

The World Socialist Web Site and the Flint water crisis

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While state, local and national officials, along with the corporate-controlled media, were covering up the poisoning of Flint residents with lead-tainted drinking water, there was one publication that was presenting the complaints of residents and exposing the crisis. That was the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Long before the October 8, 2015 decision by the state of Michigan to reconnect Flint to the Detroit water system, the WSWS had written on the crisis and issued warnings. By the end of December of last year, when the crisis in Flint became a top national and international story, the WSWS had published 12 articles. To date, the WSWS has published more than 30 articles, including video interviews with residents, examining all aspects of the disaster.

By comparison, the *New York Times*, the US “newspaper of record,” published only three articles on the Flint water crisis before the declaration of a state of emergency in the city on January 5, 2016. Two of those earlier articles were written only after Michigan Governor Rick Snyder officially took note of the crisis on September 30, 2015.

The neglect of the crisis in Flint by the *Times*, with its immense resources, is not surprising. The newspaper is remote from and indifferent to the working class and its problems, focusing instead on the concerns of American imperialism and the preoccupations of privileged upper-middle class social strata. The *Times* essentially admitted its failure to properly cover the story in a column by its public editor published January 27.

The disaster in Flint was man-made, resulting from the decision of a state-appointed “emergency manager” to break the city’s connection to the Detroit water system and switch the city’s supply to the polluted Flint River. The water corroded the city’s antiquated pipes, leaching lead and copper into the drinking water. Government officials at every level ignored the complaints of residents about foul-tasting and discolored tap water, assuring the population that it was safe for drinking, cooking and bathing in face of mounting evidence of lead contamination.

Tainted water has also been linked to an outbreak of Legionnaires disease in Flint that caused 10 deaths and the sickening of an additional 77 people.

An examination of the record of the WSWS shows that as early as 2014, our web site took note of the crisis developing in Flint and raised an alarm.

For example, on May 31, 2014 the WSWS published an article headlined “Regional disputes deepen over control of Detroit water

system.” The article related the decision to switch Flint’s water source to the Flint River to the battle for control over Detroit’s water system and plans to loot the city’s resources under the Detroit bankruptcy imposed by Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr. The piece said of the severing of Flint from the Detroit water system: “The decision by Flint to break ties with the DWSD [Detroit Water and Sewerage Department] and embark on its own independent water system serves as an example of the irrationality of the rule of financial interests over the allocation of public resources.”

On January 12, 2015, the WSWS published an article headlined “Drinking water crisis in Flint, Michigan.” In response to reports of high levels of trihalomethane in the city’s water supply, a result of heavy chlorination, the WSWS warned against assurances by city officials that the city’s drinking water was safe. We wrote: “The basic right to clean and safe drinking water is being violated exclusively due to the financial system that dominates the treatment management of this most essential natural resource.”

On April 1, 2015, the WSWS published an on-the-spot report including interviews with Flint residents entitled “Flint, Michigan residents speak on tainted water supply.” The article reported residents’ complaints that they were developing rashes from bathing in the water and that the water was corroding their pipes. It noted that General Motors had earlier disconnected from the Flint water system because the water was so corrosive.

On September 1, 2015, the WSWS published another on-the-spot report from Flint, titled “Water shutoff moratorium in Flint as water crisis continues.” The article raised the issue of corrosive water from the Flint River leaching lead from the city’s water pipes and carried extensive interviews with Flint residents.

On September 15, 2015, the WSWS published an article headlined, “Study shows Flint, Michigan has ‘very serious lead in water problem.’” It reported on the findings of Virginia Tech University researchers headed by Professor Marc Edwards revealing dangerous levels of lead in Flint drinking water. It noted the calls from the team headed by Edwards for the immediate issuing of a public health warning.

On September 26, 2015, the WSWS carried an interview with Flint resident LeeAnne Walters, whose young child was diagnosed with lead poisoning. The article, headlined “Flint, Michigan residents fight lead poisoning of water supply,” cited comments by Marc Edwards at a town hall meeting convened to warn Flint residents. The WSWS wrote, “The initial testing reveals that the

actions of city and state officials in exposing hundreds of thousands of residents to toxic water are nothing short of criminal negligence.”

