Obama in Flint: Let them drink lead

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On Wednesday, US President Barack Obama told the residents of Flint, Michigan that their children, poisoned by water from the contaminated Flint River, and many potentially scarred for life, "will be fine."

The president's trip to Flint took place amid an ongoing drinking water crisis in the city, where the water supply was poisoned when it switched its water source to the Flint River in 2014.

After taking a tiny sip of Flint water while delivering a speech at Northwestern High School, the president announced that the water is safe to drink. Obama went on, "I don't want anybody to start thinking that somehow all the kids in Flint are going to have problems for the rest of their lives, because that's not true."

Trivializing the disaster, Obama declared, "If you are my age, or older, or maybe even a little bit younger, you got some lead in your system when you were growing up. You did. I am sure that somewhere, when I was two years old, I was taking a chip of paint, tasting it, and I got some lead."

Obama's statements are reminiscent of the declaration attributed to Marie Antoinette, the Queen of France before the Revolution, upon hearing that the population of Paris could not afford bread: "Let them eat cake." Obama declared instead: Let them drink lead (or eat lead-based paint)!

The attempt to downplay the significance of what has happened in Flint (paralleled in many other cities throughout the country) by referring to the widespread use of lead paint in an earlier period displays an extraordinary level of ignorance and complacency. Regulations on the use of lead paint were bitterly opposed by the paint industry for decades before the clear evidence of its disastrous health consequences, particularly for young children, eventually led to it being banned in the US in 1978.

According to the World Health Organization, lead-based paint continues to cause 600,000 disabilities each year worldwide. Nearly 150,000 people die every year from lead poisoning, with paint a major contributor. Yet Obama would have Flint residents conclude that everything is "fine" because they have ingested lead through their water instead!

In an effort to further minimize the disaster, Obama added, "As long as kids are getting good health care, and folks are paying attention, and they're getting a good education, and they have community support, and they're getting some good home training, and they are in a community that is loving and nurturing and thriving, these kids will be fine."

A thriving community, with quality education and health care system is no description of Flint, America's second-poorest midsize city. The historic home of General Motors has been polluted and abandoned by the auto companies. It has a child poverty rate of over 40 percent and one of the highest murder rates in the country. During the course of this presidency, Obama has done much to attack health care and public education, subordinating both ever more directly to the profit interests of giant corporations.

Obama made these comments just days after the *New York Times* article previewing his appearance painted a picture of the shattering effects of the water crisis on Flint residents. The top official coordinating the federal response to the water crisis told the *Times*, "The first thing I noticed when I got to Flint, quite honestly, was the level of fear and anxiety and distress." Another local health official said that people were streaming into hospitals with "depression or suicidal ideation directly linked to what's going on with their children."

Flint residents who heard Obama's remarks were disgusted. LeeAnne Walters, whose children had been exposed to lead and who helped lead the fight to reveal the crisis before a national audience, walked out of the meeting.

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Obama's comments in Flint say much about social relations and political life in America. The president is a creature and creation of the ruling class and the political establishment. A "made man" with intelligence connections for his entire adult life, Obama is a millionaire and his friends are millionaires. One doubts if he's even consciously lying—on some level he likely believes that the problems faced by poor people would just go away if they would stop complaining.

From the 2008 financial crisis, to the BP oil spill, to the General Motors recall, to countless other crimes committed by the government, banks and major corporations, Obama has dusted off the same routine everywhere he goes. He puts on a "folksy" vernacular, gives "shout-outs" to local politicians, mentions the local sports team, and, if the interns did their homework, even a local sandwich shop.

Obama tells his audience there's nothing to worry about, while gently chiding those responsible. And when, a few years later, he meets the objects of his chastisement on the golf course, he tells them that it was all to put some distance between them and the "pitch-forks." No one is held responsible, and the world goes on as before.

After more than seven years, Obama appears to be tired of the routine, wanting to finish up his term so he can collect seven figures at a corporate law firm without having to say the word "folks" ever again. He's putting in less and less effort. Last month, Obama told the *New York Times*, "Anybody who says we are not absolutely better off today than we were just seven years ago, they're not leveling with you. They're not telling the truth." This despite the fact that the median household income has plunged by thousands of dollars over that time.

The Flint water crisis is a vast social crime for which the Obama administration bears direct responsibility, with the Environmental Protection Agency helping for months to suppress evidence that Flint residents were being poisoned. The city's decision to switch over from the Detroit Water and Sewerage department was entirely bound up with the reorganization of the region's water system in connection with the Detroit bankruptcy, which the White House supported and facilitated.

The poisoning of Flint residents is also tied to the Obama administration's restructuring of GM and Chrysler, which released GM, Michigan's largest company, of responsibility for cleaning up pollution, including in Flint, while allowing it to close plants and slash the wages and benefits of workers.

But whether it was the extent of his own complicity, or the tone-deaf character of his statements, or even the number of times people had heard the same routine, something was different. His song and dance didn't work. The Democratic Party functionaries, preachers, and trade union officials that packed the vetted audience cheered, but workers who spoke to the WSWS responded with disgust and hatred in the same way as Ms. Walters.

There is an objective significance to this response. During the Obama presidency, the working class of Michigan has witnessed the foreclosure crisis and economic crisis, the bailout of Wall Street, the pro-business auto restructuring, the Detroit bankruptcy and finally the poisoning of a major American city. Over the past year, workers have begun to fight back with Detroit teachers organizing a struggle against the destruction of public education in the city and Flint residents demanding clean drinking water.

Such experiences are paralleled in different forms throughout the country. Whatever the hopes of Obama, the social anger among workers throughout the country has deep objective roots. It must, however, be given conscious political form and direction, unifying all workers in a common and conscious fight against the capitalist system.

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