

Flint meeting examines background of city's water crisis

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The Socialist Equality Party and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) held a well-attended public meeting Thursday night on the campus of the University of Michigan, Flint. Workers and young people from around the Flint area participated in the event, which the SEP called to discuss the social and political background to the Flint water crisis.

Chairing the meeting was Lawrence Porter, assistant national secretary of the SEP. In his opening remarks, Porter noted that the crisis in Flint over the lead poisoning of the city's water paralleled the drive by state authorities to force the city of Detroit into bankruptcy and strip workers of benefits and pensions. The crisis, he said, was one aspect of a social counterrevolution aimed at rolling back all the gains won by workers in decades of struggle.

Porter then introduced the night's main speaker, Jerry White, a member of the national committee of the SEP and a writer for the *World Socialist Web Site*. White began by noting that the water crisis in Flint had become the focal point of anger of working people around the United States over deteriorating living conditions and a political system that is contemptuous of their needs.

Overwhelming evidence, White said, has pointed to the fact that state, federal and local officials were aware of the dangers both before and after the decision to shift the city's water source from the Detroit water system to the polluted Flint River. The highly corrosive Flint River water leached lead from the city's antiquated piping, poisoning the city's 100,000 residents.

He continued, "When it was no longer possible to conceal the crisis, officials in Washington DC, Lansing, and Flint began a campaign of handwringing and shedding crocodile tears while offering only a pittance compared to the massive resources needed to provide lifelong care for affected children and rebuild the city's infrastructure."

While Democratic politicians had attempted to lay all blame at the feet of Michigan Republican Governor Rick Snyder, in reality officials of both political parties are deeply implicated, White said.

In his report, White demonstrated that the crisis in Flint was part of a broader social crisis gripping the United States. While countless billions are being made available for war and for bank bailouts, social infrastructure has been systematically starved for funds. The only beneficiary has been the corporate elite, who have snared 95 percent of all income gains since 2008 while corporate profits are at the highest percentage in relation to US gross domestic product since World War II.

In opposition to this, White noted the signs of increasing militancy in the working class, including the protests over lead poisoning in Flint and the recent sickouts by Detroit teachers. The Democratic primary victories of Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, who sometimes refers to himself as a socialist, are another sign of this radicalization, he asserted.

However, White disputed the claim that Sanders offered a genuine alternative for the working class. He pointed in particular to the nationalist policies promoted by both Sanders and Republican presidential frontrunner Donald Trump. Instead of blaming capitalism for the decimation of jobs, Sanders blames trade deals such as the North American Free Trade agreement (NAFTA)

White continued: "Sander's criticisms are not made from the standpoint of the interests of the working class, that is from the standpoint of the fight to unify American workers with our class brothers and sisters in China, Mexico and other countries to fight the globally organized capitalist transnational companies. Instead, Sanders is seeking 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 workers in Canada, Mexico, Europe, China and Japan."

The nationalist policies promoted by the United Auto Workers in Flint had not saved a single job, said White. Indeed, General Motors employment in the city had fallen from 80,000 to around 5,000 today. Instead, this nationalism disrupted the international unity of the working class needed to wage an effective struggle against the transnational

corporations.

In concluding his remarks, White said that the situation in Flint presented the strongest possible case for socialism. “What is needed,” he said, “is the political mobilization of the working class as an independent force to break the stranglehold of the corporate and financial aristocracy over society.”

In the ensuing discussion, a number of Flint area residents spoke. Dorothy with the Flint Water Warriors said, “They knew exactly what was in that water. Flint did not have the proper equipment to treat it. It was not only lead; it was copper and other things.

“It is not a black or a white issue. This problem is all over the United States. It will take a revolt. No one should have had to drink that water.”

In response to a question from a U of M Flint student about the next steps that residents should take, White responded, “The politicians all claim to have heard your voices, but they are not proposing anything. They are not going to budge from the defense of a system where wealth is controlled by a tiny handful.

“What the working class needs is a party that defends our interests. We have to defend our class interests just as ruthlessly as the rich defend their interests.”

Another student asked how a socialist government could avoid the danger of “authoritarianism.” In answer, White reviewed the lessons of Trotsky’s struggle against the bureaucratic degeneration of the Soviet Union under Stalin. “There was an alternative that was fought for by Trotsky,” he said. “He insisted that you could not have socialism in Russia apart from a revolution in Western Europe and internationally. The answer is an international strategy for the working class.”

After the meeting, the WSWS spoke with several of those who attended. Tony, a social work student at U of M Flint, said, “I grew up all my life a conservative, a ‘Reagan conservative.’ Now, with all I’ve seen, and especially with regards to water crises globally, I’ve really changed my views.

“I used to think that the ‘free market’ could work. But now I’ve witnessed the lack of oversight, the lack of transparency. It shows that big changes are necessary. Today’s two speakers [White and Porter] were so genuine. I feel like I’ve been educated to take on the establishment and the oppression that holds back working-class people.

“Our system is based on profit. But the working class is the majority, and we have to work in our own interest. Politically, I’m in line with what I heard here today. I believe everyone deserves universal human rights, including the best medical care, honest and equal education, water, healthy food, protection from natural disasters.

“We need an equal distribution of resources so that everyone can be happy and thrive. People should be able to work the job they want to. If someone wants to be a farmer, or a teacher, they should be able to do that. And it doesn’t matter if they are American, African or Indian. I don’t want these things just for me. I only want it if everyone can have it.

“If [the US military] asked me to go to war again today, I wouldn’t go. But I will fight for my beliefs. I can’t stand by and watch someone oppress another.”

Melinda French, a social work student at U of M Flint, said, “I was terrified for the children. Their immune systems were affected.”

She spoke about the recent debate between Democratic presidential candidates Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders in Flint. “Why weren’t they here years ago?” she asked. “The evidence shows this started two years ago.

“I think responsibility goes all the way down to local officials. They had to know, they were here every day. The poor yelled, but no one would listen until someone with an educational background started saying that something was wrong. They don’t care about us.”

Rashard, a former U of M Flint student, said, “I was glad to be able to come. I was enlightened regarding the capitalist system in contrast to the information that we have been fed by the mainstream media.

“The speakers showed the real truth behind the water crisis. The question is, ‘Who will pay for all of this?’ I believe the government should be responsible, since we are supposed to be the wealthiest country on earth. I don’t think the working class should suffer at the expense of the rich.

“There are many problems citizens have faced for years. They have been slow to act on the federal and local levels on employment and education. We are not fixing problems in the US and we are spending billions to bomb other countries.”



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