

Michigan residents protest contaminated water at community meeting

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At a Jackson, Michigan, community meeting called to discuss the widespread problems with contaminated water in the state, residents of the Arbor Village Mobile Home Community described deplorable living conditions and expressed frustration at officials' lack of concern for their plight.

The residents, whose horrific experiences were recently detailed in a *World Socialist Web Site* photo essay, vividly described their brutal reality, including living with corrosive and highly contaminated water that runs nearly black out of the faucet; being charged exorbitant rates by the community's water company, sometimes upwards of \$250 monthly for water that is unsafe to drink; and water service outages that leave them without water for days at a time.

Residents recently told the WSWs that they had been living without water for three days.

The meeting was convened by the JXN Community Forum, a joint venture between the Jackson District Library and the Universalist Unitarian Church of East Liberty, Michigan. The speakers included Todd Knepper, director of the City of Jackson Department of Public Works, and Randy Block, director of the Michigan Unitarian Universalist Social Justice Network.

Knepper described the Jackson water treatment process, which uses the Langelier Saturation Index (LSI) to monitor the water's pH level and prevent pipe corrosion. Despite trying to reassure those in attendance that Jackson water was safe to drink, Knepper's remarks inadvertently revealed that vicious budget cuts have had a deleterious effect on the city's water infrastructure. The water treatment plant, which pumps 24 million gallons of water daily for a city of over 33,000 people, has only nine water technicians on staff.

Knepper said that an estimated 80 percent of the water service lines in the city contained lead, and that only a thin coating of scale in the pipes prevented lead from leaching into the water. Knepper insisted that the LSI form of corrosion control prevented this scale from deteriorating. The failure of a similar method of corrosion control in Washington, D.C., led to that city's disastrous lead-in-water

crisis in 2003-2004.

Block's remarks focused on the political aspects of the water crisis in Flint, as well as the water issues facing residents in Detroit, Highland Park and elsewhere. He referred to the water crisis in Flint as a "canary in a coal mine," pointing to the widening scope of water problems facing more and more people around the globe. He denounced the antidemocratic role of unelected emergency managers in Flint and Detroit who facilitated the switch to the Flint River, and he repeatedly proclaimed that "water is a human right." However, he made no call for the comprehensive replacement of lead pipes in these cities, instead insisting that those in attendance should lobby members of Congress to pass various forms of piecemeal legislation, which would do little to stem the crisis.

Moreover, Block framed the issue largely in terms of race, making the claim that water problems were driven by "institutional racism" and were unlikely to affect majority-white areas. This mirrors the reactionary political line of media outlets such as the *New York Times*, which promote a racist perspective in order to obscure the fundamental class dynamics of the social attacks on water infrastructure.

In any case, the experiences of the Arbor Village residents shatter the myth that white workers are somehow immune to the social crisis bearing down upon the entire working class.

During the question-and-answer period, Arbor Village residents passionately described the appalling conditions under which they live.

"Our water comes from a private company that we get charged monthly for," one resident said. "For the last three days, they have had our water off. This does not affect my bill. I pay at least \$45 every month whether I use water or not. My bill runs anywhere between \$60 and \$125. I've gotten a bill for \$250 claiming that I used 34,000 gallons of water in one month. ... If you do not pay your water bill, they will add it onto your rent, and when you cannot pay it, they evict you. They add on court fees, and they evict you.

"The water company that this comes from is in Burton, Michigan, right there where the Flint River is," she

continued. “We have the same company that the Flint water system has, and we live in Jackson County. I’m not saying my water comes from them, but it’s being billed from them.” Many of those in attendance agreed that the company, Universal Utilities, is engaged in a scam to squeeze residents for utilities payments.

“We haven’t had water in three days,” one resident said. “That’s dangerous. That’s very dangerous. ... We can’t flush our toilet. That can cause hepatitis, leaving the feces inside of your home like that. If it backs up into your tub, there’s nothing we can do about it. Who do we go to? Who do we ask for help? And why is it fair that it’s happening to us?”

Residents said that their children have tested positive for elevated lead levels, and that the unsanitary conditions in the mobile home park have inflicted multiple illnesses on their families.

“It’s affecting all of us,” one resident said of the illnesses. “Is it coming from the water? Is it coming from the pollution they’re letting go underneath my house because it’s easier to let feces water sit there than to dig out the wells, and dig out the drains and have it drain like it’s supposed to?”

“Children live there,” she said. “Are they not supposed to go to school because we can’t shower them? ... Something has to be done. We are getting ill.”

The residents said they have received no assistance from the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services to help pay their outrageous water bills, nor have they received any help from the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality, which is supposed to oversee water quality in any community that serves more than 10 people. Earl Poleski, the member of the Michigan House of Representatives whose district covers the Jackson area, has also done nothing, in spite of attempts by residents to contact him.

“This comes out of my faucet,” one resident said, holding a jug of nearly black water that made meeting attendees gasp in shock and disgust. “That’s what I get. That’s barely enough to flush your toilet. And it’s not just me, there’s more of us. There’s lots of us. And all of us get a different tone, but none of it is clear. None of it. And this is what we bathe in. This is what we cook with. This is what we haven’t been able to receive for three days. But yet I pay \$100 a month when I do receive this quality of water.”

The speakers at the front of the room were clearly stunned to see the jugs of turbid water, unaware that a public health emergency of this magnitude existed less than 10 miles away from the library where the meeting was held, cutting across the racist explanations pushed earlier in the evening. The Arbor Village residents were determined to bring their experiences to light, aware that many other communities across the state and the nation face conditions that are just as

dire.

“I’m not the only one affected by this,” a resident said, “but people are afraid to speak out, and that’s what I’m here for.”

After the meeting, attendees spoke with a WSWS reporter to share their thoughts on the expanding water crisis.

Jane Volk, a retired teacher, expressed outrage at the levels of social inequality that can lead to such conditions.

“CEOs are making more money than they have ever made in the entire history of the United States. This makes it so much worse for the poor people. There’s no one speaking for them. And our legislatures, they don’t seem to care. If it doesn’t affect them directly, they can ignore it.”

When asked about her thoughts on how the drive to war is bankrupting public treasuries and creating conditions like those seen in Arbor Village, she pointed to the hundreds of refugees who had recently died on a capsized boat in the Mediterranean.

“Those poor people. 500 people. That’s a disgrace. You know my grandfather came here in 1827, with no money. He came with his brother. He got free land, which made a huge difference in my family. He left Germany because they were starving. And we’re not doing that anymore. We don’t seem to care about these people.”

Debbie Hartsuff, a retired registered nurse, expressed shock that such intolerable conditions could exist in her own backyard.

“I didn’t know it was this close. I would hate to see that coming out of my faucet.”

When asked about the drive to war, she added, “It’s a horrible thing. They’re not using diplomacy at all. Dropping bombs does not work. We learned that in Iraq. You just are making another generation of people that want to come over here and destroy us, because that’s what we’ve done to their homeland.”

Many of those in attendance, including many Arbor Village residents, expressed interest in the upcoming International May Day rally and the prospect of uniting with workers across the world to defend social rights, including the right to clean drinking water, and halt the drive to war.



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