

Angry reaction to Obama's speech in Flint

An interview with LeeAnne Walters

Our reporters

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On May 4, LeeAnne Walters, her husband, and another Flint resident, Keri Webber, walked out of Obama's Flint speech after the president told Flint residents that "The kids will be just fine," and that they should begin to drink the water even though scientists have ruled that it is not safe to drink.

Walters, the Flint resident who led the fight to expose the lead in Flint's water, stated in a Facebook post, "Me and my husband walked out right after it was said, we were done," referring to the statement by Obama that the children will be fine. In another exchanged she continued, "I can tell you for a FACT MY KIDS ARE NOT FINE!!!!!"

Both the Walters' and Webber's family members have been severely affected by the lead contamination of Flint River's water following the switch from Detroit in 2014 with permanent, life long implications. Walters' 5-year-old is drastically underweight and is suffering immune disorders, and Webber's husband lost one-third of his sight following a stroke from the poisoned water. Both have other children who have been severely affected.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to Ms. Walters on Wednesday evening after Obama's appearance on her reaction to the President's presentation in Flint.

LeeAnne Walters: Just to compare what has happened to 100,000 people to eating lead paint chips! No. We were devastated to hear the president compare it to those things, to basically acknowledge our children don't matter. And it's not just my kids in my house that were affected and permanently changed forever. Because of this, our kids, meaning the community was affected. I was devastated.

WSWS: Were you surprised?

LW: Yes, very surprised.

WSWS: I agree with you very strongly. He was also telling people to drink the water.

LW: I know. That too. Basically, that's a way to stop getting the cheap bottled water programs coming into the city and we're going to tell people to drink from the filters.

I just got to back to Virginia on Friday, and so me and my husband actually drove all last night to be here for today, and for this! It broke my heart.

We have been—the City of Flint and our children—we fought so hard to be heard. And so hard to prove there was a problem here which was devastating to our community. So to be here now and hear the president say the things that he said today, I can't wrap

my head around it.

WSWS: How did other residents react?

LW: I can't tell you how all the residents reacted. I can only tell you about the ones that I was around. Keri Webber was with me. We went together. Keri walked out shortly after we did. We were in tears in the car, we just couldn't believe that we were told that our kids didn't matter again.

WSWS: For Obama to say your kids are going to fine.

LW: There is a difference their between being around lead [chips] and realizing it and being around it long-term. The long-term side of not knowing you are being exposed from your water—and for it to go on as long as it did. He was comparing apples to oranges, it's like comparing apples to a car. My husband said it best: "apples to toxic waste!"

Our pipes had over two-and-a-half times the level of toxic waste coming into it. Because of the decisions made by the government, you're telling me our kids are going to be fine? No, our kids are not fine.

WSWS: What about the fact that he didn't propose a dime of federal money?

LW: That, to me, that was a very low blow to the citizens. We were really hoping he'd declare Flint a federal disaster area. That was the hope of the citizens throughout the city. For that to not happen was bad, but telling us our kids would be just fine—that was worse!

WSWS: How can you compare drinking contaminated water for 2 years without knowledge to eating paint in lead chips? There is no comparison.

LW: Yes, that's why I said you are comparing apples to toxic waste.

WSWS: Obama sounded like he was scolding the audience, telling them to be patient.

LW: You know what, we have been patient. Don't stand up there and tell us we should be patient and we need to do more.

If it was your family showering in it, if it was your family being told to drink it on a daily basis, if it was your family being told to wash their clothes in it—How would you feel?

I begged to get a meeting with him today; I begged anybody who would listen. I didn't want the photo op. I didn't want the handshake and the meet-and-greet. I wanted him to talk to people who have been severely affected by this.

It's life-changing. We are told for my 5-year-old whose immune system has been compromised to wait, watch and see what

happens because there are not enough studies for a child whose immune system is compromised with lead poisoning. He's five years old!

WSWS: This is your child who is only 35 pounds at the age of 5.

LW: Yes, yes, so I'm sorry. No. It's not acceptable. That's why I wanted a meeting to address the fact that the medical concerns of the adults, that was not addressed at all today in his speech.

