

“He wants to sweep this under the rug”

Flint residents respond to Obama’s speech on water crisis

Our reporters
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World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to Flint residents before and after a speech by President Obama at Northwestern High School on Wednesday. Hundreds of people lined the route of Obama’s motorcade, many holding signs calling for federal aid to Flint.

In his remarks, Obama urged Flint residents to begin drinking the water again, while he sought to cover up the criminal responsibility of government officials for the disaster. His visit to Flint is part of a broader effort at damage control.

Those who spoke to the WSWS expressed anger that they were being urged to use the water, despite recent test results showing dangerously high levels of lead. Some held out hopes that the federal government would intervene.

Rory told the WSWS that Northwestern High School, where Obama had been speaking, was repaired just days before the event. “I heard that yesterday they re-tiled, ceilings, pretty much renovated most of the building. It is not a good environment for children. It is bad that students have been trying to get Northwestern and all the schools fixed. Nobody cares until something like this happens, Obama is coming and they have to fix things or they will get in trouble.”

“It’s ridiculous,” exclaimed Jaquita Gable, an auto parts worker from Flint, after hearing Obama’s remarks. “He told us the water is fine. He also said there are only a few pipes that need to be replaced in Flint. Obama did the same as all the rest of the politicians who have come here. He wants to sweep this under the rug. He might as well have stayed in Washington, DC. He figured, ‘Let me talk to them, let me shut them up.’ He told us to use filters, drink the water and go home and be quiet. The main thing you

could clearly hear is that there is no money for Flint.”

Describing the conditions in Flint, Jaquita added, “Everyone in the city has to wash in brown water and pay \$200 to \$300 water bills. We came here to see if Obama is going to do something or just talk.

“We need to get this fixed so we can stop using bottled water. We go through two to three cases a week just for cooking. No one is using the water. No one trusts the water. We are still seeing brown stuff in our water.

“I heard that schools in Detroit had copper and lead in their water. It’s not just Flint and it’s not just Snyder. It’s a bigger problem. We can’t have clean water to drink but yet they spend billions of dollars for war. That shows how this government works. They don’t care about Flint.”

Colette, another Flint resident, said, “This was a publicity stunt. He’s putting all the blame on the state of Michigan. He left out that the federal government and the EPA are still failing us. No amount of lead is safe. The filters right now are free until August. The filters last about two to three months, but there is no way to tell how much lead is actually being filtered out.

“I don’t see Obama’s daughters and Michelle here drinking the water. To tell people here that the kids will be okay is terrible. What about the ones that are still not okay? What about the still-borns, the miscarriages? What about getting the help the children need—physically, mentally and educationally?”

“I was very disappointed. Not completely surprised, but I was hoping he was going to do something. Before the rally he met with the pastors. They are not the elected officials. I don’t have anything against the pastors, but what happened to the separation of church

and state? It is really irritating that there is no accountability.”

Earlene Love, a retired GM worker, said, “I think they should stop BS-ing us. They haven’t even started any real work here. They are selecting certain spots and they are doing businesses first. If they were really concerned they would start building and repairing.

“I got a statement that our house is valued at \$10,000. It should be worth \$65-70,000. That’s a big drop.”

Speaking before the rally, Takeisha Major said, “I hope this is not a photo op. I hope that he sees we are in real pain. I hope he is not looking over the children and ignoring them. People are suffering. We should be the ones talking to the president.”

So far the federal government has only provided \$5 million for Flint. Takeisha said, “I know the money is not being used in our community. I suspect it is being used for other things. It certainly is not being used for Flint. I haven’t seen them dig up one street in the city [to replace the pipes].”

When a WSWS reporter asked Major to respond to statements by Obama that he is “frustrated” by social anger even though the economy is doing great, Takeisha said, “We are suffering. There aren’t a lot of jobs. The only jobs you can find are temp jobs, and that is before they lay you off within 90 days.

“Another thing—we spend \$20,000-\$80,000 to go to school to get a job, and once you finish you can’t find a job. I went to school in a nursing program and have over \$20,000 in loans that I have to pay, and there aren’t any jobs in the community.”

Estella Jones is a retiree from GM. She worked at several GM plants. “My problem with the water is the future for the kids. It’s bad for them. The kids want to leave. I can’t blame them. I would do the same if I could.

“I worked on the line at GM for 30 years. After 30 years of working in the factory I shouldn’t have to be picking up cases of water in order to have water to drink. I have to do it everyday. It hurts my back, my legs, my knees, it hurts everything. It’s terrible.”

Lakeecha Kendricks said, “My feeling is we want our pipes fixed. We need jobs. The conditions we are facing are horrible.”

Asked to respond to Obama’s statements about the economy, Lakeecha said, “They are offering water distribution jobs that pay \$11/hour. That is the highest I

have seen, unless you work in a hospital. And not everybody has the education to work in a hospital. I work at a factory making \$9.50/hour. I have three kids. It’s very hard. Things aren’t getting any better. If anything they are getting worse.”

Christa Hubbard was among those gathered on the sidewalk across from the school where the rally was held. She had not received an invitation for the rally, but wanted to be involved in the protest instead. She works three jobs, including for ride sharing service Uber.

“It is downright ridiculous. I want Obama to see what our life is like. There are areas in Flint where there is only one house on the street. We can’t wash our cars, fertilize our lawns—anything.

“There is nothing good happening. When the water was first switched, I put my daughter in the shower and I heard her screaming. She was itching and scratching all over and had rashes.

“My house was once appraised at \$75,000 and now it is worth \$3,500. I have lived in the city for 43 years. My neighbors are all passing away from cancer. Now they think it is in the soil. What does that mean, that we can’t let our children play outside?”



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