

An interview with Professor Marc Edwards on the Flint water crisis

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People around the world have been shocked and horrified by the Flint water crisis, where a city of 100,000 inhabitants has been exposed to toxic levels of lead in their drinking water after the city switched its water source to the corrosive Flint River. Though residents had immediately expressed outrage at the foul, discolored water, they were repeatedly assured by officials at all levels of government that the water was safe to drink. Documents have since surfaced showing that environmental officials were well aware of the dangerous levels of lead leaching into the water from corroded pipes, and that they worked to hide this fact from the public for nearly two years.

Dr. Marc Edwards is the Charles P. Lunsford Professor of Environmental and Water Resources Engineering at Virginia Tech University. He was instrumental in revealing the truth of Flint's lead crisis to the world. He and his team conducted an extensive sampling that found extremely high levels of lead in Flint residents' water, with some lead levels high enough to qualify the water as toxic waste.

After exposing a similar lead-in-water crisis in Washington, DC in 2004, Edwards found that the local water authority had been engaging in practices intended to conceal the level of lead in the water, including the now-notorious practice of "pre-flushing," or running the water for several minutes before collecting a test sample, a practice known to artificially lower test readings; removing the aerator before sampling, thus removing a major source of lead sediment from the sample; utilizing sampling bottles with very narrow openings, ensuring that samples are collected at low flow rates, which have less lead; and selectively sampling houses that are known to have lead-free plumbing, thus obscuring the scope of a lead contamination crisis.

Additionally, both the DC Water and Sewer Authority (DC WASA) and the federal agency Centers for Disease Control (CDC) falsified scientific data in order to create reports that made the incredible claim that dangerous levels of lead in the drinking water had no effect on the blood lead levels of DC residents. The EPA also falsified data to support a policy of partial pipe replacements in DC, which actually caused the lead levels in many homes to rise.

Edwards sent a document to the *World Socialist Web Site* listing 23 different practices known or believed to have been utilized by DC WASA for several years to deliberately conceal the high levels of lead in the water supply. These methods have not been limited to Washington, DC. Pre-flushing was used in Flint with the approval of the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ), and the removal of aerators has been implicated in a case of childhood lead poisoning in Durham, North Carolina.

According to a source recently quoted in the *Guardian*, these and other methods are in such widespread use that they occur in "every

major US city east of the Mississippi."

On February 3, Dr. Edwards participated in a panel before the US House Committee on Oversight and Reform on the misconduct of public health officials, leading to the lead poisoning in Flint. He recently spoke with the WSWS.

WSWS: I read your document and it's astonishing. These practices go beyond accident, beyond negligence. If I'm interpreting it correctly, this is deliberate concealment of lead in drinking water as essentially unofficial government policy. Is that correct?

Marc Edwards: That's how I interpreted it.

WSWS: How did you and your team uncover these practices?

ME: Because children were being lead poisoned while cities were meeting the Lead and Copper Rule. And so we would figure out why, and compiled that list as a result of that, hoping that we could learn from our mistakes and not repeat them.

WSWS: How widespread would you say these practices are?

ME: Very widespread.

WSWS: Are you aware of other cities beyond DC or Flint where these kinds of practices have led to toxic lead exposure? I know your testimony mentioned Durham, North Carolina as well.

ME: Yes, Durham. Greenville, North Carolina. There were others where it was not proven to the same degree.

WSWS: And this is all going on with the tacit approval of the state environmental agencies and the EPA?

ME: Well, yes. I wrote [the EPA] that letter in 2011. I wrote a letter telling them that I can only conclude that they don't care about kids lead poisoned from drinking water. And I also said, "As far as I'm concerned, the next children poisoned it's your responsibility."

WSWS: In your dealings with the EPA and these agencies, if they don't care about children lead poisoned from drinking water, what do they care about? What do these agencies' priorities actually appear to be?

ME: It appears to be that they work really hard to not do their jobs. And, of course, they would sacrifice anything, including the truth, to protect their reputation if it came to it. So it's a real mystery to me what motivates these people. Why do they have this job if they don't want to do it?

WSWS: It seems like they are doing a job of concealing these environmental hazards.

ME: That's what I accused them of. This was 2011. I'm warning them, and I said, "You're creating this false sense of security. Is that your job?" We're better off without these people.

WSWS: In your written testimony you discuss the institutional scientific misconduct by the EPA, the CDC, and the DC Water and

Sewer Authority. Could you talk about the ways that this misconduct has led to the crisis in Flint?