WSWS: He spoke about children but there are adults who are suffering as well.

LW: Exactly, that's why we're creating the nonprofit to address the affects on adults. That's where it is lacking. That's why I wanted a face to face with him [Obama]. I wanted him to meet with a family that was extremely affected by this at Ground Zero, to understand just how serious of a nature this is and what is really truly needed in Flint. And that didn't happen.

WSWS: LeeAnne, who did he meet with before the rally?

LW: I honestly don't know. He met with the federal agencies. I was told he had a round table discussion with activists on the ground and I was excluded from that.

WSWS: I saw he had Gina McCarthy [head of the EPA] at his side.

LW: That's another issue for another day. We have a recall petition about her because of what happened at the Congressional hearings.

He [Obama] said the state screwed up, the state screwed up. Yes, 100 percent the state screwed up. But at the end of the day, the EPA is not blameless in this. My fear is, by what was said today, it will make it harder for all the cases that are now in federal court to be heard and to get justice by what was said today.

WSWS: In what way?

LW: He basically said the federal government isn't truly responsible for what happened today.

WSWS: The EPA covered up for the role of the MDEQ.

LW: Yes, but it goes bigger than that. The cover-up was there. But Lead & Copper rule was supposed to be changed, I think it was 10 or 15 years ago. That's a law. It hasn't happened yet. We're talking now 2017-18 for that to happen. Well, 15 years ago when the kids in Washington, DC were poisoned that the Lead & Copper rule was messed up and there was fraud.

So, yes, the EPA was responsible on two levels: the cover-up and the failure to do what they should have been doing in the first place. Had they changed the laws back when the kids in DC were poisoned, then Flint would not have happened. They would not have been able to use the loopholes to get away with what they were getting away with.

WSWS: Which is what Marc Edwards has been saying.

LW: Yes. 100 percent. People are now asking "Are you hopeful?" Well, I am hopeful but I am very reserved. Marc has testified three times [before Congress] in the last 15 years about this, and nothing has changed. In order for the culture to change, it needs to start from the president all the way down.

WSWS: Was Marc Edwards there today?

LW: Yes, me and Marc were there together. Neither one of us had a seat on the panel. We were just guests. The EPA offered him a spot up with them up on the stage, but only offered one seat. He said, "No, I'm staying with LeeAnne. If she's not up there I'm

not going. I'm staying with LeeAnne".

WSWS: How did Marc react?

LW: He was disappointed. We talked about it. He was very disappointed about the fact that nothing is going to change with the EPA if Obama is not going to do anything.

WSWS: Were there any residents on the panel?

LW: No, because we were told to be at Keri's house that morning. We got the house cleaned up because she was told the Surgeon General and Obama were going to stop by. So, we stayed there until the very last minute. We were told we had until 3 PM to get to Northwestern HS. And so what we did, once we got over there we were told we couldn't get in even though it was only 2:26 p.m.

Thankfully, a police officer from Mt. Morris said, "Calm down Mrs. Walters, you are lucky I know who you are, and because of that I am going to let you through". That was the only reason we got in today.

We were asked why we weren't on the panel. We explained it was because we weren't asked. The only thing I wanted was a face to face, to actually talk to him [Obama], to address the serious issues. I asked Congressman Kildee, I asked the EPA. I reached out trying to get a face to face. Me and Keri got a list of things together, made it ready to go with our phone number, address for President Obama today. Then he never showed up like we were told.

WSWS: So, you never got the face to face.

LW: No, we never got the face to face. He didn't show up and then we nearly didn't get into the event today because we were waiting.

WSWS: That tells the whole story. You've played a very courageous role and if it hadn't been for you and others like you, the world wouldn't even know about this.

LW: After the event, we were sitting in the car waiting for Marc to come out. We realized that's why Obama didn't come to the house today, that's why I didn't get a meeting with him today. It wasn't about helping people out on the ground. It wasn't about what's really, truly happened there and the people who are really suffering.

At the end of the day, we have two choices: we can either get upset and walk away and take what's being handed to us, or fight harder. And you know what? We are keeping our chins up even if there are tears rolling down our face.



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