Two years of the Flint water crisis

A crime of capitalism

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April 25 marks two years since Michigan state and local city officials made the fateful switch of Flint's water supply from the Detroit water system to the polluted Flint River. This reckless and criminal action set in motion a chain of events that resulted in the poisoning of an entire city of 100,000 residents.

Despite the exposure of the poisoning of the Flint water system, there are no plans to replace the city's dangerous and antiquated lead water pipes. Instead, the state is moving to wash its hands of the matter, summed up in its recent edict to Flint residents that it will not continue to supply bottled water past the month of August. For its part, the Obama administration, after an initial show of outrage, has failed to appropriate any significant funds to address the crisis.

The needs of the Flint population are enormous. A whole generation of children face learning and neurological problems due to exposure to tainted water caused by the leaching of lead from pipes that were not treated to carry corrosive river water. It is necessary to replace lead piping to thousands of homes in the city, a project estimated to cost as much as $1.5 billion.

Meanwhile, at least 12 Flint residents have died due to an outbreak of Legionnaires' disease believed to be linked to the switch in the city's water supply.

A city long associated with the struggles of the working class—the site of the General Motors sit-down strike that established the industrial unions in the 1930s—is once again in the forefront of a major social and political struggle. Flint residents, far from being passive victims, are fighting back against the poisoning of their water supply and the attempts by the state and local governments to cover up the disaster.

An examination of the background to the Flint crisis and how it unfolded reveals in the starkest form the subordination of the public good to the pursuit of private gain and the domination of the government at all levels by corporate interests. The Flint disaster is a crime of capitalism.

The decision to switch Flint's water supply from the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD), its long-time source, grew out of mercenary financial considerations related to the building of a new pipeline from Lake Huron by the Karegnondi Water Authority (KWA). Commercial interests hoped to profit handsomely from the pipeline, including by supplying water to fracking operations in the state. The water from the KWA, unlike that supplied by Detroit, would be raw and untreated lake water, therefore cheaper and more suitable for industrial operations.

KWA financial backers needed Flint's participation to make the project profitable. But Flint's outdated water treatment plant required major upgrades to handle raw KWA water, an investment the KWA apparently had no intention of funding.

The political framework for carrying out this money-making scheme was provided by the "emergency manager" system imposed by Republican Governor Rick Snyder and the Republican-controlled state legislature, with critical support from leading Democrats. Under this completely anti-democratic setup, the state declares cities, towns and school districts to be in a "financial emergency" and appoints so-called emergency managers to take over the running of the jurisdictions.

The state-appointed czars have virtually unlimited powers, relegating elected officials to the status of bystanders. The test case was the appointment of an emergency manager and declaration of bankruptcy in Detroit in 2013, which was used to slash the pensions and health benefits of city workers and privatize public assets, including the Detroit Institute of Arts.

The appointment of an emergency manager for Flint followed soon after the Detroit operation. At the same time Flint was preparing to switch its water source, plans were being laid to turn the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department over to a regional water authority, the first step toward privatization.

Snyder's state treasurer at the time was Andy Dillon, a Democrat, who had played an instrumental role in the Detroit bankruptcy. He gave the state's approval to switch Flint's water supply from the Detroit system, Flint's water source for some 50 years. Since the Karegnondi pipeline would not be completed until 2016, the state-appointed emergency manager for Flint proposed to draw the city's water from the Flint River in the meantime, a move he claimed would save some $5 million.

Flint City Council members and the mayor, all Democrats, signed off on these moves.

The decision to switch to the Flint River came despite a history of groundwater contamination in the area and despite the fact that the river had been a dumping ground for General Motors factories. At times, moreover, it had been the repository for city sewage overflows.

According to a former top official in the DWSD, Flint rejected a proposal to remain with the Detroit water system that would have saved some $800 million over the life of a 30-year contract. The deal would have saved about 20 percent over the proposal by the KWA.

Even before the actual switch, concerns were raised. Michael Glasgow, laboratory and water quality supervisor for the city of Flint, wrote a cautionary email eight days before the switch to Flint River water. In it, he warned the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) that the city's water plant was not ready to begin treatment of Flint River water.

Within a short of period of the April 25, 2014 switch, complaints began to pour in. Residents told of rashes from bathing in the water and noted its foul taste and smell. Local and state officials responded by declaring that the water was safe and met quality standards.

