

The Flint water crisis and the US elections

Jerry White
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On the eve of Tuesday's Michigan primary election, a critical contest in the presidential campaigns of both the Republican and Democratic parties, the lead poisoning of the water supply in Flint has emerged as a central political issue. The water crisis was placed at the center of Sunday night's televised debate between Democratic candidates Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders, held on the Flint campus of the University of Michigan.

The horrific consequences for Flint residents of the decision by state and local officials to switch the city's water source to the highly polluted Flint River has become a focal point for the indignation of working people throughout the country angered by deteriorating living conditions and a political system that is contemptuous of their needs. Thousands of children have been permanently affected by the lead poisoning and at least ten people have died as a result of diseases linked to the crisis.

Overwhelming evidence has emerged showing that officials were well aware of the dangers posed to the city's 100,000 residents both before and after the decision was made on the water supply. The political representatives of the ruling class, including the Obama administration's Environmental Protection Agency, ignored the signs that the water had been poisoned and sought to suppress complaints and protests by the city's largely working class residents. Emails and other documents released in recent weeks provide ample evidence of a criminal conspiracy that resulted in sickness and death.

When it was no longer possible to conceal the crisis, those responsible, from Michigan's Republican Governor Rick Snyder to the top executives at General Motors, which long ago abandoned the city and left behind nothing but empty lots and toxic waste, launched a cynical charade of hand-wringing and crocodile tears. Aided by the national media, the central

aim of this campaign has been to conceal the real causes of the crisis and make sure that those responsible evade any accountability.

None of these issues were seriously addressed in Sunday's debate. Clinton and Sanders both sought to demagogically exploit the outrage of Flint residents. Both are long-time political functionaries of the American ruling class whose promises to rebuild the city's infrastructure and address the long-term health and educational needs of Flint children will quickly be scrapped once the election is over.

Each of the Democratic presidential aspirants sought to lay blame solely on Governor Snyder and the Republicans. This is absurd, since the mayor, the emergency manager and the City Council members were all Democrats, as was Snyder's treasurer, Andy Dillon. Moreover, the decimation of the nation's infrastructure is the result of a bipartisan policy pursued over many decades and accelerated under the Obama administration. Capital expenditures on transportation and water infrastructure fell 23 percent in inflation-adjusted dollars between 2003 and 2014, according to the Congressional Budget Office.

After the 2008 financial crash, the administration deliberately starved states and municipalities of federal funds, reducing non-military discretionary spending as a percentage of national gross domestic product to its lowest level since 1961. The federal Centers for Disease Control has cut state grants for lead poisoning prevention by more than half since 2009, and the share of children younger than six who are tested has fallen by more than 40 percent.

Leading up to Sunday's debate, Clinton sought to exploit the Flint crisis for electoral gain, attributing the situation to "institutional racism." This attempt to cast the water crisis as a racial issue flies in the face of reality, including the facts that over 40 percent of the city's residents are white and most of the local

politicians involved in the conspiracy are African-American. The purpose of this ruse is to provide cover for the Democratic Party and conceal the fundamental economic and class issues underlying the crisis.

The self-described “democratic socialist” Sanders used the debate to promote economic nationalism and trade war policies. On the eve of the event, Sanders penned an op-ed piece in the *Detroit Free Press* that blamed the Flint crisis not on capitalism, but on “unfair trade policies” that helped companies ship jobs to lower-wage countries.

“Long before Flint’s children were poisoned by contaminated drinking water,” he wrote, “the city was poisoned by disastrous trade policies that allowed GM to eliminate more than 72,000 jobs and move several factories to Mexico.” Sanders criticized Clinton for backing the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), special trade status with China, the Trans-Pacific Partnership and other “disastrous trade deals” with Vietnam, Colombia and Panama.

This is a reactionary attempt to divert working class anger over mass layoffs and factory closures away from the American corporate elite and its political system and pit US workers against their class brothers and sisters in Canada, Mexico, Europe, China and Japan.

The nationalist policies promoted by Sanders complement the anti-immigrant racism and xenophobia of Republican front-runner Donald Trump. In a rally in the Detroit suburb of Warren last Friday, Trump said he would call the head of any American company that moved a factory to Mexico and threaten him with a 35 percent tariff. “Within 24 to 48 hours,” Trump declared, the CEO of Ford would be on the phone to say “they’ll move back.”

A *New York Times* article yesterday noted that Trump had a “rust-belt strategy” of exploiting the economic insecurity of workers in manufacturing states like Michigan, Ohio and Illinois to deliver the normally Democratic states to the Republicans in the November election.

Sanders is similarly working to direct social opposition along channels that serve the political aims of the American ruling class, which is seeking to prevent a further erosion of its global economic position by means of militarism and war.

Sanders’ positions are carefully pitched to the rhetoric employed by the trade unions to divide the

working class and subordinate it to the interests of US corporations. The United Auto Workers (UAW), the United Steelworkers and other unions have long used economic nationalism to divide the international working class and suppress the resistance of American workers to layoffs, wage cuts and speedup. The city of Flint is littered with the catastrophic results of this reactionary policy. One can still see rusting UAW signs outside of the parking lots of empty factories that read “No foreign imports.”

Nothing could more clearly expose the fraud of Sanders’ socialist pretensions. If the case for real socialism is to be made anywhere, it is in Flint. The water crisis in the city—like Hurricane Katrina, the financial crash of 2008 and the BP oil spill—has revealed certain fundamental realities of American capitalist society. Everything is done to serve the interests of the corporate and financial elite, who are rewarded for their crimes with bank bailouts, deregulation and tax cuts, while workers and their families see their schools and basic services destroyed, their pensions looted and their wages and living standards decimated.

In opposition to the pro-capitalist and nationalist program of Sanders and the entire political establishment, what is needed is the political mobilization of the working class as an independent force to break the stranglehold of the corporate and financial aristocracy over society. The obscene fortunes of the billionaires must be seized and utilized to help meet the needs of society, including the rebuilding and modernization of basic infrastructure. The auto industry and all of the major corporations and banks must be nationalized under the collective and democratic control of the working class. This must be part of the socialist reorganization of the US and world economy to ensure the social rights of all workers—to good-paying and secure jobs, safe and clean water, and a future for the next generation that is free of poverty, inequality and war.



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