ME: Well, it created an environment where primary agencies like the MDEQ felt justified in cheating, felt justified in downplaying lead-in-water dangers, felt justified in letting children drink that water. That's a direct result of CDC's falsified report in 2004, when they claimed that people in DC drank all that lead in water and no one got hurt. So that is the price that is paid for scientific misconduct. People get hurt, and those who pay the price are the most vulnerable and poor amongst us.

WSWS: What is it in the scientific community, in academia, in the peer review process, that allows these kinds of, essentially, propaganda reports to get disseminated to the public?

ME: It's this institutional scientific misconduct where, if you have unethical, corrupt scientists and engineers running your agency, you don't care about the truth, or data, or science integrity. You care about abusing and keeping your power, first and foremost. So no one ever really anticipated that people would do this with no profit motive whatsoever, to poison little kids when it's their job to protect us. So there's obviously something seriously wrong with these agencies where we'd actually be better off without them, frankly.

WSWS: There's a lot of talk in the media right now about the need to restore trust in these agencies. But in DC, the way that they restored trust was to falsify data and to tell people that no one had been hurt by the lead in their drinking water.

ME: Incredibly, yeah. It's such a betrayal of the public trust and science integrity.

WSWS: At what point does one have to say what is, and say that these agencies are fundamentally undeserving of the public trust?

ME: I'm saying that unfortunately these experiences in Flint, Michigan prove that they're undeserving. They've never apologized. They've never accepted responsibility. Even when they were caught, they got out of it by telling even more outrageous Orwellian lies. So, you can be sure as long as these people are in power that this will happen over and over again.

WSWS: What does that say to you about our government as a whole? That an agency that is supposed to be protecting the population from toxicity is actually helping to facilitate the poisoning of children with lead?

ME: Well, I think that's why it's striking such a chord among everyone, making this story a national, international sensation. It's truly malevolent government. There's no other explanation. I've never seen such a black-and-white case. To get Congress to the point of frustration as part of the American people where they pass a law that says EPA has to tell people about high lead in drinking water if they know about it, that's pretty unbelievable. We have to pass a law for people to exercise common sense and to be human?

WSWS: I've talked to a former employee of the Detroit water system who told me that there's a connection between the starving of funds and these deceitful practices. He told me that the funding has been cut so many times, and so many people have been laid off, that all these utilities can do is cover things up.

ME: Crazy. Wow! But that doesn't explain Washington, DC. That doesn't explain Durham. The emergency manager wasn't present there, nor was the racial element, and yet it happened. If I lived in Flint or Detroit, I would have a hard time believing it was not related to the emergency manager or racially motivated, because the behavior is so outrageous. But I saw the exact same thing happen in these other cities. And as remarkable as it is, and as unbelievable as it is, I

therefore conclude it's something even worse, frankly, than racism.

WSWS: What would you think that would be?

ME: It's this culture of corruption where they're not going to do the job they're paid to do. And how can you force them to do a job that they're paid to do if they don't want to do it? No one ever anticipated such a thing. There's no check and balance. When I found CDC engaged in scientific misconduct in 2004 and Congress reamed them, they just responded by writing another falsified report. So what are you going to do when no one ever thought such a thing would happen? We don't have a check and balance on their power.

WSWS: What would it take to ensure that children aren't poisoned by their drinking water, to ensure that this doesn't happen again?

ME: We have to get caring, competent, ethical people working at these agencies. These are good jobs. There are people who would love to do this sort of work. Unfortunately, these agencies chase away and destroy anyone who is an ethical, courageous actor. That's the nature of these agencies. They fire people for doing their job. So how does it come to be that an agency becomes so corrupt? It's because they make a culture in which good people leave and weak, unethical cowards stay.

WSWS: Where do you think that's rooted?

ME: I think we allow this to happen. I blame us. Why do we tolerate this? Where is our common morality? The great thing about Flint is both Republicans and Democrats are outraged. Little kids understand what happened in Flint. So maybe something can change. But if we're always pointing the finger at each other and saying it's a political issue, if the Democrats point at the Republicans, and the Republicans point to the Democrats, we never address the root issue here, which is the corrupt culture at these agencies.

WSWS: That Congressional hearing had quite a lot of finger-pointing and grandstanding.

ME: Right.

WSWS: We've known about the dangers of lead on children for decades —

ME: You're talking millennia. You go back to the Romans, they knew lead in water was dangerous. This is the first known, environmental contaminant. There's no disputing it's danger. It cannot get more black and white than this.



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