

The crimes behind the US lead water crisis

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On Tuesday, Marc Edwards, a professor of civil engineering at Virginia Tech University and the leading expert on lead contamination in drinking water, testified before the US Congress on the ongoing crisis in Flint, Michigan.

Dr. Edwards had likely read an advance copy of a report in this week's edition of *USA Today*, which quoted him extensively, reporting that lead had been found in the drinking water of hundreds of schools and child care centers throughout the country. The report suggested, based on an independent analysis of government data, that as many as one-fifth of water systems in the US have dangerous levels of lead contamination.

Speaking in a restrained tone before the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, many of whose members were absent, Edwards described what amounts to a conspiracy by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), under two presidential administrations, Republican and Democratic, to allow states and municipalities to falsify water quality testing results.

EPA Regional Administrator Susan Hedman, Edwards said, "aided, abetted and emboldened the unethical behavior of civil servants at the State of Michigan Department of Environmental Quality." Referring to a case of lead contamination ten years ago in the drinking water of the nation's capital, Washington DC, Edwards charged that the EPA "wrote falsified scientific reports and created a climate in which anything goes across the United States, anything at all to cover up the health harm from leaded drinking water."

He expressed perplexity at the "willful blindness" of government officials, who were "unremorseful" and "completely unrepentant."

Edwards' comments and the report in *USA Today* are the latest in a series of revelations on the elevated lead

levels present throughout the country's water systems. Flint is not unique. Reports have pointed to lead levels higher than Flint's in Cleveland, Ohio, in Jackson, Mississippi and in cities throughout Pennsylvania.

Edwards could not hide his exasperation at one basic reality: "If a landlord were to engage in similar practices, and through their negligence, to allow even a single child to be exposed to lead paint risk, the EPA would argue for prosecution and incarceration. Yet, the EPA has allowed entire cities to be unnecessarily exposed to elevated lead in their drinking water."

Edwards' comments raise a critical point: Why is no one being prosecuted for the actions that have created this situation? While various Democratic Party officials have, in an effort at damage control and blame shifting, suggested that Michigan Governor Rick Snyder should resign, no one is calling for his arrest and indictment.

In testimony in the same room two days later, Snyder, whose administration covered up the poisoning of residents for at least a year, declared, "Local, state and federal officials—we all failed the families of Flint."

No, these officials did not "fail" Flint residents, as if it were a matter of miscalculations or missteps. Rather, they knowingly made decisions that have led to permanent disabilities and impairments of untold thousands of children and have been linked to at least ten deaths from an outbreak of Legionnaires' Disease, then hid and doctored evidence showing that the city's water was not safe to drink.

At the federal level, the EPA under the Bush and Obama administrations has allowed cities throughout the country to willfully ignore the government's own standards. The consequences of these actions are not yet known. How many people have suffered needlessly from permanent brain damage or other effects of high lead levels? How many people have died?

The United States spends over a trillion dollars a year on its military, which President Obama bragged at this

year's State of the Union address was bigger than that of the next 10 countries combined. It is home to as many billionaires as the next five countries combined. Even as a radical expansion of the military is underway, public capital investment in transportation and water infrastructure has been slashed by 23 percent since 2003. The cuts to education, health care and other social spending are comparable.

The crisis in Flint follows a pattern in which preventable catastrophes are inflicted on the population, and no one is held responsible. A hurricane can largely destroy one of the most important cities in the country, New Orleans, due to the underfunding of infrastructure, leading to more than a thousand deaths, and no one goes to jail.

The banks and investors produce a financial disaster and a global economic crisis, and no one is punished. Revelations of the manipulation of exchange rates and actions to defraud people of their homes have produced at most wrist-slap penalties. The US government has launched wars based on lies, the CIA has tortured prisoners, then hacked government computers to cover it up, and again, no one is prosecuted, let alone convicted.

The actions of government officials are dictated by the character of the social system that they defend, one that is based on the subordination of everything to the interests of the financial and corporate elite. That the United States is run in the interests of a criminal cabal has received yet another confirmation in the catastrophe in Flint and what it has exposed about the state of infrastructure in the country as a whole.



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