

“They’ve taken us back to the dark ages”

Outraged Flint residents protest water contamination

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12 January 2016

On Friday, January 8, more than 100 people gathered on the lawn of Flint, Michigan’s City Hall in the pouring rain to demonstrate against the ongoing poisoning of the city’s water supply.

Nearly two years ago, Flint’s then Emergency Manager Darnell Earley, appointed by Michigan Governor Rick Snyder, disconnected Flint from Detroit’s water system and began drawing water directly from the polluted Flint River.

Subsequently health officials determined that the water contained dangerous levels of lead and that residents were being systematically and irreversibly affected.

Flint, an industrial city north of Detroit was once a prosperous center of automotive manufacturing. The water contamination crisis follows years of neglect and decay that has seen the city transformed into a near wasteland, blighted by vacant homes and abandoned factories, a symbol of the decline of American capitalism.

The crisis in Flint has attracted national and in fact international attention. The *New York Times* website featured a front page article on it over the weekend. Al Jazeera and the British *Guardian* have also followed the developments.

The organizers of the Friday protest focused attention on the role of Governor Snyder. However, the entire political establishment in Michigan, Democratic and Republican alike, is implicated in the crisis. Officials at all levels of government ignored citizen’s complaints over foul smelling and tasting water for more than a year. It was only the independent action of courageous health practitioners that finally led to the exposure of the lead contamination and the belated declaration of a

state of emergency.

“They’re pulling bodies out of that water. They pull cars out of that water. People aren’t even supposed to eat the fish out of that water,” said Shica, a young Flint mother who works in medical billing. “But you’re going to serve it up to the city? Nobody had a vote on that! And you can sleep at night? There’s a special place in hell for you, and it’s nice and warm.”

The water from the Flint River is so corrosive that it has leached lead from the city’s pipes, causing a health crisis for the approximately 100,000 people who rely on the system. Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha, a pediatrician at Flint’s Hurley Medical center, documented in September that the level of lead in the blood of Flint’s children had tripled since the switch from the Detroit water system was made. This can cause irreversible neurological damage, she said, explaining that “in five years, these kids are going to have cognition problems. Seven to ten years, they’re going to have behavioral problems.” Even though Flint has now been reconnected to Detroit’s system, the corroded pipes continue to contaminate the water with lead.

At Friday’s demonstration the outrage was unanimous. People demanded that state officials be held accountable for this man-made disaster. Many carried signs demanding the indictment and arrest of Governor Snyder.

Colleen, who works at a school in Flint, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “They wonder why kids don’t want to go to school. It’s because of this situation right here. The kids don’t want to eat the food at school. The water in the food makes them throw up. They come to school smelling bad because they don’t want to take a bath. Their clothes aren’t clean. They

tell me, ‘My mom says the water isn’t clean, we can’t use it.’ And it’s a medical problem, too. Some kids have got medicine to take at school, in special education. And they have to use water to do that.

“We’ve all got to work for a living, and we’ve got to have water to do it!” she continued. “The rich can get water some way. They can buy water. We are not able to do that, we live on a fixed income. We can’t do what the wealthy do.” In fact, over 40 percent of Flint residents live in official poverty. It is one of the poorest cities in the country.

The most vulnerable layers of the population are suffering the most from the Flint water crisis. As Charles Krako, who worked in the Genesee County Jail, explained, “I witnessed them bring in a good fifty cases of bottled water and the deputies were drinking it for themselves and making the inmates drink the water out of the faucets. They give them tea that is made from the faucets, and they have to shower with it, brush their teeth with it, eat with it. They treat them worse than animals over there. A man at the jail got sick from drinking the water and all they did was put him on the medical floor and said he was just faking it.”

Colleen explained some of the ways in which the crisis is affecting the entire community. “You can’t drink it, can’t cook with it, you can’t wash dishes. It’s making people sick. People are scared to eat in a restaurant; the water is the same there. People won’t go to the hospital to get tests done because they’re so scared.

“And what about the people in nursing homes, like my father? What about the people in the jail? We’re out here for all the people who can’t be here. Some people are diabetic, going through kidney dialysis and all that. They cannot use the water. I believe you could die from that. Mark my words, you’re going to see a whole lot of people with medical problems because of this water.”

Hedieh, a student at University of Michigan, traveled 60 miles to participate in Friday’s protest. “The governor must be held accountable for what he did,” she said. “He appointed the emergency manager. The mayor who was in power when this happened was also directly responsible. There should be a process to change the situation, and money to help the people. It is not a simple issue.”

Despite the declaration of a state of emergency by

Governor Snyder and the launching of a federal investigation by the Obama administration, no federal funds have been allocated to help with the crisis. “They’re not going to issue one more food stamp to the people of Flint,” said Shica. “They’re going to keep us in bondage. We’ve got money all day for wars, but we’ve got nothing for the poor! How do I explain this to my 7-year-old daughter?” Referring to the regularity of mass shootings in America she said, “It’s no wonder that people are going postal.”

Robert Rowe described the inability of the government to provide clean water as “taking the population back to the dark ages.”

“They call it an Emergency Manager, but that’s not what it is. It’s a usurpation of local leadership. It is a dictatorship. Snyder is a stooge for corporate interests,” he said.

“One thing I know is who is not responsible,” said long-time Flint resident Annie Gordon. “It’s the citizens of this town.” She said that since the water has become contaminated, “my hair is falling out, and I have been having dental problems. Why should we be punished for something we didn’t do?”

Pointing to City Hall, Colleen said, “They aren’t listening to us in there. We’ve got to come together with people all over the nation. What other choice do we have? If it happened here, it can happen somewhere else. Somebody over us made this bad decision, and they have to answer for it.”



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