

Michigan residents speak on Flint lead poisoning

A WSWS reporting team
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A crowd of more than a thousand workers and students, anticipating a calculated and self-serving cover-up by Governor Rick Snyder in his State of the State address on Tuesday evening, rallied at the state Capitol building. Reporters for the *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed demonstrators, who reported that virtually every living thing in the city of Flint has been poisoned in one way or another. Young children, the elderly and pets suffer the worst immediate effects, but the poisoning is everywhere.

“It doesn’t matter if it is Flint, or anywhere else,” said Cornelius Hooper, an autoworker at Pontiac Metal Stamping, who had driven to the rally with Peggy Gilbertson whose grandchildren live in Flint. Both are outraged by the entire situation and furious that no agency has intervened to hold those responsible accountable. “This is outrageous,” he continued. “The governor is making excuses. It doesn’t matter whether it’s a Republican or Democrat. All of them are responsible.”

“People are not even held accountable for what they have done,” Hooper said. “Water is a right,” he continued. “It is a social right! This should never have happened in this modern age. We can send people to the moon and to Mars. But here, in 2016, we have an entire city which has been poisoned by the government.”

Opposition to the stranglehold of the unions, which have suppressed the class struggle for more than three decades, began to erupt in the recent auto contract struggle and has continued in the “sickouts” of Detroit teachers. That shift in the political landscape found expression in the make-up of the crowd, as well as in some of the conclusions people are beginning to draw.

“This whole situation is outrageous,” said Lila Kadaj, an award-winning art teacher from the Detroit Public

Schools (DPS). She told a heartbreaking story of the effects of budget cuts and the abandonment of essential infrastructure. “The emergency manager [Darnell Earley was moved by the governor from Flint to DPS] gets \$225,000 a year,” she added with disgust. “And water is leaking into the classrooms and mold is growing on the walls.”

With 20 years seniority, she was forced into retirement in 2014 because of the intolerable conditions that had developed in her classroom. “No windows would open and the air conditioning was broken,” she said. “I was teaching for six years without any ventilation.”

Voted art teacher of the year in 2006, she is devoted to teaching but could not continue. “The University of Michigan did a study on the roof of the school,” she said. “The area has among the highest levels of pollution in the state.” The situation in Flint represents a flashpoint that exposes conditions of rampant pollution and dangerously decayed infrastructure in city after city.

Larry Hutchinson said that his mother’s skin had turned very dark and had begun to peel off. “Her hair is falling out,” he reported. “They said she had skin cancer, but they never checked for lead poisoning.” His wife Sharman added that her oldest son, who is age 5, had been diagnosed with lead poisoning.

There were crowds of students from different colleges and universities chanting and carrying signs demanding prosecutions, accountability and adequate funding for medical care. Jacob Shaver, from Michigan State University, felt compelled to attend the rally. “I am outraged,” he said. “I want someone to be held accountable. The people of Flint have suffered a crime.” He went on to explain, “It is a bipartisan problem. Both the Democrats and the Republicans are

responsible.” And like many others in attendance, he is beginning to draw a more far-reaching conclusion: “Honestly, at the root, it is a class question.”

Tonya Burns owns a small business installing alarms in a working class neighborhood of Flint. A friend is an attorney representing a number of people diagnosed with lead poisoning. “Some people have died,” she began. “They had legionnaires’ disease, skin rashes, poisoning. This is serious.

“You cannot get away with saying, ‘I’m sorry,’ for killing people. The buck stops some place: the emergency manager, the governor. They take on the responsibility when they take the job. No one has been held accountable.”

“They are not going to be held accountable and that’s the problem,” she continued. “It is not the rich people who are suffering.” The question of the class divisions in society arose repeatedly. “Clean water is for everyone,” Burns added, “It is a right.” She summed up her anger and frustration saying, “I spent \$700 on one pet. He can’t drink the water. He can’t bathe in it. He’s got rashes. The dog didn’t die from the bullet lodged in his back that he had when he was adopted. But the water is killing him.”

Dorothy Batchelder lives in Holly, Michigan. She has family in Flint, including two young nephews who have recently been diagnosed with blood lead levels of 5.5 and 4.5. She spoke to the WSWS over the phone on Thursday:

“Snyder lies. They all lie. All the Democrats and Republicans are guilty! Enough lip service from them. I want to see shovels in the ground. I’m just finished with both the Democrats and Republicans. I’m from a working class family, and was for the Democratic Party, but no more.

“They knew how to treat the water, but they didn’t want to spend the money. They spend \$400 billion on fighter jets, but they don’t want to spend \$1.5 billion in Flint to repair the infrastructure. I’m appalled. They have poisoned people, destroyed their teeth, their bones, their brains and no one is accountable. This is genocide. If you or I poisoned someone we would not be getting away with ‘I’m sorry.’

“This means they can kiss democracy goodbye because this is not a government of the people, by the people or for the people. I’m for repealing Michigan Act 436 [Snyder’s Emergency Manager Law], which

has allowed the emergency managers—even though we voted this down. There are 62 billionaires who own more wealth than the population of the world, so what does that tell you?

“Darnell Earley! Didn’t he do enough damage in Flint? And now look what he’s doing to the Detroit public schools, teachers and students.

“I’m 72 years old. You’d think I wouldn’t have to be out fighting at this age, but I am. I lost my house when my husband died in 2011. There was no help from the government to try to save my house. I’m finished with them.”



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