

The roots of the crisis in Flint and Detroit

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The disclosure that thousands of working class families and their children were exposed to lead poisoning in the city of Flint, Michigan has led to a wave of outrage throughout the world.

The basic events are now clear, though details continue to emerge. In April 2014, city officials made the decision to save \$5 million by switching the city's drinking water source to the polluted Flint River after the Detroit water department demanded higher rates. High acid levels in the river water corroded the city's lead pipes, wearing away the protective mineral coating and introducing lead into the water used by tens of thousands for drinking, cleaning and bathing.

Already, 10 people have died in a Legionnaires' disease outbreak likely caused by lead-tainted water. Children are particularly vulnerable to lead poisoning, which can cause comas, ataxia, brain disease, mental retardation, ADHD, behavioral issues and toxicity to reproductive organs. Damage to bodies and brains is permanent.

Seventy miles away in Detroit, thousands of teachers have organized "sickouts," independent of and in opposition to the trade unions, to protest the disastrous state of the public school system. Detroit's public schools have been starved of funds for decades, as resources have been diverted into privately-owned, for-profit charter schools.

As a result, Detroit's 50,000 students study in rat-infested schools that have poisonous black mold, mushroom growth, a lack of heating and crumbling building structures.

Officials from both political parties and at every level of state, local and federal government are implicated in the catastrophe in both Flint and Detroit. The response from officials has been crocodile tears, lies, evasions and blame shifting.

Michigan Governor Rick Snyder, a former venture capitalist with an estimated net worth of roughly \$200

million, bears personal responsibility. Emails released Wednesday show his administration knew of the Flint poisonings, covered up the crisis and referred to the issue as a "political football." Appearing on CBS News that same day, Snyder made the incredible statement that Detroit teachers must end their protests over school conditions because they were "harming the children."

The Democrats—including individuals brought in to contain the outrage, such as Michael Moore and Jesse Jackson—for their part blame the Republicans and no one else. In a visit to Detroit on Wednesday, President Barack Obama spoke to a room full of cheering UAW bureaucrats at the joint United Auto Workers-General Motors Center for Human Resources. "I am very proud of what I've done in Michigan," he said, before making an empty statement about how "If I were a parent I would be beside myself" over the water crisis in Flint.

Obama told the UAW audience that, "all kinds of good things are happening" in the aftermath of the Detroit Bankruptcy of 2013-2014.

In fact, the catastrophe in Flint and devastation of Detroit during the bankruptcy—which was supported by Obama—are two sides of the same process. During the bankruptcy, wages, pensions, infrastructure and social programs were slashed and the city threatened to sell the art in the Detroit Institute of Arts to pay off the Wall Street creditors. On top of this, tens of thousands of families had their electricity and water shut off. Detroit was not "rebuilt," it was restructured in the interests of the rich.

The emergency manager model Obama promoted in Detroit has also been used by city officials in Flint, and led to the decision to cut costs by drawing from the Flint River. For months, the Obama administration's Environmental Protection Agency refused to respond to tests showing high concentrations of lead in the Flint water supply. The sum of \$80 million in aid offered

yesterday by the Obama administration is little more than a pittance aimed at covering over its own complicity.

Alongside these efforts at evasion are the inevitable attempts to present the Michigan crisis as a racial matter. In an editorial published yesterday, *New York Times* columnist Charles Blow wrote, “It is hard to imagine this happening in a city that didn’t have Flint’s demographic profile—mostly black and disproportionately poor.”

In fact, the racial composition of Flint and Detroit has nothing to do with it. Whether white or black, immigrant or native-born, there is no section of the working class that is immune from the consequences of 40 years of social counterrevolution in America. Two recent studies, one by the *New York Times* and another by a Nobel laureate economist, found that white workers have suffered an immense deterioration of living standards. Impoverished white youth are dying of drug overdoses in record numbers, while older working class white men face record levels of disease and suicide caused in particular by rising drug and alcohol rates.

In his valuable new book *The Rise and Fall of American Growth*, Robert Gordon explains that average income for the bottom 90 percent “was actually lower in 2013 than it was in 1972,” with a sharp drop from \$37,053 to \$31,652 between 2000 and 2013. Starting in the early 1970s, Gordon explains, “a giant gap emerged between the growth rate of real income for the bottom 90 percent and the top 10 percent of income distribution.”

The crisis in Flint and Detroit is the inevitable outcome of this massive transfer of wealth and is part of a general process that is unfolding internationally. In every country, the social needs of the population are subordinated to the accumulation of vast sums of wealth by the corporations and the financial aristocracy.

Workers are outraged over what has happened in Michigan. There is widespread sympathy amongst workers for the families of the poisoned children and for the teachers. Many workers—expressed by teachers who spoke to the WSWS—are coming to realize that the crisis is the outcome of deliberate policies implemented by the corporations and the government against the working class. The events in Michigan follow the powerful eruption of opposition among autoworkers

throughout the US in the final months of last year.

What is necessary above all is that the different struggles of workers be unified on the basis of a common perspective and an understanding of the source of the crisis that workers confront. The root cause is the economic system of capitalism, in which a tiny fraction of the world’s population controls the economy and enriches itself at the expense of the working class. While trillions are spent on wars, the deliberate policy of the governments has been to transform all the basic necessities of life into profit-making opportunities for the corporations.

Workers confront the government, the corporations, the courts, the police and the corporate press. Workers cannot defeat such powerful entities in isolation, but the strength of the working class as a unified international social force is immense.

The Socialist Equality Party has called an emergency public meeting at Wayne State University on Wednesday, January 27 of all sections of workers in Detroit and Flint. This meeting will bring together teachers, autoworkers, students, youth and other sections of the working class to discuss the crisis and the urgent need for workers to develop their own strategy. We call on all workers to attend this emergency meeting.

For details on the meeting in Detroit, click here.



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