American Water Works, respectively. Through the purchase of American Water Works, RWE gained control of the largest U.S. private water utility. This expanded its customer base from 43 million to 56 million people (Rothfeder, 2001, p. 125). Water is a $150 billion industry in America and growing fast (Varghese, 2007).

THE CASE OF WATER IN DETROIT AND HIGHLAND PARK

The largest city in Michigan and the second largest city in the midwest, Detroit is the 18th largest city in the United States. Once the fourth largest city in the United States, Detroit's population has been declining since the 1960s. In the decade between 2000 and 2010, Detroit lost a staggering 20% of its population, the largest decline in any large U.S. city other than New Orleans. Its population in 2010 was 713,777 with over 80%

Black residents (Seelye, 2011). As industry deconcentrated and Detroit lost its base of manufacturing jobs, it has also lost its tax base. When Chrysler left Highland Park (an independent municipality within the Detroit city limits), the population therein dropped from 60,000 to 16,000 (Public Citizen, 2003). Detroit and Highland Park, which maintain independent water systems, inherited decrepit infrastructure with large deferred maintenance costs that their current tax base is unable to address. The solution on offer for distressed communities like Detroit and Highland Park is water privatization. Former water industry consultants were appointed as heads of water departments in Detroit and Highland Park. They have implemented aggressive austerity measures to soften up these communities to accept privatization and improve the revenue stream of the utilities prior to putting them on the auction block.

DETROIT

Between July 1, 2001, and June 30, 2002, the Detroit Water and Sewage Department cut off water to 40,752 households in the Detroit area (Lords, 2003). Since 2001, between 40,000 and 45,000 households have been cut off from water every year. The new chief administrator of the Detroit Water and Sewage Department (DWSD) arrived from a high-level position with the Thames Water Corporation (a subsidiary of RWE). Within one month of taking office, he hired a consulting firm which was involved in the privatization of Atlanta's water, instituted double-digit rate increases, and launched an aggressive policy of debt collection and cutoffs for nonpayment. Despite corporate customers accounting for over three-quarters of the money owed to Detroit for back water bills, he focused the collection efforts on individuals. This included DWSD workers' cementing areas around shutoff valves to prevent residents from turning their water back on (Michigan Welfare Rights Organization [MWRO], 2004).

HIGHLAND PARK

The state of Michigan took Highland Park into receivership in June 2001. Governor John Engler appointed an administrator to run the city. The elected mayor and City Council no longer had power over any decisions that affect the budget. Highland Park's emergency financial manager immediately imposed an extreme austerity program. She "shut down City Hall. She closed the library and the recreation center. She slashed the workforce to a skeleton crew, then cut further" (Angel, 2002). For months, she refused to authorize the expenses involved with turning on the lights at City Hall so that City Council could meet. She closed the cities district court. Public safety officers accuse her of creating a pay crisis to destroy their union (An-

gel, 2002). Highland Park resident Marian Kramer adds that in Highland Park they "don't have people checking fire hydrants anymore. When there is a fire, everyone is afraid. Whole blocks burn because the fire hydrants are not working. Neighboring cities' fire departments refuse to help. Who will pay them? They just let the city burn" (personal communication, Chris Caruso, January 2007).

In addition to service cuts, a move towards privatization began with the hiring of a former vice president of a privatization consulting firm based in Atlanta to perform the daily administration of the city. He hired a fellow former vice president to run the water department in Highland Park. This new administrator raised the water rates steeply and subcontracted the water department's collection to a private firm, which sent employees carrying firearms to shut off people's water. The city administrator has instituted a policy of adding delinquent water bills to the property tax owed for a home. The city then began to foreclose on homes of people who could not pay their water bill. In some cases, children were seized from parents who could not pay their water bill and placed in foster care (Litowich, 2004). Highland Park's new water rates are among the highest rates in the country. It should be no surprise, then, that almost half of Highland Park households have been slated for water shutoff. At the same time, these two administrators were paid $300,000 a year for the part-time work they perform for the financially strapped city.

The city administrator spent 18 months negotiating in secret with the Rothschild Wright Group (RWG) to privatize the water in Highland Park. No other bids for managing the water department were considered, and RWG admitted that they have no prior experience running municipal water departments (Sweetwater Alliance, 2004). The proposal between Highland Park and RWG wrote in millions of dollars of guaranteed profit to RWG and stated that if the deal was canceled before its 10-year term, RWG would recoup all its costs and profits at Highland Park's expense (Sweetwater Alliance, 2004). Under this contract, RWG would also be allowed to use water from the public reservoir for bottled water sale. This withdrawal and privatization of public services is consistent with a capitalist logic that says that a population whose labor is no longer required for accumulation is a "surplus population" that is undeserving of basic services (Glimore, 2007).

