

## Will Copeland Transcription

**[00:00:00]** [So I just really want to know your perspective, on, or maybe even EMEAC's perspective if you feel comfortable speaking in that regard, the environmental components of the water shut off crisis]

**[00:00:24]** I think that the environmental components and the social components go linked together. One of the things we learned, take it all the way back to Hurricane Katrina, is that that the environmental is so linked to the social in which yes you can say that a storm happened, you can say that it was a natural event, but if you look at the landscape of the whole Gulf Coast and the way it was developed, you look at climate change and the way it exacerbated the rivers and the storms, you can see that they say that the storm was natural, but the disaster was manmade, the fact that so many people died and the fact that there was so much suffering. So I think that the environmental part goes alongside the manmade part. Think about, we've had a lot of rain, you know this month of August, think about the flooding that took place. There was a storm that took place it was a storm, it was a good storm, not the worst storm I've seen in my life, the flooding that took place was so horrendous, you know people stuck in their cars, there was cars broken down, probably thousands of people with flooding all throughout their homes, and we come to find out we have contacts that work with the unions, and so they've been in touch with the water department, and they were talking about how the water department is severely understaffed, that there's about one half to one third as many people that are supposed to be working there that are working. And so you see that in this approach of emergency management in this approach of saving money, doing all these things, they're understaffing the city in various ways and making them more susceptible to these natural and environmental things, you see what I'm saying so these disasters, so that's why this phrase that the storm is natural but the disaster is manmade, it is very relevant. **[00:02:30]** So this water shutoff goes with all sorts of cuts that are taking place across the board, you know to the very necessities of life. The other connection that I like to make, for me Hurricane Katrina was also a big moment. Hurricane Katrina, which, next year will be 10 years, is a personal big moment and kind of galvanized my whole understanding of environmental justice or environmental injustice, a very ancestral and traumatic moment. But the other thing is, how do we respond to climate change? What's our ability, so the industries have created all of these climate and greenhouse gases, and these things that are going to happen in extreme energy, and flooding and storms, and all these different things. So what's our ability to survive these things and make it through? **[00:03:23]** And we see that in the United States when you look at the hurricanes and when you look at different things, that the evacuations are privatized for people with money. And so for people and communities without money, we need to be figuring out our own evacuation plan, and to see Hurricane Katrina how they just warehoused people in the coliseum, in the Super Dome, and how they were shooting black people when they were trying to get into the neighboring cities and they called them looters. It made me realize that we need to come up with our own plan, because literally the government, FEMA, whatever you call it, they'll pretty much just warehouse us and let us die if you're not in that money

class that you're going to be a priority for these things. **[00:04:11]** So when you talk about water, you think about, "Why did he announce it right in the beginning of summer, right as the weather is going to go hot?" You know he announced that he's cutting off water for thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of people. We actually here at the EMEAC, the Cass Corridor Commons, we have a good friend named David Blair, who actually passed a few years ago from heat stroke. I realized that his death was actually, because this summer it was very hot, the summer when he passed, it was very very hot and he didn't have air conditioning in his house, and he was looking for a, I was actually out of town and came back and found out that he had passed, looking for a cool place to go but by the time he found it, it was too late. You know, his medical or metabolic situation had already accelerated. I realized, you know, he was a friend, he was a poet, he was an activist, he was a warrior, but I realized he was a casualty of climate change. And thinking about the elders in their home, thinking about the children, you know and thinking about the people who are vulnerable to temperature change, and their deaths may be called natural death or called this or called that, you know, when they are coming from these policies. And so I think that the other environmental thing is this attacking and decimating our community's ability to respond. You know what, you're not going to have a stable situation. You know you're going to have to struggle through this summer, which is pretty much what they said for thousands of people, who, rather than being able to be comfortable in their homes, you know just figure out the various other things that they have to figure out from life. Now they're running around and figuring out where am I going to get water? Next door or on the corner or this or that. **[00:06:12]** How am I going to get formula for my kid? How am I going to clean up, how am I going to do all these different things? It was really making our community more vulnerable. Lastly, I was just having a great conversation talking on the phone with Baxter Jones, a very valiant Detroit activist and he was talking about this whole thing of privatization, talking about the Great Lakes, as a repository for a significant portion of the world's fresh water. And talking about what is being done to control the water, so that we stop having a public system and have a private system. And I think that that's very important for people to look at and for people to start to challenge and fight and be aware that that this shift is taking place not only in Detroit but in other places. The obstacles of privatizing water, which we've actually seen in some countries and some places leads to actually militarizing the water, in which the water is treated, the river or the source of the water is treated as a private investment and they need to protect the people, you know from getting access to this water. We see in certain countries, in Indian and other countries where Coca Cola, which is a major bottler of privatized and corporate water, it's cheaper to get Coca Cola than it is to get water. These are the things we're fighting against. We do not want to go down this path. **[00:07:50]** So we're working to presume and to continue water as a human right to continue so that people have access to the Great Lakes and to the watershed, that it doesn't become known as this domain for a specific corporation to make their money and make their profit from. Once it belongs to a corporation then it's private property, and if you go to it you're trespassing. And so we're trying to fight so that we don't go down that path.