On October 2, 2015, the WSWS published an article headlined “Michigan governor grudgingly admits Flint water danger.” It reported the findings of Flint pediatrician Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha, who discovered significantly higher lead levels in the blood of Flint children after the decision by Flint to disconnect from Detroit water.

Reporting on the decision by Governor Snyder to shift Flint’s water supply back to the Detroit water system, the WSWS published an article on October 10, 2015 headlined “Michigan governor belatedly orders change in Flint’s water supply.” It cited the statement by Professor Edwards, who said that local, state and federal agencies “have proved themselves unworthy of the public trust. Flint residents have been left to fend for themselves when it comes to dealing with the dangers of high lead in their water.”

On November 11, 2015, the WSWS published a comprehensive analysis of the crisis in Flint.

Headlined, “Michigan political crisis over lead poisoning in Flint ,” the article examined the background of the disastrous decision to switch the Flint water supply. It exposed the political and financial considerations behind the switch and documented the role of public officials in the disaster, including the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality.

The article traced the roots of the crisis to a decades-long assault on the working class across the United States by Democratic and Republican administrations alike, which has impoverished wide layers of the population and gutted social infrastructure such as water. The WSWS wrote, “To say that the actions of authorities concerning Flint’s water system were negligent or reckless doesn’t adequately characterize them. These are criminal acts.”

Since the January 5, 2016 declaration of a state of emergency in Flint, the WSWS has published more than two dozen articles on the water crisis, including four Perspective columns. It has refuted the attempts of Democratic politicians and their allies in the various pseudo-left organizations to conceal the complicity of the Obama administration and the Democratic Party by placing the blame for the crisis solely on the Republican Party.

It has likewise exposed the efforts to obscure the roots of the disaster in the capitalist system itself and cover up the class character of the attack on Flint workers by presenting it as a racial question, even though more than 40 percent of Flint residents are white and many of the politicians and officials who approved the switch to the Flint River are black.

In an article published January 29, “The Rachel Maddow show in Flint: Damage control for Democrats,” the WSWS exposed the attempts to portray race as the primary issue in Flint. The WSWS wrote, “As always the politics of race is introduced to obscure the fundamental class questions involved in the poisoning of Flint.” It continued, “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.”

On January 6, a Perspective column titled “Lead poisoning in Flint, Michigan” drew a connection between the social crisis in

America, the crisis in Flint, and social inequality. It declared, “The deprivation of the most elemental necessities of life—clean water, public education, a decent job, health care, a pension—is an indictment of the capitalist system, which takes its most brutal form in America, a country where 20 billionaires control wealth equal to the bottom half of the population, or some 152 million people.”

A January 20 Perspective column was headlined “The Flint water crisis and the criminality of American capitalism.” It analyzed the recent state of the state address by Governor Snyder, in which he insisted that no Michigan officials should be held accountable for the Flint disaster. We wrote, “Flint is a symbol of the criminal character of American capitalism.” The article concluded, “These disasters arise from the failure and bankruptcy of the capitalist system, an outmoded and reactionary economic order that subordinates the most elemental needs of society to the enrichment of the corporate and financial aristocracy.”

A Perspective published January 28 titled “War and the destruction of social infrastructure in America” contrasted the claims by the ruling elite that there is no money to repair decaying social infrastructure with the vast sums being made available to the US military. It noted, “In the insane and socially destructive priorities of the American ruling class, one sees in concentrated form the inextricable connection between war and capitalism...”

These selections are only a sample of the news reports and commentary appearing on the WSWS on the Flint crisis. This record clearly shows that the WSWS early understood its implications and sought to mobilize the working class.

It further establishes that the WSWS is the only genuine and truly independent voice of the working class. In the coming weeks, the WSWS will expand and develop its coverage of Flint as part of its fight to educate and politically arm workers and young people for the coming revolutionary struggles of the American and international working class.



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