A BRIEF HISTORY OF ORGANIZING DETROIT

Through the 19th and early 20th centuries, American industry roughly followed a pattern of centralization. As William Cronon documented in the case of Chicago, factors such as topography; access to transportation routes, including rivers and railroads; and proximity to raw materials were

important in the centralization of industry in the United States (1991). The level of technical and organizational development of the production process reached in the 20th century—known as Fordism—also tended to centralize industry into large factories where large numbers of workers worked together on long assembly lines. Detroit was one such "central city"—situated on the powerful Detroit River with access to the Great Lakes. By the mid-20th century, Detroit had become a major center of world capitalism, and was perhaps the most concentrated and technically advanced site of industry in the world. Sixty percent of that industry was the automobile industry (Sugrue, 1996, p. 126).

Karl Marx argued that the concentration of large numbers of workers in large factories (such as the River Rouge Plant in Detroit, which employed 85,000 workers at its peak) created favorable conditions for labor organizing. In *Capital, Volume 1*, Marx wrote, "Hand in hand with this centralization . . . there also grows the revolt of the working class, a class constantly increasing in numbers, and trained, united and organized by the very mechanism of the capitalist process of production" (1990, p. 929). Perhaps not surprisingly, Detroit was home to some of the most militant labor organizing and most powerful trade unions in the United States. The roots of Detroit's militant labor movement are in the Unemployed Councils that developed during the Great Depression. These Unemployed Councils were strongest in 1932 and 1933 with marches, housing takeovers, and other efforts to fight hunger and homelessness. The Unemployed Councils took their fight against hunger to the auto manufacturers in 1932; "out of this mass drive came the seeds for organized labor to organize the shops in the city" (Baker, 2010). In the winter of 1937–1938, the United Automobile Workers (UAW) organized sit-down strikes in over 100 Detroit companies (Babson, 1986, p. 79). The period between the Great Depression and World War II was one of substantial gains by the union movement. This organizing was at the point of production and was focused on leveraging strikes to win concessions around wages and working conditions.

DETROIT'S REVOLUTIONARY UNION MOVEMENTS

Although Ford Motor Company was hiring African Americans in the 1940s, African Americans were not hired into Detroit's factories in large numbers until the labor shortages of World War II. Many African American workers were alienated by labor's White conservative leadership, and by the 1960s

> a much more radical current of black working-class activism developed in Detroit. Only weeks following King's assassination, black workers at the Detroit

> Dodge Main plant of Chrysler Corporation staged a wildcat strike, protesting oppressive working conditions, (Georgakas and Surkin, 1998)

This wildcat strike led to the formation of the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement and inspired the development of many revolutionary union movements (RUMs) throughout the auto plants in Detroit. Workers at these factories formed the League of Revolutionary Black Workers (LRBW) in June 1969 (*Finally Got the News*, 1970). One of the leaders of the LRBW was General Baker who is directly linked to the current struggles around water privatization:

> We developed an organization, not a caucus, not tied down by union rules. I got fired leading a wildcat strike and we decided to use my discharge as a calling card to build an organization called DRUM... We used it to say that, you have declared war on us and that's the only decision that you will make. We will decide…the terms of the engagement...We are going to fight you everywhere we can. (Baker 2010)

This radical organizing had strong roots in the Black freedom struggles in Detroit dating back to the 1940s and 1950s through organizations including the Negro National Congress (NNC), the National Negro Labor Council (NNLC), Local 600, the March on Washington Movement (MOWM) and others (Theoharis and Woodard, 2003; Dillard, 2007).

WELFARE RIGHTS MOVEMENT

In addition to these organizations of African American workers, welfare rights organizing was also very strong in Detroit. Reacting to a racist and discriminatory history of welfare and taking inspiration from the civil rights movement, the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) struggled to register thousands of destitute women and men, especially people of color, for the welfare roles in the 1960s and 1970s. This movement was led by poor women of color and claimed a membership of hundreds of thousands at the height of its organizing (Nadasen, 2004; West, 1981). The Detroit Metropolitan Welfare Rights Organization was one of the five largest welfare rights organizations in the late 1960s and distinguished itself by increasing welfare rolls in large numbers (Piven and Cloward, 1979, p. 298). Welfare rights organizing in Detroit was closely linked with union and other radical working class organizing that was happening concurrently. There is a valuable body of scholarship on this organizing in Detroit (e.g., Fine, 2000; Goldberg, 2010; Kelly, 1996; Smith, 2001; Thompson, 2004; and Ward, 2006),

THE DEINDUSTRIALIZATION OF DETROIT

Thomas Sugrue, in *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, points out that deindustrialization actually happened earlier within the auto industry than in other industries. Between 1947 and 1963, Detroit lost 134,000 manufacturing jobs (1996, p. 126). Advances in communication and transportation technology; the transformation of industrial technology, including automation; the acceleration of regional and international competition; and the expansion of industry in low-wage regions, especially the South, are responsible for this job loss.

