

Why the New York Times is pushing racial politics in Flint

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The *New York Times* continued its efforts to present the lead poisoning of Flint, Michigan's water supply as a racial issue with an editorial in its Friday edition headlined, "The Racism at the Heart of Flint's Crisis." The newspaper distorts both the factual record and the content of a report released Wednesday by the state-appointed Flint Water Advisory Task Force.

That report presents no evidence that racism was a significant factor in either the decision of state and local officials to break away from the Detroit Water and Sewerage System and draw the city's water supply instead from the polluted Flint River, or the nearly two-year refusal of the federal and state governments to respond to complaints from Flint residents as well as medical evidence of widespread lead poisoning and a fatal outbreak of Legionnaires' disease linked to the tainted water supply.

While the report concludes that what happened in Flint was a case of "environmental injustice," linking this to the fact that Flint residents "are majority Black or African American and among the most impoverished of any metropolitan area in the United States," it specifically denies that the term implies racial discrimination. "Environmental injustice," it states, "is not about malevolent intent or deliberate attacks on specific populations, nor does it come in measures that overtly violate civil rights."

This does not prevent the *Times* from presenting the report as confirmation that the Flint crisis is all about race. It begins its editorial by asserting: "An important new report makes clear the principal cause of the water crisis in Flint Mich.: the state government's blatant disregard for the lives and health of poor and black residents of a distressed city."

But what about the lives and health of poor and *white* residents of the city, who make up more than 37 percent of Flint's population? Was the disregard any less blatant toward them?

The editorial goes on to say, "While [the report] avoids using the word 'racism,' it clearly identifies the central role that race and poverty play in this story." Here the *Times* employs a verbal sleight of hand, fusing together the

concepts of race and poverty, as if to suggest that they are identical and inseparable. Of course, they are not. A large majority of poor people in the United States are white, and poverty in Flint is pervasive among both white and black workers.

Further on, the newspaper writes: "[Governor] Snyder did not inspire confidence when he said on Wednesday that he did not know if race was a factor in the Flint disaster, even though the record shows that the concerns of poor and minority residents were dismissed by his administration in ways that *would never have happened with rich and white communities.*" [Emphasis added]

True. But as the *Times* well knows, it would never have happened with rich black communities either. The newspaper is once again identifying poverty with race in order to obscure the primacy of economic status and social class in the Flint disaster.

This requires a willful and cynical misrepresentation of the facts. It is a matter of record that white residents were among the most active and persistent campaigners against the poisoning of the water supply, especially in the early stages of the crisis. Their concerns were dismissed no less ruthlessly than those of black residents. In the various protests by Flint residents, black and white workers and youth have come together, drawn into a common struggle by the criminal actions of a political system that represents the banks and corporations.

It is precisely to preempt and subvert the growth of class consciousness that the *Times*, the "newspaper of record" of the American ruling class, ferociously promotes racial politics. In addition to fueling divisions within the working class on the basis of secondary questions such as race and gender, this brand of capitalist politics serves to provide political cover for and promote illusions in the Obama administration and the Democratic Party.

The Democrats have for decades relied on racial and identity politics to obscure their subordination to Wall Street and cultivate a constituency within the most privileged layers of the middle class, black as well as white. Over the

same period, the Democratic Party has worked hand in glove with the Republicans to drive back the social conditions and living standards of the working class and increase the share of income and wealth going to the rich and the super-rich.

The *Times* cites the task force report to cover up the bipartisan character of the Flint disaster and place virtually the entire blame on Michigan Governor Snyder and the Republicans. It plays fast and loose with the facts in order to do so, writing, “The [Michigan Department of Environmental Quality] failed to instruct officials in Flint, *which was under state control at the time*, to treat its water with chemicals that would have prevented lead from leaching from pipes and plumbing fixtures into the drinking water.” [Emphasis added]

The *Times* omits the fact that the “state control” of Flint was in the form of a state-appointed emergency manager, who exercised virtual dictatorial control over the operations of the city. It is convenient for the newspaper to make this omission since the emergency manager at the time of the water switch was a Democrat, as were most of the local officials who approved the decision to break away from the Detroit system.

The emergency manager and the other Democratic officials were also, for the most part, black. The *Times* skips over this fact because it cuts across its racialist narrative.

Both the *Times* and the Flint task force report conceal the economic and class interests behind the Flint disaster. It is in reality the result of an asset grab by powerful moneyed interests intent on getting control of the city’s water system for their own personal gain. They utilized the emergency manager setup to evade any democratic accountability, while relying on their bribed servants in both political parties to rubber-stamp the scheme.

In a column published Thursday, *Detroit News* columnist Daniel Howes lifts the lid ever so slightly on this backstory to the crisis. He writes: “Less clear are the politics surrounding the decision to award a sole-source contract in June 2013 to a local engineering firm—Lockwood, Andrews & Newnam Inc., or LAN—to ready the city’s water treatment plan for its planned switch to Flint River water. The task force says the firm did not respond to its written questions.”

The firm, actually based in Houston, was awarded a contract for as much as \$3.8 million by the Karegnondi Water Authority (KWA), the shadowy entity overseeing the plan to eventually run a separate pipeline from the Flint area to Lake Huron.

Howes writes: “KWA’s financial model for the new entity needs Flint and its nearly 100,000 residents to be paying members of the KWA, lest the dream of water independence from Detroit be dashed by financial reality.” He goes on to note that the task force report recommends that state

authorities “conduct an investigative review of the development and approach of the Karegnondi Water Authority and the city of Flint’s commitments to KWA water purchases,” which he calls “a vaguely suspicious suggestion...”

The Flint catastrophe is a crime of capitalism. It is the outcome of decades of social devastation in Flint and scores of other former industrial cities and towns across the country resulting from a deliberate policy of deindustrialization and promotion of financial parasitism.

In Flint, the birthplace of General Motors and scene of the great sit-down strike that established the industrial unions in the 1930s, GM employment has gone from 80,000 at its peak to a mere 5,000 today. The city’s population has fallen by more than 50 percent from its high point of 200,000 in the early 1960s. The city’s poverty rate is over 40 percent.

The decay of capitalism has reached the point of criminal conspiracies by financial oligarchs and their political puppets to plunder the economy to satisfy their boundless greed and steal what little remains in the bank accounts of working people and in the public domain. The model was the Detroit bankruptcy, which roughly coincided with the shift of Flint’s water supply. That operation, which was applauded by the *Times* and the Obama administration, utilized a Wall Street-backed emergency manager to set a precedent for appropriating public employees’ pension and health benefits and privatizing public entities from parks and water systems to art museums.

A crime of capitalism can be answered only by a united struggle of the working class to replace capitalism with socialism, which includes the nationalization of the utilities along with the banks and major corporations and their transformation into publicly owned entities under the democratic control of the working class.



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