Between August and September 2014, the city issued three boil water alerts for elevated levels of coliform bacteria in the water. At about this time, a leading environmental expert at Michigan State University noted that the high bacteria levels were a sign that Flint's water distribution system had a "shaky foundation" and was susceptible to other forms of contamination as well.

In October, 2014, General Motors said it would stop using Flint water in

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its factories because it was corroding car parts. GM reached an agreement to start using Lake Huron water instead. Nothing of this was communicated to Flint residents, who continued to drink the tainted water. GM's move raised the obvious question, if the water was not safe even for industrial purposes, how could it be safe for human consumption?

Aides to Governor Snyder did begin raising concerns about the Flint water supply. Michael Gadola, top legal counsel to Snyder, sent an email remarking, "to anyone who grew up in Flint as I did, the notion that I would be getting my drinking water from the Flint River is downright scary." However, state officials did not issue any warnings to the public or suggest that the city shift back to Detroit water.

A new crisis erupted in January 2015 over reports by the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality noting excess levels of trihalomethanes—or TTHM—a byproduct of chlorination, in Flint's water. Among the risks associated with TTHM are liver and kidney disease as well as cancer.

The MDEQ report sparked calls by several Flint City Council members to switch the city off the Flint River water to Lake Huron. At this point, Detroit offered Flint the option to reconnect to its water supply for a $4 million connection fee plus $900,000 a month, but Flint Emergency Manager Darnell Earley, a Democrat, rejected the proposal. Earley held fast even when Detroit offered to waive the $4 million fee.

Later that month, at a massive town hall meeting in Flint, local officials offered bromides and false assurances to residents over the safety of their drinking water. Meanwhile, a state epidemiologist sent an email to local health officials about an outbreak of deadly Legionnaires' disease. She proposed that cases of the disease be mapped to the Flint water system to determine if there was a correlation.

In February 2015, the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) notified the MDEQ that it had detected dangerous levels of lead in the drinking water of Flint resident LeeAnne Walters. She had contacted the EPA about dark sediments in her tap water, which she felt were affecting the health of her children. Subsequent testing of her water revealed that it contained 104 parts per billion (ppb) of lead, far in excess of the EPA limit of 15 ppb.

The next month, the Flint City Council took a symbolic vote to switch the city's water supply back to the Detroit water system. The city's new emergency manager, Jerry Ambrose, vetoed the action and said Detroit water was no safer than Flint's.

Later reports documented that throughout this period state officials were doctoring test data from Flint water, making it appear that lead levels were lower than test results actually indicated. MDEQ officials also impeded an investigation into the source of the outbreak of Legionnaires' disease, believed tied to Flint water.

In the meantime, an EPA official, Miguel Del Toral, reviewed the data from the home of LeeAnne Walters and became increasingly concerned about the elevated lead levels in Flint drinking water and the failure of the city to use corrosion control to prevent lead leaching from the city's antiquated lead pipes. He issued a memo warning that the city was not using corrosion control and noted that a Virginia Tech University team had found lead levels at Walters' home as high as 13,200 ppb. The EPA classifies water with a lead level of 5,000 ppb as hazardous waste. Del Toral noted that three other Flint homes that were tested showed elevated lead levels.

Top EPA officials in the Obama administration stonewalled Del Toral. They made sure that his findings were not made public and that Del Toral himself was isolated. An MDEQ official bragged that Del Toral had been "handled" and that Flint residents would not be hearing from him again.

Over the summer, concerns about the high lead levels in Flint drinking water escalated, but the state still took no action. In a meeting with state officials, Walters got only smirks and laughter in response to her complaints. Residents of Flint collected 26,000 online signatures demanding that the city switch back to Detroit water.

In late August, Virginia Tech Professor Marc Edwards, in response to a request from Flint residents, notified the state that he would be conducting a test of lead levels in the Flint water system. The initial results of Edwards' testing were shocking, with a high percentage of the homes tested exceeding the federal 15ppb standard. But the MDEQ rejected the results, insisting that Flint water was safe. They accused Edwards of "pulling a rabbit out of his hat."

In late September, Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha from Flint's Hurley Medical Center released the results of her own testing on lead levels in the blood of Flint children. She found that the number of children with elevated lead in their blood nearly doubled following the switch to Flint River water. State officials ridiculed Dr. Hanna-Attisha's findings and personally vilified her.

