

# WSWS report from scene of e-coli deaths: Walkerton, Ontario residents demand answers

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*A World Socialist Web Site reporting team recently visited Walkerton, a rural Ontario town where at least seven people have died after drinking water contaminated with a deadly strain of the e-coli bacteria. The deaths have caused a public outcry, as evidence mounts that the Tory provincial government's privatization of water-testing, downloading of responsibilities onto the municipalities, and cuts to the Environment Ministry directly contributed to the Walkerton tragedy. Even the pro-Tory press concedes Walkerton has raised a question mark over the Tories' so-called "Common Sense Revolution," a program of drastic public spending cuts, privatization and deregulation.*

At some point Walkerton and its 4,800 residents will fall back into the familiar patterns of daily life. But that day is still far off. An eventual return to "normalcy," moreover, will not alter the fact that the e-coli contamination of Walkerton's water system has changed the town and its residents forever.

Seven, and possibly as many as eleven people, are dead as a result of e-coli poisoning. More than two thousand others were made sick by the bacteria, 962 of them so seriously that they required hospital care.

Ministry of Environment and local health officials say it will be seven to eight weeks before Walkerton's residents will be able to begin drawing their drinking water from the municipal water system. Next week, a disinfection program is to begin that calls for inspectors to visit every one of the town's 2,500 houses and businesses and disinfect dishwashers, washing machines, faucets and other places where e-coli may linger.

Located in the south-western Ontario farming belt, Walkerton has traditionally voted Conservative (Tory) and, like many rural town, is a place where people tend to place their confidence in government and other authorities. But in the face of the events of the past month a certain political differentiation is taking place. Those connected to the local and provincial government have been thrust onto the defensive, as residents seek answers as to why the water system broke down and why authorities failed to alert them in a timely fashion of the e-coli outbreak.

Unsatisfied with what they have been told, a group of Walkerton residents have formed a "Concerned Walkerton Citizens Committee" to demand that a provincial judicial inquiry examine not just the immediate events surrounding the Walkerton contamination, but also the state of the province's entire water management system.

Walkerton lies about two hours northwest of Toronto. It is mainly a farm service center, in an area of Ontario where industrial or intensive livestock production is increasingly the norm. The improper disposal

of waste by large cattle farms has been cited by many health experts as a possible cause of the e-coli contamination.

Walkerton also boasts some light manufacturing and a fledgling tourist industry. It appears relatively prosperous, although there are some signs of economic decline. A poultry plant shut down in April and the local Energizer Battery plant has seen significant job losses. In answer to these and earlier job losses, the local government under the leadership of Mayor David Thomson has made efforts to boost tourism.

For no apparent reason, other than possible damage to Walkerton's name and the credibility of the Tory provincial government, Thomson has refused to declare a state of emergency, even though such a declaration would give the town access to additional funding. Speaking through his lawyer, Thomson claimed, "Everything that is being done now is essentially the same as what would be done under the state of emergency."

The first thing one notices on arriving in Walkerton is the general absence of people. Those who are able to leave have left the community. While most businesses have resumed operations, many have curtailed their hours and staff, and are reporting a dramatic decline in trade. Most of the Walkerton's residents, whether workers or small businessmen, are confronting a drastic loss in income.

On a corner near the outskirts of town, we met a volunteer distributing bottled water in a donut store parking lot. She related many of the hardships that people she knew were facing, but at the same time expressed confidence in the capacity of people to pull together in the face of adversity. In a swipe at the government, she laughingly told how the municipality had offered to waive her water bill for the next several months. That will mean a rebate of about \$8 a month.

Another resident told us the death toll would have been even worse if the community had lost its hospital. Only after a petition campaign collected 8,000 signatures did the provincial government back down a few years ago from its plan to close the town hospital.

Next we spoke with Barb Fisher, manager of the Brockton Response Center, which was set up last week to distribute \$100,000 in financial assistance from the Tory provincial government. (The \$100,000, which works out to little more than \$20 per towns-person, was denounced by most Walkerton residents as woefully inadequate. On June 8 the government, in the latest in a series of about-faces, said it would make "millions" available in compensation and assistance, but those accepting such assistance had to waive their legal right to sue the government for damages.)

Fisher, who was a Tory member of the provincial parliament until the last election, told us the \$100,000 in aid money had come only because of her lobbying efforts. She had only praise for her former colleagues in government and grew agitated when we questioned her about responsibility for the breakdown of Walkerton's water supply.