As opposed to the centralizing tendencies of Fordism of the previous period, in this new period of flexible accumulation, processes of industrial decentralization became dominant. (Harvey, 1990). Decentralization was an effort to seek cheaper labor costs and to escape the large unions that were concentrated in urban areas like Detroit. An additional aspect of this deindustrialization was automation, which in the late 1940s and 1950s was pursued aggressively by Detroit automakers as another way to reestablish control over the labor process.

For Detroit in the period of Fordism and industrial centralization, the main contradiction was between capital and labor, the struggle was situated at the point of production, and the dominant form of organization was the union. As the processes of deindustrialization and decentralization of factories first to the American South and then to the Global South progressed, the conditions of class struggle changed. New forms of class struggle are beginning to take place in Detroit and other deindustrialized cities in response to capital flight and accumulation by dispossession.

PRIVATIZATION AND ACCUMULATION BY DISPOSSESSION

David Harvey describes "accumulation by dispossession" as one response to the chronic crisis of overaccumulation that capitalism has been experiencing since the 1970s. As the geographic expansion of global capitalism nears completion, the remaining public resources within capitalist countries are being privatized:

> Since privatization and liberalization of the market was the mantra of the neo-liberal movement, the effect was to make a new round of "enclosure of the commons" into an objective of state policies. Assets held by the state in common were released into the market where overaccumulating capital could invest in them, upgrade them, and speculate in them. (2003, p. 158)

Harvey describes privatization as one of the key practices of accumulation by dispossession. Privatization is an important element of neoliberal thought and has been actively encouraged by the policies of the World Bank and IMF. The privatization of public assets such as water, utilities, schools, hospitals, roads, and so on is increasing worldwide. A key tenet of neoliberal ideology is that private enterprise is more efficient than municipal services. The alleged savings, however, involved in privatization do not always materialize. The contracts that municipalities sign with water corporations often include financial guarantees on the part of the municipalities (Barlow and Clarke, 2002). These profit guarantees are standard practice in the industry, and are seemingly even more stringent as the water industry looks to cover its losses in the developing world. In the case of Atlanta, which privatized its water supply in 1999 to United Water Resources, a subsidiary of Suez, the savings to the city were less than half of what were promised (Hall, 2003a). Atlanta has since reestablished a municipal water service.

THE SOCIAL RESPONSE

Arundhati Roy describes privatization as

> the transfer of productive public assets from the state to private companies. . . . These are the assets that the state holds in trust for the people it represents. . . . To snatch these away and sell them as stock to private companies is a process of barbaric dispossession on a scale that has no parallel in history. (2001, p. 43, quoted in Harvey, 2003, p. 161)

The early stages of privatization of water in Highland Park and Detroit are examples of this barbaric dispossession; using privatized armed security guards to shut off water for nonpayment, sealing shut off valves with cement, and seizing people's homes are all acts of forcible dispossession. These measures did not happen without a fight from the community. The very fact that the DWSD cemented shut the water valves demonstrates that people are illegally turning their water back on.

The Michigan Welfare Rights Organization (MWRO)—with roots dating back to the National Welfare Rights Movement of the 1960s discussed above—has become a leading organized expression of this opposition. The MWRO has built a broad coalition of local organizations called the Highland Park Human Rights Coalition. They have sponsored a wide array of tactics, all focused on uniting and organizing the low-income residents of Highland Park affected by the policies of dispossession and exposing the conditions that have resulted from these policies. Some of their activi-

ties have included organizing "water town hall meetings" where residents brought their water bills and expose the situation in front of local television and radio broadcasters; and organizing a "State of the People Address" in Lansing by bringing large numbers of affected residents to lobby the governor and state congress. They have organized nonviolent civil disobedience in front of water departments. One protest was titled Protest the Death of Democracy and Water Rights in Highland Park.

HUMAN RIGHTS AND DEMOCRACY

The rhetorical strategies of the Highland Park Human Rights Coalition challenge the rollback of democracy and needed services that privatization demands. Their language focuses on the "death of democracy" and lack of human rights in Highland Park. The lack of democratic process is a major political vulnerability of the privatizers and makes a persuasive argument about the immorality of these policies. Maureen Taylor, codirector of the MWRO, states,

> Access to water, access to the means of survival is supposed to be one of the tenets that democracy is built [on]. When you have a class of people that are denied the ability to live, that is a straight-up democratic fight. Your children are under attack; your survival is under attack. All of our elected officials, 90% of them, look the other way. The Black politicians stand mute. This is the final frontier.