**[00:08:32]** [Can we talk about some of the environmental stresses of the DWSD system aside from the protextually created stress of cutting staff? We talk about some of the environmental issues that go on down in 48217 and in some of the areas in Detroit that are highly industrialized and how that might tax the water system which in turn produces a climate for where they might purchase bonds from banks to accommodate these polluters.]

**[00:09:16]** Detroit is under a heavy pollution load, especially 48217, but also here in what is called the Midtown area with the Detroit incinerator. But 48217 is even more excessive than that. It's one of the most polluted zip codes right here in Southwest Detroit because it has multiple sites, multiple factories, and the way they do their permitting is that each site is looked at individually and so each site has to be under a certain threshold. If each person is throwing two or three units of pollution into the jar, eventually that jar still is going to overflow. And so environmental justice activists organizations such as the CR Club and other organizations in 48217, they have a community organization for their zip code, are working to fight against the EPA, in some cases to work with the EPA, to get cumulative impact regiments. Right now it's only individual impact. And is this struggle for cumulative impact is very important. With the water and the air which creates a lot of stresses on the human body, and people.

**[00:10:46]** [What else do you want to talk about?]

Can you pause it?

**[00:11:05]** So EMEAC is part of a coalition called the climate justice alliance, and climate justice alliance is looking at climate change, which, impacts Hurricane Katrina, which is a result of all these various forms of industry that we have and we are working on putting this water situation in the middle of this climate change discussion and we view this as an environmental injustice. The U.S. is a fast perpetuator of environmental racism. Whenever you do a study of this around pollution, even when you account for income, you always see statistically that communities of color are near where polluting sites are located in the U.S. We call it environmental racism, and now it's called environmental justice, and now we see water shutoffs taking place. Now we see these water shutoffs taking place, which is being, marked as individuals being delinquent on their bill, but what is not being told is how the system is in debt. The entire debt is in debt through bonds and through various loans and these people's bills are so astronomical not only because of usage but because of this increasing debt on the entire system. But it's being used to shame people for the fact that of their water bill, furthermore, this goes to a more regional issue. Some people say that Mayor Coleman Young would be rolling in his grave for the way the state has been working on this takeover of Michigan and this takeover of Detroit. Furthermore, the way that the water bills are structured in Michigan, the Detroit water system feeds the entire region. It feeds many other municipalities besides just Detroit, but a lot of these municipalities have a sweetheart deal, so their rates are locked in. **[00:13:25]** And so the debt of this entire system, Detroit is being viewed as the owner, and so Detroit alone is paying for the debt, whereas these other

customers are just view as customers, and their rates are actually locked in from increasing, and at the same time, the Detroit people are getting the astronomical bills, and the Detroit people are being branded and are being labeled as felonious, or lazy or ridiculed, why are you paying your cable bill, why are you doing this, why are you doing that? When they systematically put in place protection for the suburban customers, and increases only in the Detroit region, and so this financialization, this attack on the black metropolis of Detroit is something that we are struggling and we are working on communicating, because it's, it may not be sexy, but it's very important. It may not be quick to grasp or comprehend, but we see the effects when we see the water shutoffs, when we see the cuts on services, when we see the things that are taken away because of these debts, because of how the deb is structured to fall on Detroit specifically. So this is definitely something were raising awareness for and that we're connected with the entire country because honestly, it may be coming to your city next, whether that's privatization, whether that's municipal debts, water shutoffs for low income communities, so we're just hoping to make people aware of these tactics and to really be aware. All in all we're under the same slogan water is a human right because we're really working to protect the commons. The commons is the notion of public infrastructure. There's all this campaigning going on to show Kwame Kilpatrick is corrupt, this politician is bad, this politician is that, in order to get people to seek out private industries. Oh, it wouldn't be so bad to go to charter schools; public schools are so bad, oh we need some private recycling because the public is just too dumb to recycle. **[00:15:55]** All these different things is really a war to take as much public money as possible and feed that to various corporations. And so when we talk about this fight for the commons, which, we've come to the environmental justice analysis that we need this economic justice analysis of the commons in our environmental justice. It's not just enough to say, oh we need some recycling, oh we need some water, or we need some of this or some of that. We need to make sure that this fight for the commons is part of the environmental justice, that we keep these and develop these public structures with public accountability. That we improve them and not just sell them away to private investors. And so many times in communities like Detroit, people are so hungry for a change. They've seen crappy schools, and different things that are falling apart and they want this change. But we need to come together and demonstrate that this public infrastructure is the real vehicle for change. Because when we look at privatization all over the world, we see it's really just a separation between the haves and the have nots, we see that some people can afford quality services and some people can't. **[00:17:18]** And we get to another Hurricane Katrina situation in which some people get the gold star package and some people get left behind, where housed and unprotected. So we need to get away from this messaging that the privatization is here to save us, because the evidence form all around the world, that these private companies, once they get in place, then they start putting in these tiers and they're going to be quick to leave folks behind and leave folks with the crappy, nonexistent services which in many cases are even worse than they were before, plus there's no public accountability. So that's why the fight for the commons is an integral part of our environmental justice.

