

# Obama White House declares state of emergency over Flint water crisis

Thomas Gaist  
18 January 2016

The Obama administration declared a state of emergency on Saturday, in response to the poisoning of Flint, Michigan's water supply.

Flint has become the center of national and international media attention in the wake of revelations that state and local authorities sought to conceal the exposure of thousands of residents to high levels of toxic chemicals, including lead. Public anger has grown so intense that the candidates at Sunday night's Democratic presidential debate felt compelled to make a few demagogic remarks about the disaster.

The crisis in Flint concentrates the basic features of the broader crisis gripping American and world society. Under conditions of a social catastrophe which require a sweeping mobilization of resources, including billions for programs to treat and provide sustained health care for children and others irreparably harmed by the extensive contamination of the city's water system, the Obama administration has nothing to offer but a pittance in federal aid, various public relations maneuvers and military-police repression.

In the face of an immense public health catastrophe, the American federal government, touted by President Obama last week as the "most powerful" state on Earth, has mustered the meager sum of some five million in federal funds. These "emergency response" measures add insult to the grave injuries already inflicted on the population.

The crisis itself emerged as the product of conspiratorial policies and decisions by the office of Michigan's Republican governor, Rick Snyder, and the Democratic political establishment, which ignored mounting evidence that the city's water supply had been contaminated.

The events in Flint highlight the imperviousness of the American government towards the concerns and

needs of the population. They also underscore the advanced state of decay of America's infrastructure and the horrific social conditions now facing a large and growing section of the working class.

Residents lodged grievances that the water being drawn from the polluted river caused health problems at least as early as 2014. Unusually high levels of lead, sufficient to produce damage to the brains and other vital organs of children and adults, were found in blood samples taken last year.

In spite of this damning evidence, both big business parties worked together to cover up evidence and contain the fallout. The Obama administration's emergency decree itself came after a formal request from Governor Snyder, whose office has pushed for some \$100 million in federal aid, but has failed to convince the Obama administration to classify the crisis as a "major disaster," rather than an emergency.

Ironically, this objection by the Republican Governor, himself the favored boogey-man of Michigan's Democratic Party establishment, was repeated numerous times by the Rainbow PUSH Coalition's Jesse Jackson and a lineup of local politicians and "community leaders," as they spoke to a small assembly in Flint on Sunday.

The political elites at the local, state and national levels are in damage control mode and are increasingly anxious over the surge of social opposition. The aged Jackson has spent four decades trying to put out social fires and contain popular anger within the Democratic Party. In recent years this has occurred with less and less success, as seen in the hostile reception Jackson received from youth in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014.

"Repeat after me," Jackson told the audience, "This is a Disaster, not an Emergency...An Emergency means too little money...The federal government needs to give

us more money,” he said without mentioning Obama by name.

Recent days have seen Democratic politicians and other Democratic Party-linked fixers arrive in Flint, where they have sought to channel popular opposition, and whitewash the role of the Obama White House. The administration has deliberately starved state and local governments and used the resulting crisis to force implementation of privatization schemes that transfer vast amounts of public wealth to the financial houses.

Cities, school districts and other government institutions in Flint, Detroit and other cities have been forced to rely ever more on the banks and to seek to raise quick cash through the sell-off of city assets and slashing of public workers’ wages and benefits.

In Detroit, this has taken the form of the “regionalization” of the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD), which has served as a means to kick-start the creeping privatization of the city’s water infrastructure. This coincided with a campaign to shut off water to poor residents and the hiking up of rates to water users.

Faced with rising costs, the former Emergency Manager of Flint, Democrat Darnell Earley, switched the water supply from Detroit—which gets its water from the Great Lakes—to the Flint River, long known as a virtual sewer for General Motors and other corporate polluters.

During the Detroit bankruptcy, the White House ordered the Justice Department to step in to block any legal challenge to the emergency manager laws and clear the way for the savage cuts to retiree health care and pensions.

The federal emergency declaration opens the way to the further deployment of National Guard soldiers, which, while ostensibly sent to assist in distribution of water and other supplies, are no doubt seen by the authorities as important force to maintain “public order” and prevent social unrest.

The Michigan National Guard doubled its official troop presence from 35 to 70 on Sunday, positioning new forces at water distribution areas throughout Flint. This is not the first time the guardsmen have been deployed in the city. In 1936-37 troops seized control of the city and erected machine gun nests at key intersections in response to the sit-down strikes by autoworkers.

The state of emergency authorization signed by Obama empowers the Federal Emergency Management Agency and other sections of the state apparatus to exercise expanded powers over Flint and surrounding areas, which they will use as testing grounds for the US government’s expanding “emergency management” doctrine and programs.

On Saturday, filmmaker and Flint resident Michael Moore explicitly endorsed the military mobilization, declaring, “We need the Army Corp of Engineers in here as if they are invading Iraq. We need everything here to rebuild the infrastructure.”

The administration, however, has no intention to expend the necessary resources to rebuild the infrastructure of Flint or any other city. The administration, which spent trillions to bail out Wall Street, will do nothing to undermine the profit interests of the financial elite.

One should also contrast the insulting \$5 million being sent to Flint to the trillions of dollars on the military and purchase of advanced weaponry, including ultra-expensive weapons platforms such as the F 35 jet fighter, which costs between \$150-330 million per plane.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**