

# Lead poisoning in Flint, Michigan

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The water crisis in Flint, Michigan is another devastating exposure of the state of American capitalism.

In response to mounting public anger over the systematic lead poisoning of city residents, Michigan Governor Rick Snyder has declared a “state of emergency.” The Obama administration has announced a federal probe into toxic levels of lead in the city’s water supply. These are acts of damage control aimed at covering up for criminal neglect and cover-up.

The catastrophe will have a “multigenerational impact,” according to Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha, director of the Flint Hurley Medical Center’s pediatric residency program, who revealed the doubling and tripling of lead in the blood of city children since April 2014. Because exposure to lead can cause permanent neurological damage, Dr. Hanna-Attisha said, “In five years, these kids are going to have cognition problems. Seven to 10 years, they’re going to have behavioral problems.”

The poisoning of this major American city of 100,000—a former major manufacturing center and birthplace of General Motors—is not a natural but a man-made disaster. It is the result of political decisions made by the city’s state-appointed emergency manager to save money by cutting Flint off from the Detroit water system and to draw water directly from the Flint River, heavily polluted from decades of industrial waste. The river water corroded the city’s antiquated pipes, which led to the leaching of lead and copper into the water supply.

Tasked with slashing costs and keeping payments flowing to the Wall Street banks and big bondholders who hold the city’s debt, Emergency Manager Darnell Earley and city officials ignored resident complaints about the color, foul smell and taste of the water coming into their homes. They insisted that it was financially impossible to reconnect to the Detroit water

system. Then, along with state officials, they constructed a wall of lies denying any deleterious effects from the Flint River water.

Testing done by the state Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) of residents’ water was performed in a slipshod manner that minimized the levels of lead in the samples. When further tests showed lead levels above the US Environmental Protection Agency’s (EPA) action levels, the results were statistically doctored to bring them under the EPA threshold. Even after the city’s remaining GM plant publicly made its own arrangement to reconnect to Detroit water because the city’s water was corroding its engine components, state and local officials continued to stonewall residents.

Like Dr. Stockman in Ibsen’s *Enemy of the People*, Dr. Hanna-Attisha, Virginia Tech University Professor Marc Edwards and other public health experts who raised alarms as early as last June were subjected to a vicious smear campaign by high-ranking state officials. The governor’s office denounced Dr. Hanna-Attisha’s data for being “spliced and diced.”

The state of emergency has not resulted in any serious measures to address health issues, many of which are in any case irreversible. Even though Flint has been reconnected to the Detroit water system, lead continues to be leached from service lines, pipes and fixtures into drinking water, which will remain unsafe to drink for months. To add insult to injury, residents are still being charged hundreds of dollars for the poisoned water and many are being threatened with shutoffs for past due bills.

The authorities have not organized a door-to-door campaign to distribute lead filters—only a third of the certified filters donated to the county have been distributed—nor are local, state or Obama administration officials doing anything to marshal the necessary human, financial and medical resources to address the

crisis.

While the Obama administration can find limitless funds to bail out Wall Street and pay for endless wars, a pittance is spent on America's decaying infrastructure and public health programs. The Pentagon plans to spend \$400 billion to develop and buy its new F-35 fighter jets or \$166 million per warplane. In comparison, Flint Mayor Karen Weaver has said that the cost of replacing the city's water pipes would be about \$1.5 billion.

It is highly significant that the crisis is taking place in Flint, the "Vehicle City," whose GM plants once employed an estimated 80,000 workers. It was in Flint where the 1936-37 sit-down strikes led to the unionization of GM, then the world's largest corporation, and inspired a wave of mass struggles around the country. By 1960, Flint had the highest per capita income in America.

By the late 1970s, however, facing increasing international competition, the American ruling class embarked on a class war policy that continues unabated to the present day. Having abandoned any resistance to the employers in the name of labor-management "partnership," economic nationalism and support for the capitalist system, the United Auto Workers did nothing as GM slashed 90 percent of its workforce in the city.

GM has accumulated vast profits from the relentless attack on jobs and wages, accumulating a cash hoard of some \$25 billion after Obama's restructuring of the company in 2009. Rather than investing in the city where the company originated, GM handed over \$10 billion to wealthy investors last year in the form of dividend payments and stock buybacks. By contrast, city officials refused to spend \$80 to \$100 a day to treat the water supply with phosphates that would have coated the pipes and prevented the escape of lead and copper into the water supply.

Some Democratic Party supporters, including film director and former Flint resident Michael Moore, have sought to place the sole blame for this crisis on the state's Republican governor. Snyder no doubt bears immense responsibility for the cover-up, but this crime was entirely a bipartisan job. The former emergency manager Darnell Earley—who is now overseeing the sell-off of the Detroit public schools to private interests—and the city's entire political establishment are Democrats.

Moreover, the Democrats initiated the system of imposing unelected financial dictators in the 1980s.

In 2013-2014, the Obama administration oversaw the forced bankruptcy of the nearby city of Detroit, working with Snyder to run roughshod over the state constitution in order to slash city worker pensions and hive off the city's assets, including the publicly owned streetlight, electrical grid and water systems, to semiprivate and private businesses. The restructuring of Detroit paved the way for similar measures in Flint, which have produced the current disaster.

The deprivation of the most elemental necessities of life—clean water, public education, a decent job, health care, a pension—is an indictment of the capitalist system, which takes its most brutal form in America, a country where 20 billionaires control wealth equal to the bottom half of the population, or some 152 million people. The super-rich, who control both political parties and every lever of government, are engaged in a nonstop effort to loot everything that is not nailed down.



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