**[00:18:07]** I mean that's a really important piece, the accountability piece, of private corporations, but also the accountability of the philanthropies that are coming in and saying, "stepping up" to take over and fund entire sectors of public infrastructure. Foundations and philanthropies are not meant to take the place of the public. They're meant to supplement and add to our quality of life and help those who the public isn't able to help to the fullest extent. But the public isn't helping anyone right now because it's been hijacked by corporations. I think that we can look at private takeover as the disaster that we don't have the infrastructure for. **[00:19:03]** We don't have accountability laws for private corporations or foundations. And so if we look for a way to build infrastructure around accountability, to allow private corporations to come in. I don't think private corporations should ever come in, but if you're going to involve private corporations in the public good, at least have accountability laws, and public reporting laws. You can't FOIA a private corporation.

**[00:19:50]** This accountability is why they use the strategy of putting an EM on Detroit. We actually have 2 EM in Detroit. One for our school board and one for the city as a whole. This EM has no accountability. He's just accountable for the governor. He does not need to hold any public hearings or list out the contractors or list out the buyers. Whatever accountability is there is what the EM is forced to have. And so they did this technique because of the long history in Detroit of public accountability and public infrastructure. This thing could not have gone down in Detroit without an EM who was able to disregard the regular laws because it's an emergency. So they know that public accountability is a strength of this community and now they're messaging this whole message of corruption and this message of incompetence, and this whole message that the public sector is greedy, lazy and stupid in order to enlist this system with no accountability. And then transition more permanently to this whole privatization system with no accountability. **[00:21:22]** And so it's very true. We're looking right now to see what we can do, where are our steps. We know that there is no formal public accountability and so we're looking to see where can we force them at every step of the way because that's the situation that they're in is that they chose this method to remove the public accountability from our entire government.

**[00:21:56]** You trace the action that Orr has done and that Snyder has done. It's just no different. It's no different than what Kilpatrick did or what Victor Mercado did. It's the same and they're literally solving a problem that they identified as with the same actions. And I'm not one to bash Kwame because I think it's a distraction but I also can't defend his behaviors and so the only thing to say is that they're much worse and no better.

**[00:22:46]** Even with the EM on the school board for example, there's such little accountability that the school board of Michigan has been under numerous takeovers, and then it got shifted to EM. For many, many years of that process, the deficit was increasing. It wasn't even decreasing. His job was to come in for a financial emergency and these suckers were increasing the deficit, but there was so little accountability that we couldn't even do a performance review. This is an objective measure that would at least tell you, even if you believed in it, you would say well he's not doing a good job.

**[00:23:32]** Because he was hired to blow up the public schools system. That was his job. That was Robert bob's job, and that was Roy Robert's job, and that's Jack Martins job, to get rid of public schools.

**[00:23:45]** And these are the types of things you're not going to see written down, but even these things that even go against the things that are written down, like you're not going to go and say blow up the public schools. They'll say finances and then you'll look at the numbers and he's not doing it. This is why we need to protect these systems, we need to protect the commons, we need people to get involved because these formal ways are running up against the walls of these legislative and policy ways. There is no policy recourse of the EM.

**[00:24:50]** This water situation, we need everybody to keep their eye on it. We need everybody to look deeper. Yes it is about people who don't have water but there is a struggle going on right now for not only Detroit but for black political life and the ability of black people to self organize in this country period. We got a call in Detroit saying that soon after Mayor Chokwe Lumumba was elected, that the state of Mississippi was starting to consider various forms of EM legislation. Please. This thing right here is not an isolated incident. Whenever black people, whenever people of color are coming together in these communities in order to demonstrate their political acumen and to create institutions that meet their needs. These extreme and illegal things are being put forth in order to counteract this tendency. Conservative people, business interest, they know the U.S has changing demographics. They know that within the next 15 to 20 years, there will be a majority of people of color in this country. They know that many states in the southeast and southwest will have majority people of color populations in many of the cities as well as the states in general. This right here is a training ground for how to exert financial and political control and people actually call it an apartheid state in the sense that a minority in this case, meaning coming from Detroit, is exerting political and economic control in order to determine the life of the majority, by controlling all of its institutions. So this is something that we want everybody to keep their eye out. This is something that we want young people to keep their eye out. This is something we want people to join and to say enough is enough. **[00:27:20]** And to say that they must side with Detroit to prevent this from happening here and anywhere else that these type of techniques might occur.