

# GM and UAW donate \$3 million to Flint: Criminals covering their tracks

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In an action few could match for guile and hypocrisy, the United Auto Workers and General Motors earlier this week announced that they were jointly donating \$3 million over five years to help children exposed to lead-poisoned water in Flint, Michigan.

The giant automaker, which long made Flint a center of production, posted a record \$11 billion in pre-tax profits in 2015. The joint donation of \$600,000 a year is equal to what GM made in profits every half hour last year. It is not known how much the UAW—which owns the largest block of GM stock, worth billions—is contributing.

In any case, this is an insulting amount for the city's children, who will require lifelong health, educational and other social services to cope with irreparable damage from neurotoxins. The cost of replacing the city's antiquated pipe system—long starved of resources due to tax abatements demanded by GM and the consequences of automaker's deindustrialization of the city—is estimated at \$1.5 billion alone.

Far from condemning GM, the UAW has run to its defense and portrayed its damage control effort and tax write-off donation as the height of corporate responsibility and humane behavior.

“We know that this crisis requires long-term commitment that focuses on those things that Flint families can do to mitigate their exposure to tainted water,” UAW Vice President Cindy Estrada said in a Tuesday news release. “Whether it is filters, medical care, educational resources or nutritional resources, this partnership can have a lasting impact.”

In fact, the UAW is collaborating with GM to divert attention from the corporation's complicity in the poisoning of the city and its cover-up. The donation came only a few days after long-time consumer advocate Ralph Nader wrote a letter to GM CEO Mary Barra asking why company officials did not alert the public about high levels of lead in the water after discovering that parts at its local engine plant were being badly corroded by the city's water.

“The concerned people of Flint, of Michigan, of the

United States, should be informed in detail of the degree or lack thereof of GM's corporate and community responsiveness to sound the alarm and disclose the test results at the time they were produced,” Nader wrote, saying, “there is no way GM did not have information about lead and other heavy metals in the water from its own comprehensive testing.”

In October 2014, GM quietly switched its water supply from the Flint River—which it had long used as a dumping ground for pollutants—to an untainted water supply from a neighboring township. It would take another 11 months—during which time state and local officials ignored resident complaints and scientific evidence—before the governor would provide funds for the city to reconnect to the Detroit water system, its original water source.

The partnership of the UAW and GM has already had lasting and devastating consequences for the people of Flint. Outside of the state and local authorities who switched the city's water supply and then covered up their actions, there are few if any entities so deeply implicated in the social catastrophe in the city.

After reaping incalculable profits in the Vehicle City over eight decades, GM largely abandoned Flint by the 1990s, leaving behind little except abandoned factories, ruined neighborhoods and land and waterways saturated with toxic waste.

As for the UAW, born in Flint during the sit-down strikes led by left-wing militants during the Great Depression, the ruins of the city are symbolic of its repudiation of these class struggle traditions and adoption of the corporatist program of labor-management “partnership” to boost the profits and competitiveness of the Detroit automakers against their international rivals.

As a result of the mass struggles that built the UAW, by the 1960s workers in the city had achieved one of the highest per capita incomes in America. After decades in which the UAW colluded in the shutdown of the city's factories—including the 1999 closure of Buick City, which once employed 28,000 workers alone—today over 40 percent

of the city's population is living in poverty, according to the US Census Bureau. That makes Flint the second most poverty-stricken city in the nation for its size, just behind the depressed former steel town of Youngstown, Ohio.

A 2014 article in *Belt* magazine, which focuses on reclamation efforts in America's so-called rust belt cities, provides a devastating picture of the deindustrialized city of 100,000 residents.

"Over the last 35 years, auto employment in Flint has dropped from 80,000 to 5,500. That's why Chevy in the Hole [the site of the 1936-37 UAW sit-down strike] has shifted from producing engines to growing wildflowers. Like so much of Flint, which has lost half its peak population of 196,000, the former plant exists in a state of half-wildness that looks neither natural nor deliberate. Nearly half the city's commercial properties are vacant. Factories abandoned by General Motors make up over 10 percent of the city's land area. The largest former GM property, the 400-acre Buick City, appears on maps as a gray void in the heart of the city.

"General Motors was here for 80 years, and left behind toxins that will take centuries to dissolve: arsenic, chromium, mercury, lead, solvents. Petroleum leaks into the Flint River, said Christina Kelly of the Genesee County Land Bank, which has been overseeing the remediation and participating in the site planning."

According to Mike Bennett, the retired president of UAW Local 326, workers at GM's Ternstedt plant in Flint were dying of cancer at up to three times the national average. A December 2008 *USA Today* article notes that children at Flint's Carman Park Elementary School are subjected to some of the worst levels of air pollutants in the country.

Several weeks ago, UAW Vice President Estrada cited the water crisis in Flint in her introductory remarks for President Obama during his January 20 visit to the UAW-GM Human Resources Center in Detroit. She attacked Michigan's Governor Rick Snyder, saying that he and other Republicans were not "motivated" by their moral responsibilities like Obama was when he supported the 2009 bailout of the auto industry. "Unfortunately, we haven't seen that kind of thinking in Flint, Michigan, where it seems that the state of Michigan and its appointed, not democratically elected emergency manager, focused more on the bottom line than it did on the community safety and of our children," Estrada said.

In fact, Obama's restructuring of GM and Chrysler not only slashed by half the wages of new autoworkers, but also immunized the automakers from lawsuits stemming from pollution and largely relieved them of the cost of environmental cleanup in Flint and other cities. The UAW, like President Obama and the Democrats, is no less

committed to defending the bottom line of GM than its top executives and corporate board members—which include representatives of the UAW.

In 1845, Frederick Engels, the collaborator of Karl Marx, wrote scathingly about the charity the English ruling class doled out while brutally exploiting the working class and condemning families to cramped, fetid slums of mill towns like Manchester.

"What? The wealthy English fail to remember the poor? They who have founded philanthropic institutions, such as no other country can boast of! ... As though you rendered the proletarians a service in first sucking out their very life-blood and then practicing your self-complacent, Pharisaic philanthropy upon them, placing yourselves before the world as mighty benefactors of humanity when you give back to the plundered victims the hundredth part of what belongs to them!

"The English bourgeoisie is charitable out of self-interest; it gives nothing outright, but regards its gifts as a business matter, makes a bargain with the poor, saying: 'If I spend this much upon benevolent institutions, I thereby purchase the right not to be troubled any further, and you are bound thereby to stay in your dusky holes and not to irritate my tender nerves by exposing your misery. You shall despair as before, but you shall despair unseen, this I require, this I purchase with my subscription of twenty pounds to the infirmary!'"

The American ruling class, along with its servants in the trade union apparatus, is no less hypocritical than its English predecessors. The workers in Flint are not bowing and thanking these criminals. Instead they are fighting. To guarantee such elemental rights as clean water, the working class must unify all of its battles into a single political struggle to put an end to capitalism.



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