She continues, "Forty to forty-five thousand people turned off every year. . . . This is a human rights violation of enormous proportions" (personal commmunication, Chris Caruso, January 2007). The language of human rights is a powerful counter to the commodification of basic human needs like water. Although not without risks human rights are an internationally legitimated framework to make collective demands for human needs and to unite otherwise disparate, issue-based struggles.

This appeal to human rights has a long history in grassroots struggle. In 1947, W.E.B. Du Bois and the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) were the first to appeal to the Human Rights Commission at the United Nations about violations of economic human rights in the United States with a petition, "An Appeal to the World: A Statement on the Denial of Human Rights to Minorities in the Case of Citizens of Negro Descent in the United States of America and an Appeal to the United Nations for Redress" (Anderson, 2003). Less than twenty years later, both Malcolm X and Martin Luther King also began to employ the

human rights framework. (Malcolm X, 1964/1990, King, 1968). Struggles like the one in Detroit and Highland Park are renewing a bottom up human rights discourse in an age of neoliberal austerity and privatization.

COMMUNITY MEDIA

The hub of the wide array of tactics fighting water privatization was a live weekly call-in show hosted by members of the MWRO and broadcast on the local cable access station and radio. This was the primary way the latest information was shared and people were recruited. On a cable access program in January 2007, one caller expressed her indignation with the lack of respect that poor Detroiters receive from the city during eviction. She said,

> It's degrading and embarrassing that our mayor would want people that are being evicted's personal belongings put into a trash dumpster. Kids' school clothes, their groceries, everything into a dumpster? . . . They ought to help them, give them a place, go to a shelter, but instead they put all their personal belongings into a dumpster.

Marian Kramer, codirector of the MWRO and involved in welfare rights organizing in Detroit since the 1960s, responded on air that in the face of this indignity, the community should stand up and support one another:

> It becomes the duty of the community; it becomes the duty of all of us to begin to start stopping this from happening. They don't care about turning our water off. They don't care about turning us out into the street. We got to start caring and moving people back in, turning their water back on, turning their electricity back on. And letting these folks know that we are not just going to lay down and die.

POLITICAL AGENCY OF THE POOR

On May 24 and July 8, 2004, Highland Park City Council voted against the proposal from RWG to privatize their water department. They were shocked to learn that the city administrator had been negotiating in secret to privatize Highland Park's water. A copy of the contract was obtained by the MWRO, which then began to demand answers at City Council meetings. Marian Kramer explains, "There was a private company that was going to

run the city of Highland Park's water department. Take public funds to do this, 20% of profits to city, 80% to them. We said look at this crap, and you don't know nothing about it. We demanded over and over. We wouldn't let them get to other business" (interview by Chris Caruso, January 2007).

The city administrator then stated in a letter to RWG that she would sign a 10-year contract with them for the management of the Highland Park Water Department. She claimed special powers because of Highland Park's financial situation and was willing to sign this over to RWG against the expressed will of the City Council. Met with mounting local pressure, she was replaced by the governor with a new administrator from the local community. Although water rates are still very high in Highland Park, the immediate threat of privatization was abated. The MWRO also worked with the Highland Park mayor and City Council and submitted a detailed alternate plan to resolve Highland Park's financial situation without cutting half the residents off from water.

MWRO has focused their efforts on the water affordability crisis taking place in Detroit as well. Maureen Taylor describes the process of putting together the "Water Affordability Plan":

> When Michigan Welfare Rights first started negotiating with the water department around a new way to structure water rate charges, we contacted some groups of attorneys we knew. We had a number of meetings to pull together language that would be a systemic change in how water rates are charged. After many months, we found a legal expert out of Boston Mass[achusetts], specializing on developing language for affordability programs. We sent him packages of notes, this is what it should be, this is what it should say, and this is the outcomes, and he put something together and it is brilliant. We are very proud of it. We made copies and took it to members of city council, took it to the water department. People looked at it and scrutinized it, and couldn't find anything wrong with it. (Personal communication, Chris Caruso, January 2007)

The MWRO, as an organization of poor people, has developed a practical policy solution to the Detroit water affordability crisis. They found the expertise and created a plan that could end the water shutoffs. The Detroit Water Board and City Council have both passed the MWRO's water affordability plan, but have refused to implement it. The implementation date was set for July 2006. The struggle then moved to pressure them to actually implement the solution. This fight over water privatization in Detroit has demonstrated the agency of the poor to create

social change. The organization of the poor has become a leading force in efforts to challenge water privatization and other austerity programs. Their struggle is a school for us all.

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