

# Drinking water crisis in Flint, Michigan

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Flint, Michigan is now plagued by Violations of the Safe Drinking Water Act only months after the city severed its water supply from the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD). Residents have been complaining about the color, smell and taste of Flint water and several boil water advisories have been issued starting in the summer months due to the presence of coliform bacteria in the tap water.

In addition, Flint water contains elevated levels of trihalomethane (TTHM), a byproduct of the heavy chlorination of river water to combat bacteria. On January 2, notices were sent to water customers by the city warning that drinking water with excessive amounts of TTHM over “many years” could result in liver, kidney or central nervous system problems as well as an increased risk of cancer.

The notices claim that the water is safe to drink, but that anyone with “a severely compromised immune system, (who) have an infant or are elderly ... may be at increased risk and should seek advice about drinking water from your health care provider.”

The official line of the city is that the problem is being dealt with. Mayor Dayne Walling held a news conference to declare, “I want to assure everyone that the city is sensitive to the public’s concerns. This is a very important challenge ... We recognize all our residents and customers deserve clean, safe water supply.”

Despite the assurances of local officials, the state Department of Environmental Quality has said that the levels of TTHM contaminants were sufficiently high in Flint’s water to guarantee that the current violation will remain in place until at least next May.

Last March, Flint decided to break its 50-year relationship with the DWSD in order to partner with the Karegnondi Water Authority, which is constructing a quarter-billion dollar pipeline to deliver water directly from Lake Huron. The project, however, is not

projected to be completed until the end of 2016. In the interim, the state of Michigan gave the city authority to process tap water from the Flint River, which meanders through the city of Flint and the counties of Genesee, Lapeer and Saginaw.

The city of Flint is some 60 miles north of Detroit. Once a powerhouse of automobile production, Flint has been devastated by decades-long deindustrialization and has been under the rule of five different emergency managers since 2002. The 72-inch water pipeline from Detroit was built during the heyday of the Michigan auto industry with an anticipated capacity for further growth. The decision to break its 50-year contract with the DWSD reflects the retrograde and divisive political climate accompanying the Detroit bankruptcy and serves as an example of the irrationality of the rule of financial interests over the allocation of public resources.

As a result of the water crisis, some Flint City Council members are advocating the reconnection with the DWSD pipeline. Councilman Scott Kincaid said, “We have a 90-day window to work out an agreement to buy Lake Huron water from Detroit or Genesee County. The data shows we can’t meet the standards for quality of water for the residents of the city of Flint.”

Councilman Eric Mays noted, “We got a problem, and I suggest we go back to Detroit. The water is cheaper out of the Flint River but it ain’t good.”

Flint residents continue to pay the highest rates for water in Genesee County. As of last June, the average residential water bill is \$140 a month. Resident Maxine Powell expressed the anger of many when she told the press, “You’re asking Flint citizens to pay for something we aren’t even getting. You may as well tell us to drink out of a toilet.”

Flint emergency manager Darnell Earley announced his decision to hire a water management company as a

consultant to help the city deal with the crisis. He told the press that Flint can “ill-afford to switch course” and revert to DWSD as a water source. Earley claimed that to revert to purchasing Detroit water would cost Flint \$1 million each month in surcharges.

An engineering contractor for Flint, Lockwood, Andrews & Newman issued a November 26 report to the city on its short-term options to resolve the water crisis. The report concluded that “utilizing the DWSD for interim supply is cost-prohibitive under the terms defined by DWSD.” It says that there would be a \$4 million reconnection fee and \$900,000 a month in addition to use charges.

On January 5, a demonstration at Flint City Hall protested “plummeting water quality, soaring water rates” and arrests for “water theft” by police.

Nayyirah Shariff, a spokeswoman for the Flint Democracy Defense League, which participated in the protest, said, “This whole thing [using the Flint River as a water source] was premature. They didn’t have their ducks in a row and people are scared because of that. I think we need to go back to Detroit until we figure it out.”

A chemist employed by the DWSD spoke to the WSWs on the Flint water crisis. He said that re-contracting to Detroit water would not solve the problem. He added, “Now, Detroit over-chlorinates too. When you drink Detroit water, it’s acidic, first of all because of chlorine, and you can smell the chlorine in the water. This is why people put on those carbon filters on their taps to take out that stuff. That’s very expensive.

“Detroit is not using carbon filtration for their drinking water, therefore so many people have to use those devices on their taps in order to get away from all that poison.”

He pointed out that other major US cities, such as New York, Los Angeles and Miami, do not have the chlorine smell in their tap water. The use of chlorine in the water system causes cancer, he said. “There are different ways of treating water. There is ultraviolet, ozone ... There are chlorine compounds like sodium hypochlorite that many are using to treat drinking water and base water because it doesn’t produce carcinogenic compounds. It’s a much lighter chlorine ... that kills the bugs, but doesn’t create those chlorine compounds which give you cancer.

“Detroit water is twice the national average and it will stay like that because they have these terrific bonds, \$5.5 billion, which is spent for nonsense and they have to pay for it. The people in Flint probably figured this out after looking at the going rates, and said, ‘Okay maybe we can cut it down by doing our own.’ And they probably don’t have the technical help to do a good job in their system.”

The basic right to clean and safe drinking water is being violated exclusively due to the financial system that dominates the treatment management of this most essential natural resource. The transformation of the DWSD into the Great Lakes Regional Water Authority will unfold this year as part of the predatory process used to claw back Detroit’s public resources into the coffers of corporate interests. It is the working class of the region, not just Detroiters, who are being forced to pay the price.



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