But the cover-up soon collapsed. The Michigan Department of Health and Human Services verified Dr. Hanna-Attisha's findings. As popular outrage mounted, state and federal officials began a campaign of public hand-wringing and finger-pointing, seeking to evade blame for the disaster. Even then, remedial action was utterly inadequate and proceeded at a snail's pace. The city of Flint did not switch back to the Detroit water system until October 16, 2015, and the state of Michigan did not declare a state of emergency in the city until January 2016.

For its part, the Obama administration refused to provide any substantial federal disaster relief funds to Flint on the grounds that the catastrophe was man-made. In the end, Obama dispersed a paltry $5 million, a derisory amount demonstrating once again the contempt and indifference of the White House toward working people.

As the crisis became national and global news, a parade of Democratic Party celebrities including the Reverend Jesse Jackson, film producer Michael Moore and Democratic presidential candidates Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders visited Flint. They offered false assurances that residents' concerns would be addressed while seeking to place all the blame on the Republican Snyder administration.

Just this month, Professor Edwards reported the results of testing that indicates Flint's water is still not safe to drink. Indeed, several homes showed dramatic increases in lead levels from the first round of testing. Despite this, state officials told residents that the water was safe for showering and bathing.

The Flint water crisis is a crime—socially, morally and legally. Those responsible include local, state and federal officials in both the Democratic and Republican parties and the corporate-financial interests they represent. The events in Flint have drawn the curtain on a broader social crisis in the United States spawned by decades of neglect of infrastructure, as vital resources have been diverted to support the criminal manipulations of the financial aristocracy and fund the Pentagon war machine.

In the wake of the exposure of the Flint cover-up, reports of lead poisoning are mounting nationwide. This includes the Detroit Public Schools, just 70 miles from Flint, where 15 schools tested were in excess of the federal standard of 15 ppb for lead in drinking water.

From this experience, definite conclusions must be drawn. The subordination of society to private commercial interests is incompatible with the right of the population to basic necessities, including safe and clean drinking water. Both political parties, Democrats and Republicans, serve at the behest of the banks and big corporations, running roughshod over the working population in the interests of corporate profit.

There has been a concerted attempt by the politicians, particularly the Democrats, and the media to depict the catastrophe in Flint as a racial issue. This is a false presentation of the crisis. Its purpose is to obscure the fundamental class issues that underlie the poisoning of an overwhelmingly working class, multi-racial population that has been devastated by decades of plant closures, layoffs and budget cuts.

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The issue in Flint is fundamentally that of class, not race. Over 40 percent of the residents of Flint are white, and both white and black workers have played leading roles in exposing the outrage committed against the people of Flint. What has characterized the protests over the water crisis is the mobilization of white and black, young and old in a common struggle against a common enemy.

Efforts to push racial politics serve the interests of the ruling elite by dividing the working class and diverting attention from the central role of the capitalist parties and politicians and capitalist private ownership of the banks, corporations and utilities in the decimation of the city.

Absolutely no credence can be given to the claims of the big business politicians that they are addressing the crisis in Flint. The record of both parties demonstrates their complete indifference to the victims of disasters, both natural and man-made. Just ask the victims of Love Canal, Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill.

Love Canal, the Niagara Falls, New York neighborhood polluted by toxic chemicals, has never been properly cleaned up and lawsuits continue more than 35 years after the first exposure of the dangers.

A large portion of the victims of Hurricane Katrina were permanently driven from their homes. Forced to live in shoddily built government trailers, some 17,000 got sick from exposure to formaldehyde. Meanwhile, the public school system in devastated New Orleans was dismantled and replaced with an inferior system of for-profit charters, while social inequality soared and poverty increased.

In the case of the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, the Obama administration shielded oil executives from criminal prosecution. Only a small portion of the money set aside to aid victims of the disaster was actually spent. Those who received payments usually had to settle for a fraction of their actual losses. The Gulf Coast is still suffering from the ecological consequences of the disaster, which have never been adequately investigated or mitigated.

The working class must rely on its own independent strength to seek redress for the crimes committed against it in Flint and in cities all across the country. Flint has become a national and international issue—a symbol of the decadence and failure of the profit system.

It is to their fellow workers throughout the US and internationally that Flint residents should turn to mount a counteroffensive. It must be based on the understanding that even the most basic human needs, such as clean water, have become political and revolutionary questions. It is a matter of building an independent socialist movement of the working class, fighting to break the grip of the financial elite over economic and social life, and turning the banks, corporations and utilities into publicly owned and democratically controlled institutions.

This is the perspective advanced by the Socialist Equality Party.

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