Nonetheless, Fisher did paint a devastating portrait of the impact of the water crisis on the community. Many, if not most people thrown out of work by the water shutoff and decline in local commerce, do not qualify for unemployment insurance or welfare.

Particularly problematic is the care of the children. Schools in the town have been closed since the e-coli outbreak was publicly revealed and students are being sent to nearby communities for the remainder of the school year. Recreational facilities are also closed and sports activities have been largely suspended. Some parents who had their children in daycare are now relying on friends and family because the daycare centers have also been closed. Others have been forced to take leave from work to look after their children.

Barb Fisher claimed that the money the Ontario government has provided to date is adequate to meet immediate needs, yet also said she was launching a campaign to solicit corporate and private donations nation-wide. When pressed as to why she was seeking non-government aid, if the government's support was sufficient, Fisher said she feared many businesses would soon go under, further damaging the town's future. "I don't think there's going to be enough money because of the business losses to date...and we've got to keep that business section alive somehow. We don't quite frankly, at this stage of the game, have enough time to wait."

Since the onset of the crisis, the provincial Tories have been preoccupied with diverting attention from the part played by government cuts and privatization in the breakdown of water management in Walkerton. Only under pressure from the opposition, from the media and from Walkerton residents did the Tories agree to a judicial inquiry into the Walkerton tragedy.

Fearing a government coverup, local Walkerton residents have begun to organize. The "Concerned Walkerton Citizens" has grown to about 25 in the past week and many other residents have expressed an interest in joining.

Of particular concern to the citizens' committee is the scope of the planned public inquiry. Concerned Walkerton Citizens is seeking intervenor status in the inquiry, with full funding from the province. In their mission statement they say, "We believe our full participation is vital to restore the confidence of all citizens of Ontario in the government's ability to ensure the safety of our drinking water supply."

One of the spokespersons for this group is Bruce Davidson, a massage therapist. He and his wife, a school teacher with the Catholic school board, have two children. According to Davidson, members of the community were alarmed by Premier Mike Harris' attempts to deny any provincial responsibility for the tragedy when he visited Walkerton May 26. They are also concerned about the ability of local officials to adequately represent the citizenry given that their own under actions are under investigation by police and other authorities. Thomson, who also serves on the Walkerton Public Utilities Commission (PUC), and PUC manager Stan Koebel are currently fielding questions about the Walkerton tragedy through their legal counsel.

The initial apprehensions of towns-people have only been heightened by Harris's repeated attempts to shift responsibility for the Walkerton crisis from his government. This week the premier said

Walkerton officials were to blame because they hadn't taken advantage of a provincial scheme to co-fund improvements to municipal water systems. After it was learned that Walkerton had in fact spent more than \$400,000 in recent years to upgrade its water system under a similar federal-provincial-municipal scheme, Harris had to issue a public apology.

Bruce Davidson expressed his determination that the citizens' committee be heard before the Tory government proclaimed the terms of reference for the judicial inquiry. "We feel that we are now standing on this issue as, basically, representatives of all citizens in Ontario ... Our confidence in them [the Tories] is at a tremendously low point right now. Since the start of this we have been handed nothing but insults... the feeling is that [Premier Harris] is simply trying to deflect attention, rather than trying to meet the needs of the people."

Davidson opposed the appeal to the private sector for financial assistance, calling it "absolutely inadequate." He said, "This is the responsibility of government. We should not be at the mercy of private enterprise on this one. I appreciate everything that is being done by anyone who is helping us...but to think that the actual financial welfare of people is to be placed in private hands! Although private donations have far exceeded anything the government has done to this point—the provincial government's response has been an insult to the people of this town."

Davidson was emphatic that the Walkerton tragedy should not be seen as an aberration, but could happen anywhere. "The Conservative government in Ontario is just part of a very much larger political trend in North America, and perhaps the world right now."

He said that the Tories' claims that they could attract investment and jobs by cutting so-called red tape have had widespread public support. "It's one thing if red tape stands in the way of getting things done, but if it was there to ensure certain safeguards (which it now appears to be the case) then people aren't so sure anymore. The tide is changing.

"If the inquiry is permitted to include the downloading of responsibility and the de-manning of ministries, the total abdication of responsibility, and draw the conclusions that would appear to be logical from that exploration, what I think we're going to be left with...is that we have to re-think this 'Common Sense Revolution' and ask if it's not a whitewash revolution.

"We have been told that we can have massive tax reductions, massive reductions in government staffing levels in ministries that are charged with protecting and ensuring public health and safety, and that our needs would be met adequately. I believe that what has occurred in Walkerton must make people look at that and really question the logic."



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