

Obama to Flint: Shut up and drink the water

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President Barack Obama's remarks Wednesday in Flint, Michigan before an audience of about 1,000 people at Northwestern High School displayed the arrogance and contempt of his administration and the corporate elite toward working people suffering from the devastating effects of lead in their drinking water.

Flanked by a host of state and federal officials who oversaw the disaster in Flint, including Environmental Protection Agency chief Gina McCarthy, Michigan Governor Rick Snyder and Democratic Congressmen and Senators, the president offered a series of false promises and platitudes. He blandly noted certain symptoms of the social crisis in America—crumbling roads and bridges, aging water pipelines, failing public schools—without acknowledging the role of his administration in presiding over this disaster.

In his trademark folksy and patronizing manner, Obama urged the people of Flint to resume drinking the city's water, despite test results showing the persistence of dangerous amounts of lead. At the same time, he dismissed the serious short and long-term effects of the poisoning of Flint children by lead-tainted water. "The kids will be just fine," he said.

To back up this assertion, Obama cited the spurious example of children accidentally chewing on lead flakes from paint. He noted that perhaps he had ingested lead as a child.

Obama also urged Flint residents to begin drinking the water again, which in many areas is brown and still contains high levels of lead. At one point in his remarks he asked for and drank a glass of filtered water, while proclaiming, "This is not a stunt."

LeeAnne Walters, an activist whose actions played a pivotal role in exposing the lead poisoning of Flint's water, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, that she and her husband walked out of the event. "Obama's speech was a complete atrocity. To sit there and tell a city of 100,000 that lead poisoning from drinking water

compares to Obama eating paint chips as a kid is incredible. To compare drinking lead poisoned water to paint chips is like comparing apples to toxic waste. We were devastated. We were told our kids don't matter—not just my kids, but all the children here. We're talking about the long-term effects.

"He told us to drink the water. That means the programs for filters and bottled water will stop."

Obama's visit to Flint coincides with an explosive development of the class struggle in Michigan. It came in the wake of two days of angry protests by teachers in nearby Detroit, Michigan over intolerable conditions in the classrooms and attempts by authorities to rob them of pay. It also coincided with the start of mass water shutoffs in Detroit for households with delinquent bills.

Hundreds of people lined up along the route of Obama's motorcade in Flint, some holding up signs calling for federal help for the city. Many expressed frustration and anger that work on repairing Flint's water system has barely begun.

Estimates of the cost of repairing Flint's antiquated piping run as high as \$1.5 billion. Democrats in Congress have advanced penny-pinching proposals amounting to only a few hundred million at most. Obama himself in his remarks made only vague promises of fixing Flint's pipes, specifying no concrete dollar figure. Instead he touted the work of non-profits, charities and philanthropists in providing assistance to Flint residents. He even cited approvingly the \$2,500 raised by a group of prisoners in Indiana.

A central aim of Obama's remarks was to perpetuate the cover-up of the criminal responsibility of government officials at all levels for the disaster. He made a point at the beginning of the speech of noting the presence of Michigan Governor Rick Snyder and chastising those who responded by booing. "We're doing business here," Obama said.

Obama blamed the crisis on "poor decisions,"

claiming that no one “consciously wanted to hurt the people of Flint.” Instead, officials simply “weren’t attentive to potential problems” when acting under budgetary pressures. “This is not to sort out every screw-up that resulted in contaminated water.”

In fact, officials did not merely make “poor decisions,” they actively conspired to ensure that the water source was switched to the Flint River despite ample warnings of the consequences. Documents show that state environmental officials altered reports in order to minimize the dangers of lead in Flint’s drinking water. When residents began to complain of the contaminated water, local, state and federal officials worked to discredit these complaints and cover-up their responsibility.

Obama wants to avoid an analysis of the “screw-ups” because his administration is itself culpable. The federal Environmental Protection Agency moved to isolate and silence Miguel Del Toral, an EPA official who warned of elevated lead levels and said that the city was not using corrosion control. The agency regularly allows cities throughout the country to violate the government’s own standards.

Both Democratic and Republican officials were involved in the decision to shift Flint’s water supply to the polluted Flint River. This included former Democratic State Treasurer Andy Dillon who signed off on the decision to shift the Flint water supply.

The crisis in Flint is part of a generalized crisis produced by decades of deindustrialization, budget cuts, the elimination of regulations on corporations and growing social inequality. Basic social services are being starved for funds while the Obama administration lavishes countless billions on the Pentagon war machine and handouts to America’s wealthy elite.

Obama’s remarks on Wednesday were a declaration to the people of Flint and throughout the country that nothing will change, no serious assistance will be provided and that workers should simply stop complaining and be quiet.



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