

The Rachel Maddow show in Flint: Damage control for Democrats

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The visit by MSNBC news host Rachel Maddow to Flint on January 27 reflected the deep crisis of the US ruling establishment over the lead poisoning disaster in Flint, which has discredited government at all levels—state, federal and local.

Maddow is a principal spokesperson for the left-liberal section of the US corporate media and hosts her own nightly television program. Her programs generally reflect the concerns of a privileged and complacent upper middle class layer (Maddow herself earns some \$7 million annually) and rarely deal with social issues such as poverty and unemployment.

The hosting by Maddow of a town hall meeting in Flint Wednesday night therefore represented something of a departure for the news host. She was sent to Flint evidently in an effort at damage control under conditions, where the credibility of government authorities is in shreds after nearly two years of lies and evasions over the lead contamination of Flint drinking water that has poisoned 100,000 of the city's residents and a whole generation of children.

The event was a tightly choreographed and controlled affair, with attendees allowed in by invitation only and questions pre-screened. Despite this there was an evident restlessness in the audience and a decidedly cool response to the various Democratic Party hucksters invited to appear by Maddow.

The show opened with a pre-recorded segment containing interviews with Flint residents on the water disaster. It then shifted to the town hall meeting hosted by Maddow, held at a local high school gym. During the course of the next hour Maddow brought on camera several groups of panelists, including Virginia Tech environmental engineer Marc Edwards, who first brought the issue of lead contamination in Flint water to light, and pediatrics doctor Mona Hanna-Attisha, who exposed elevated lead levels in Flint children.

The state authorities have roped in these professionals to provide a veneer of legitimacy to their efforts to appease public anger. Edwards is currently heading lead testing efforts in Flint, and both Hanna-Attisha and Edwards have

been appointed by Republican Governor Rick Snyder to a state task force on the Flint water crisis.

Maddow's main purpose, however, was to provide a platform for a series of Democratic politicians to profess feigned outrage over the lead poisoning of Flint residents and false sympathy for the plight of the victims.

The first group of panelists included Flint Mayor Karen Weaver, Edwards, and Martin Kaufman, a professor at the University of Michigan who is working to map all of Flint's pipes. Maddow began by noting that no pipes had yet actually been replaced. During the ensuing discussion on the costs and practicality of replacing Flint's outdated lead piping, Mayor Weaver nervously warned that further delays would undermine public confidence. "Our trust has been broken in the city of Flint. If we don't get new pipes, people aren't going to trust that," Weaver declared.

The next group of panelists included Dr. Hanna-Attisha and Democratic State Representative Sheldon Neeley. In her remarks the doctor stressed the immediate need for massive resources to assist the thousands of Flint children who suffered irreversible damage due to exposure to lead-tainted drinking water. In the course of the discussion it emerged that there was only one school nurse for the entire Flint public school system, and that Michigan ranked last in the United States in the ratio of children to school nurses.

For his part, Neeley attempted to focus blame solely on Governor Rick Snyder for the lack of resources reaching Flint. Neeley claimed that Democratic state legislators would make sure that the needed assistance was made available to help Flint's children. However, all Neeley proposed was a miserable \$16 million loan forgiveness, not even a grant, to Flint's cash starved schools.

In fact the horrific conditions existing in Flint and major cities across the United States are the product of decades of a social counterrevolution carried out by Republican and Democratic politicians alike at the federal, state and local level. The city of Flint has been presided over by a series of Democratic administrations, including the administration of former mayor Dayne Walling, who gave his OK to the

switching of Flint's water supplies from the Detroit water system to the polluted Flint River. The highly corrosive Flint River water leached lead from the city's piping, leading to the poisoning of Flint residents.

The final segment of the program included Democratic Michigan US Senator Debbie Stabenow and Charles Williams, head of the Michigan chapter of the Reverend Al Sharpton's National Action Network, along with Mayor Weaver again. Maddow began by advancing the position, eagerly taken up by panelists, that responsibility for the disaster in Flint could be entirely laid at the doorstep of Michigan's emergency manager law and, by implication, the Snyder administration.

The emergency manager law, which strips elected local officials of decision-making powers, is entirely anti-democratic. Indeed, when Michigan voters decisively repealed the state's emergency manager law in a popular referendum in November 2012, the Snyder administration imposed a new, in some ways even more draconian and referendum-proof emergency manager law.

That being said, the attempt to lay the blame for the disaster in Flint wholly at the feet of Snyder is entirely self-serving. Emergency manager measures, first adopted under a Democratic governor in the 1980s, have been employed by both Democratic and Republican state administrations to carry out massive cuts in cities and school districts across the state. Darnell Earley, the Snyder appointee who presided over the Flint water crisis and is now decimating the Detroit Public Schools, is a Democrat, as have been the majority of the state's emergency managers.

Democratic former Michigan Treasurer Andy Dillon played a key role in redrafting the emergency manager law after it was defeated in 2012. A year later, Dillon signed off on the decision to shift the Flint water supply to the Flint River.

In his contribution to the discussion Williams inevitably introduced a dose of racial politics, declaring that Snyder had taken over "every black city in Michigan." As always the politics of race is introduced to obscure the fundamental class questions involved in the poisoning of Flint.

As was evident from the audience at the town hall, the city is a highly integrated working class community. The political establishment is clearly alarmed by the fact that all sections of the Flint working class—white, black and immigrant—have come together to oppose the attack on their right to clean and safe water. The role of forces such as Williams and his mentor Sharpton is to disrupt that unity.

For her part Stabenow defended the miserly response by the Obama administration to the Flint disaster. The White House has committed \$80 million, not all of which is even specifically earmarked for Flint, in comparison to an

estimate of as much as \$1.5 billion needed to upgrade Flint's water infrastructure alone.

Maddow interjected to argue against more federal aid to Flint, claiming that this would let the state of Michigan off the hook.

Continuing her apologetics for the White House, Stabenow went on to claim to have spoken to President Obama that morning, declaring, "he would like me to tell you he loves you and has your back."

During her closing remarks Maddow cynically assured Flint residents that the city would be restored. "America is with you," she declared. "I am convinced it is going to happen. We as a country will not let things like this lie."

Maddow is lying and she knows it. While there is a deep sense of shared outrage with the people of Flint from workers throughout the US and the world, the American ruling elite, after decades of bleeding US infrastructure to pay for handouts to Wall Street and endless wars, is not about to change its spots and provide the billions needed to restore Flint and working class cities across the United States. All of those Democratic politicians Maddow presents as saviors are implacable enemies of the working class, no less ruthless than their Republican counterparts.

Social discontent is mounting across the United States, as evidenced, among other developments, by recent opposition of autoworkers and the wave of teacher sickouts in Detroit, which have emerged outside of the control of the Democratic Party-aligned trade unions. That movement requires direction, leadership and political clarification. This means a struggle to expose the reactionary essence of liberal apologists for the Democratic Party like Maddow.



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