

Protest at University of Michigan on Flint crisis promotes racial politics

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Approximately 100 students and youth rallied Tuesday afternoon at the University of Michigan (UM) in Ann Arbor to protest the continued poisonous contamination of the drinking water in nearby Flint, Michigan.

The protest was originally called to coincide with a panel discussion entitled “Detroit: Bankruptcy and Beyond” at the UM Law School. Panelists were to include Michigan governor Rick Snyder and other officials involved in the bankruptcy, a process that involved the gutting of pensions for thousands of retired city workers. Along with Snyder, the planned speakers included Kevyn Orr, emergency manager for Detroit throughout the bankruptcy; Steven Rhodes, the judge overseeing the case in bankruptcy court; and Gerald Rosen, the federal circuit court judge involved in the arm-twisting that resulted in the final deal.

Last Friday, the panel discussion was postponed indefinitely, ostensibly to allow Snyder to attend to “higher priorities” in the state government. Undoubtedly, efforts to contain the political crisis now raging over Flint’s tainted water supply were among these.

The organizers of the protest included Ann Arbor-Flint Solidarity Network, the International Socialist Organization (ISO), and the UM chapter of the National Lawyers Guild. The first group is an umbrella that includes the ISO, a pseudo-left group oriented to the Democratic Party.

The organizers’ orientation to the Democratic Party and commitment to a predominantly racialist interpretation of the unfolding Flint disaster were evident from the moment the protest assembled near the university’s law school. Calls for resignations of politicians were limited to Snyder alone. There was a studied avoidance of any criticism of local, state or

national Democratic Party politicians, including Obama himself. Not even the emergency managers (Orr and former Flint emergency manager, Darnell Earley) were denounced.

The organizers went so far as to call for demonstrators to rearrange their places by race. First, white students were asked to move to the outside rings of marchers to “protect” blacks at the center. Perhaps sensing that this violated some bylaw of political correctness, the organizers soon changed their directive: white students, they now said, should move to the back so that blacks would be in the first rows. Even chants that started with a broad class appeal were twisted to pose the matter in racial terms. “Water is a human right!” for example, was quickly given the reactionary second line, “Not just for the rich and white!”

Supporters of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) distributed a leaflet whose headline asked, “Who is responsible for the crisis in Flint?” and which advertised a meeting later this week on the subject.

The leaflet pointed to the responsibility of both capitalist parties for the attacks on workers in Michigan. “The policies and decisions that led to this crisis were the result of Democrats and Republicans working together to defend the interests of the financial elite,” it said. “The same players who poisoned the drinking water in Flint were also involved in the bankruptcy of Detroit, with the same cold indifference about the consequences of their decisions.” Arguing against Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, it made the point that the Flint crisis was not a racial question, but a class one.

Before the protest concluded, Lawrence Porter of the Socialist Equality Party spoke from the microphone.

While the organizers of the protest looked on nervously, Porter pointed to the class nature of both the Detroit bankruptcy and the Flint water disaster. He explained the role of Democratic Party officials, black and white, in both events, naming Andy Dillon (former treasury secretary in the Snyder administration), Earley, Orr, and Obama as being no less guilty than Snyder.

Porter insisted that the crisis in Flint and Detroit were not the result of racism (and was interrupted here by an attempted chant of “Black Lives Matter!” from the crowd) and concluded by saying that there were many other cities in the US where infrastructure has been sabotaged by the ruling elite, impacting workers of all racial backgrounds. Though received somewhat coolly, Porter was approached by several students afterwards who asked for the SEP leaflet.

Two episodes highlight the divergent reaction to Porter’s remarks. In one discussion, a student said that he had long read the SEP’s leaflets and articles and disagreed with its claim that “race is just a sideshow.” When pressed on the issue of class and race and asked how to account for the role played by Obama and his administration in Michigan and around the world, he argued that current president was simply a “frontman” for the billionaires like Bill Gates that made the real decisions.

The second episode was quite different. A student named James remarked to Porter that he tended to agree with his points and had noticed that it was now standard practice of the “pseudo-left” (James’s term) to sow racial divisions. This, he said, had to be stopped.



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