

Water shutoff moratorium in Flint as water crisis continues

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A Circuit Court judge has ordered a reduction in water rates in the city of Flint, Michigan and imposed a moratorium on water shutoffs. Judge Archie Hayman ruled that a 35 percent rate hike in 2011 was illegal and that the city must go into negotiations to determine how to restore \$17 million to the city's sewer fund that was diverted in 2007.

The ruling comes as the water crisis in the former industrial center 60 miles north of Detroit continues. Residents complain of discolored, foul tasting drinking water following the decision of the city's unelected emergency manager in 2014 to disconnect the city from the Detroit water system as a cost-saving measure and begin drawing water from the polluted Flint River.

Steve, who runs a food outlet and whom neighbors call affectionately "the barbecue man" told the WSWWS, "The water is brown. It still smells and we won't drink it. They said they had fixed it, but it is still messed up. Everyone buys their water now, but they still charge you for it."

Meanwhile, the nearby city of Detroit is continuing its brutal policy of water shutoffs, with thousands of households per week disconnected. This follows the recent decision by the City Council to impose a 7.5 percent rate increase.

Earlier this year the city of Flint came out from under a three-and-a-half year financial emergency that saw a series of unelected emergency managers impose draconian cuts. These included a 20 percent cut in the city's workforce, pension cuts and wage cuts. In his final order, outgoing Emergency Manager Jerry Ambrose decreed that none of his past actions could be revised for at least one year.

Over the past 35 years Flint has been devastated by the closure of General Motors factories that once provided tens of thousands of jobs for area residents.

As late as 1980, GM employed 80,000 workers in Flint, including some 28,000 at the giant Buick City complex, the largest GM facility in the world. Today GM employment in the city has dropped to just a few thousand. With a population of 196,000 in 1960, the city now has less than 100,000 residents.

According to US census data, an incredible 41 percent of Flint residents between 2009 and 2013 lived in poverty. The average per capita income is just \$14,360, a little more than one half the statewide average of \$25,681. Flint, along with Detroit, has among the highest child poverty rates in the United States, with 66.5 percent of children in Flint living in families below the federal poverty level in 2013.

In 1950, the city had the highest per capita income in America, due to the battles of autoworkers. The decades-long betrayals of the United Auto Workers union have produced the current disaster.

Flint residents interviewed by the WSWWS said all the jobs available in the city were, temporary, part-time, retail or in fast food.

Steve told the WSWWS, "My son is still looking for a job. They say there are jobs, but there are not. There is still poverty here. Work is hard to come by. People wouldn't be in the street if they had something to do. Jobs would be a wonderful thing. There are lots of people who want to work."

He spoke about the city before the wave of devastating plant closures. "Flint was once wonderful. It took a big chunk out of Flint when GM left. There wasn't all this crime and stuff back then."

The decision by Judge Hayman has been appealed by the city, which claims that the loss in revenue due to lower water rates could force it into bankruptcy. The city has already imposed a spending freeze and hiring freeze.

Flint has some of the highest water rates in the United States, with bills averaging up to \$150 a month. Shortly after the city began drawing water from the Flint River, which has significant sewerage input, evidence of E. coli bacteria in the water was discovered. When the city attempted to deal with the bacteria using chlorine, this resulted in elevated levels of trihalomethane (TTHM), a byproduct of chlorination that is tied to liver, kidney and nerve damage.

TTHM in the Flint water supply exceeded federal safety levels in 2014, although residents did not get a warning until January. The federal TTHM limit is 80 parts per billion while Flint's highest TTHM reading was 99 parts per billion, 25 percent in excess. Flint has meanwhile installed a filtration system it says will decrease TTHM rates.

There are also concerns over leaching from lead pipes that connect homes to city water mains. The water from the Flint River is very high in lead and iron corrosive materials compared to the water purchased from Detroit, which came from Lake Huron.

A plan to draw water from Lake Huron through a pipeline will not be completed until sometime in 2016, with residents in the meantime forced to deal with dirty and unsafe water.

As with other cities across the country, the slashing of federal funding for water infrastructure projects has severely impacted the city. US municipalities will need \$1 trillion to fund necessary improvements by 2035, a large portion of that needed to replace existing infrastructure. According to a 2012 study published in *USA Today*, of 100 cities surveyed, water rates had more than doubled in 25 percent and tripled in some, including Atlanta, San Francisco and Wilmington, Delaware. This is despite a drop in residential water consumption.

Venus Cooper and her daughters Krystal and Clinique spoke to the WSWs. Krystal said, "It is offensive. We are being treated like subhumans. Sometimes after I wash my face I feel like I need disinfecting.

"We spend over \$20 a week on bottled water. Everyone needs water. At the community center where I work we hand out cases of bottled water and don't have enough.

"They find all the money they need for things they want. We are not asking for a handout. It is not like we

aren't paying for it. It is a necessity."

Clinique agreed, "We don't drink it. It has a smell to it."

Venus added, "They don't want to do anything to solve the problem that will affect their pockets. I think when people here get fed up enough they will start stepping on some toes."



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