

Flint, Michigan: Portrait of an American city

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On Wednesday, just one day after Michigan Governor Rick Snyder mobilized the National Guard in response to the drinking water crisis in Flint, Michigan, he was forced to admit that ten Flint residents had died as a result of an outbreak of Legionnaires' disease likely linked to the city's contaminated drinking water.

Those deaths are in addition to the 9,000 children likely to have been put at risk for lead poisoning. Even small exposures of children to lead can permanently lower intelligence and academic achievement, and the effects cannot be corrected.

The city's spiraling public health disaster is the result of its move in April 2014 to draw its drinking water from the Flint River, after the Detroit water department demanded higher rates in the aftermath of the Detroit bankruptcy. The Flint River, having been used as a dumping ground for chemicals by local industry for decades, was widely known to be polluted, but state-appointed Emergency Manager Darnell Earley argued that a cost savings of \$5 million over two years—to be passed on to the city's creditors on Wall Street—justified the move.

The city's political establishment hailed the decision and the emergency manager and local Democratic Party officials declared that the water was safe in the face of mounting protests by residents. Throughout early 2015, city officials even falsified the results of tapwater tests in order to downplay the presence of lead.

On Tuesday, the *Detroit News* reported that the US Environmental Protection Agency had indications as early as February that drinking water in the city of Flint was contaminated, but took no action to inform the population, even as state and local officials sought to publicly reassure residents that the water was safe to drink.

Snyder's admission of the outbreak of Legionnaires' disease was made the day after President Obama gave a State of the Union address in which he declared,

ritualistically, that “the state of our union is strong.” He bragged, “our auto industry just had its best year ever,” as part of a “manufacturing surge” that had led the United States to “recover from the worst economic crisis in generations.”

A look at Flint, the birthplace of General Motors, tells a different tale. In 1978, the city employed 80,000 autoworkers. Today, this figure stands at about 5,000. Flint has an official poverty rate of 40.1 percent, making it the second-most poverty-stricken city of its size in America, behind Youngstown, Ohio, another former icon of American industry.

A staggering two-thirds of the city's children live in poverty, 10 percentage points higher than Detroit, America's poorest large city. To an extent even greater than Detroit, the city's population has dwindled and most of its historic buildings have either been demolished or stand vacant.

Even as government officials were forced to admit the scale of the disaster taking place in Flint, teachers in Detroit were engaged in a mass sick-out in defiance of their union that closed 60 schools, protesting dismal school conditions that left buildings covered in dangerous mold with huge gaps in flooring and no heat.

The conditions in Flint and Detroit reveal the reality behind the Obama administration's claims of an “economic recovery” in America's manufacturing cities, and the triumphal assertions by politicians and the media that the bankruptcy of Detroit—which sold off city assets to speculators and slashed the pensions of municipal workers and retirees—has brought about an economic turnaround.

In fact, the desperate conditions in Flint and Detroit are a microcosm of the social disaster that has been imposed on the American working class by decades of deindustrialization, mass layoffs and attacks on workers' living standards.

Even as he sought to present an absurdly positive

picture of social relations in America, Obama was forced to acknowledge the growth of poverty and social inequality, while attributing it to inexorable technological changes that resulted in workers having “less leverage for a raise.”

In reality, the horrific growth of poverty and social misery in cities such as Flint is the result of the class policies of the ruling elite, imposed by both parties and rubber-stamped by the trade unions and the Democratic politicians who have run cities such as Detroit, Flint, Baltimore and Chicago.

Every step in the destruction of Flint has taken place with the seal of approval of the unions, beginning with the wave of auto plant closings in the early 1980s which the unions said were necessary to improve the profitability of the automakers and the long-term prospects of autoworkers.

Three decades later, responding to the move in April 2014 to begin using water from the polluted Flint River, AFSCME Local 1600 president Sam Muma declared, “This is a good thing for the community. It will provide jobs” and make the city “self-sufficient.” Flint’s director of public works, Howard Croft, an African-American Democrat, declared that the move “marks the beginning of the new narrative of the city of Flint,” while Democratic Mayor Dayne Walling praised the decision as “an important day for us.”

These minor henchmen of the American financial elite have made their livelihoods peddling policies that have destroyed the lives of countless millions of families, led to hundreds of thousands of early deaths, and turned America into a country where most households are so poor they do not have enough cash to cover a \$500 emergency expense.

The conscious policy of deindustrialization begun in the late 1970s, which reduced cities throughout the country to rubble, was aimed at extracting trillions of dollars from American workers by slashing wages, raiding pensions and selling off assets. But more than pure greed was involved in these sociopathic measures. Flint was the scene of the powerful sit-down strike of 1936-37 and a symbol of the independent strength of the American working class. Its destruction was a form of cruel vengeance extracted by the ruling elite.

Legend has it that when the ancient Romans sacked the city of Carthage, in addition to razing it to the ground, they salted the earth so that nothing would

grow there again. This was done as retaliation for the defeats they had suffered at the hands of their great enemy, Hannibal.

That story, describing the actions of a people who were among the cruelest in history, is as far as we can tell not true. But the American ruling class, filled with bitter hatred of the workers of Flint, not only reduced the city’s factories to rubble and its children to poverty, but poisoned its water supply.

The disaster in Flint reveals the nature of the sociopaths and murderers among America’s billionaire financial oligarchs and their hired politicians and functionaries. The only way to reverse the decades of social destruction that they have wrought, and ensure a decent life for America’s workers, is to confiscate the ill-gotten billions of the financial oligarchy, seize the major corporations, and reorganize society on a socialist basis.



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