

# Escalating Michigan crisis overwhelms Obama's visit to Detroit

Andre Damon  
21 January 2016

President Barack Obama arrived in Detroit, Michigan Wednesday amid an intensifying political crisis and escalating working class protests.

Governor Rick Snyder desperately sought to fend off demands for his resignation amid a growing body of evidence that a generation of youth in the city of Flint were irrevocably poisoned by lead and will suffer lifelong consequences.

At least ten people have died and thousands more have suffered permanent damage to their health in connection with the deliberate and criminal policies carried out by the state, federal and local governments in Flint.

Snyder's State of the State address on Tuesday, which was met with protests by hundreds of workers and young people, only fueled popular anger against his administration. The next day, highly redacted emails released by the state government showed that the Snyder administration had sought to downplay and trivialize complaints from Flint residents that people were being sickened by tainted water in the city.

Snyder's hand-picked emergency manager for Flint had, in 2014, ordered that the city's water supply be switched from the Detroit system and drawn instead from the notoriously polluted Flint River, in order to cut costs.

Obama landed in Detroit in the midst of the widening Flint protests as well as ongoing protests by Detroit teachers against intolerable conditions in that city's public schools. Sick-outs and demonstrations organized by rank-and-file teachers in defiance of both the city administration and the Detroit Federation of Teachers union, which had begun last week, shut down the majority of public schools on Wednesday.

Protesting teachers described freezing cold schools covered in mold, with gaping holes in the floors that

posed a hazard to the children.

In the face of this growing crisis, which some have compared to Hurricane Katrina, the president delivered a bizarre speech in which, appearing to have lost touch with reality, he boasted that "all kinds of good things are happening."

Obama's audience at a joint United Auto Workers-General Motors facility in downtown Detroit, consisting of toadies and functionaries from among the local Democratic Party and trade union officialdom, including the president's "good friend" UAW head Dennis Williams, cheered at every banality he uttered.

Obama had planned his trip to Detroit, timed to coincide with the Detroit auto show, as a victory lap after last week's State of the Union address, in which he hailed the resurgence (i.e., profit surge) of the US auto industry and the "success" of the economic turnaround supposedly engineered by his administration. He managed to surpass the phony optimism of that speech in his remarks in Detroit, which were even more banal and delusional.

Even as most TV news networks preempted his speech to report that the Dow Jones Industrial Average had dropped 566 points in intraday trading, Obama declared, "The United States of America right now has the strongest, most durable economy in the world."

"You can feel something special happening in Detroit," Obama continued. "Today you've got buses that are running again. Streets that are well lit again. New homes and businesses getting built."

Just a few miles from where Obama was speaking, over a hundred Detroit teachers protested the destruction of public education in the city, with some calling for "class struggle" and "revolution." State officials filed a request for a court injunction Wednesday seeking to compel the teachers to return to

work.

While Obama did not mention the continuing sick-out protests, he did make a perfunctory comment on the Flint crisis, saying, “I am very proud of what I’ve done in Michigan... but I know that if I were a parent I would be beside myself.”

Obama, whose Environmental Protection Agency knew about the water disaster for months without doing anything to inform city residents, bears as much responsibility as the Snyder administration for the disastrous conditions that exist in Detroit and Flint.

Immediately upon taking office, Obama moved to continue and extend the Bush administration’s bank bailouts, which provided trillions of dollars in free cash to banks and major corporations, even as he made clear that there would be no federal bailouts for states and municipalities facing funding crises. That was tantamount to an injunction to state and local governments to carry out sweeping cuts in social services and infrastructure spending. What followed were hundreds of school closures and hundreds of thousands of teacher layoffs across the country, along with brutal cuts in the wages, pensions and health benefits of public employees.

In 2009, Obama made a 50 percent wage cut for all newly hired autoworkers as well as benefit cuts for retirees a prerequisite for providing federal aid to GM and Chrysler, contributing to a dramatic reduction in workers’ living standards in states such as Michigan, Ohio and Indiana.

Obama supported the 2013 declaration of bankruptcy for Detroit and the plan enacted by Detroit Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr in 2014 to exit bankruptcy by slashing the pensions and health benefits of city workers and retirees, selling off city assets to speculators at a fraction of their real value, privatizing the city lighting system, and moving to hive off the city’s water and sewerage department and set up a new regional water authority. The latter measure was the direct precursor to the decision by Flint’s emergency manager—presently the emergency manager of the Detroit public school system—to begin using water from the toxic Flint River.

The only truth in Obama’s Detroit speech, although unwitting, was his statement, “What’s true of Detroit is true of the country.” It is a fact that the “blessings” his administration has bestowed on the people of the

United States are best exemplified by the conditions in southeastern Michigan.

Detroit and Flint are testaments to the failure of American capitalism and the criminality of its ruling elite.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

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