

Flint workers speak out against lead poisoning of water supply

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For more than a year, residents of Flint, Michigan have faced a health catastrophe due to the cost-cutting decision of city officials to switch their water source from the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD) to the Flint River. After months of public outcry and recent independent tests showing that lead in the water and in children's bloodstreams are high, the switch back to Detroit water has begun.

Residents of the city, long ravaged by the shutdown of factories and mass layoffs by General Motors, are still consuming water with high levels of lead. Pipes are corroded and leaching lead due to the highly corrosive character of water from the Flint River.

This problem was preventable, and its consequences are well documented in two recent independent studies, one by Dr. Marc Edwards from Virginia Tech University and the other by Dr. Mona Hanna-Atisha from the Hurley Medical Center in Flint.

The situation in Flint is a product of attacks on workers by both Democrats and Republicans, including the appointment of emergency managers in both Flint and Detroit.

Flint is a historic center of General Motors, which made \$6.6 billion last year in North American profits. In 2013 Flint emergency manager Darnell Earley approved a 50 percent tax abatement on the new \$125 million paint facility scheduled to open in 2016. GM will only pay \$2 million a year in taxes for 12 years after the new facility is up and running. This was proclaimed a major victory by local politicians and the UAW, who cited the pledge that the facility will retain a miserly 135 jobs and add 15 more. This is in addition to previous tax abatements granted to GM.

Earley, who became Flint's emergency manager in 2013, was the key proponent of the water switch. He is currently the emergency manager for the Detroit Public

Schools. The state gives emergency managers the authority to override the decisions of elected officials and to abrogate labor and business contracts that are deemed too costly.

The switch in the city's water source followed previous attacks on workers. In 2012, Earley reduced the city's workforce by 20 percent, wages were cut by 20 percent, retiree health care was eliminated for new city employees, utility rates were increased by 25 percent and property taxes were increased.

The WSWS spoke to workers in Flint about the impact the water crisis has had on their lives.

Michael said, "I have three daughters and two sons at home. I buy alkaline water for us every day, but I'm worried about us taking baths and brushing our teeth. I tasted the Flint River water yesterday just to check it and I, literally, I almost cried, but I screamed. My kids asked what was wrong. I told them that the smell of the Flint River and the taste were horrible!

"I want to know what we can do about it. I'm willing to walk to Washington. Whatever we need to do. We pay city taxes for this. It is a necessity. What do you do when you're a single father with five kids? I can't just get up and move.

"I do window cleaning, and I am a single dad. Right now, I am going to pick up four big glass bottles. My kids just called and said to make sure to bring water home."

A GM autoworker, Al, familiar with the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* due to its coverage of the Fiat Chrysler contract, explained: "My uncle owns a store, and his water bill was unbelievable. He only has a small bathroom, and he never uses it. His water bill is over \$1,300 right now. It is overdue, but it was coming in at over \$400 per month. There's no shower, nothing. Just a sink and a toilet. That's all there is. How is that

possible? He is 78 years old, and he doesn't have water anymore because he couldn't afford his bill.

"He has had that store for 30 years, and he has been there for low-income people who are retired and on fixed incomes, and now he can't even pay the water bill. That situation is crazy. They cut him off."

Christian, a 19-year-old unemployed youth, said that his family had been filtering their water since before the switch to the Flint River. "Since they switched to the Flint River, the filter has gotten so unbelievably dark. It looks as dark as this tar on the pavement, and we change it every six months. My sister is in school, and the students are not allowed to drink the water from the fountains. She drinks the bottled water that the school supplies."

When asked whether he thought switching water back to Detroit would resolve the problem, Christian added, "No, because it has already been flowing through our pipes, and it is probably going to take about a year to clear out the system because it has already been flowing through for almost two years now. The whole system is screwed up. So when they switch it back we're still going to have problems."

When told about the recent layoff of 100 Detroit DWSD workers, including the head chemists, Christian responded, "They may not need those workers anymore because the water in Detroit is completely free now and they cannot pay them the same way. They have sewer bills, but no water bills."

Another worker recently from Detroit explained that not only do workers pay for water, but many of the elderly and families with children routinely have their water shut off because they cannot afford to pay. Christian responded, "I think water—and groceries—should be free. We all need them and they should be our right. I really think that some day we will be able to live without having to worry about money."

Karen, who is retired, and Rick, a welder in Detroit, were asked if they were affected by the lead crisis. They said they were not sure, though they had begun to experience many ailments. Karen explained, "They say that seniors and children are more at risk. I am 64, so I think I should be considered a senior. We do make coffee everyday and drink the coffee. We do not have filters that I know of on the water. We live in an apartment."

Responding to the official advisory to run the water

for five minutes before drinking it, she said, "I can't let my water run like that. It will really jack up my water bill."

Rick drives to Detroit (over 60 miles) every day to work for \$12 an hour. Doing the same job in Flint would only pay him \$9.00 an hour.



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