

Corporate-backed charities come up with teaspoon of help for Flint

Sheila Brehm
13 May 2016

In response to the devastating water crisis in Flint, Michigan, 10 local and national philanthropic organizations have pledged \$125 million toward the beleaguered city's recovery. The announcement comes only a week or so after President Barack Obama visited Flint, 70 miles north of Detroit, and essentially told residents to drink the water and stop complaining.

No pun intended, but the foundations' collective donation is a drop in the bucket! The contributions—which will not come immediately, but over five years—are paltry in the face of the estimated \$1.5 billion needed to replace Flint's aging pipes and water system infrastructure. This sum does not even include the resources needed for long-term education and health care for damage caused by lead-tainted water.

Leading the group of donors is the Flint-based Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, which pledged \$50 million the first year, with an additional \$50 million to be spread out over the following four years. Other pledges include \$10 million from the FlintNow Foundation, \$5 million from the Kellogg Foundation, and \$1 million each from the Carnegie, Ford, Hagerman, Robert Wood Johnson and Ruth Mott Foundations. The Detroit-based Skillman Foundation pledged a half million, with the possibility of an additional \$1.5 million over the next three years.

No level of government, state or federal, has yet committed substantial resources. The population is being treated like a political football while the politicians of both parties try to create the illusion that funding is imminent and large. This week, congressman Dan Kildee (Democrat) announced he is urging a vote on his bill to authorize up to \$765 million, while congresswoman (Republican) Candice Miller proposed \$1 billion in federal aid in February. The Michigan state legislature has so far approved \$71.7 million in Flint aid. The state senate has approved another \$128 million for Flint, a proposal awaiting action in the House.

Obama's limited state of emergency, which supplied free bottled water and filters, will end in August after a two month extension.

Upon hearing about the foundation donations, Michigan Governor Rick Snyder declared, "This is a tremendous effort by organizations well known for their philanthropic support of communities and people around the state."

Snyder, of course, hopes the donations will defuse some of the popular anger and divert attention away from his administration's criminal role as well as from the state of Michigan's refusal to provide serious resources to the water crisis.

In fact, the effort to substitute private funding, and at miserable levels, for a massive, government-funded recovery effort is a further demonstration of the bankruptcy of American capitalism and its leading institutions.

Charles Stewart Mott, who established the foundation that bears his name in 1926, was an auto company executive, one of the co-founders of General Motors (in Flint) in 1908. Mott served on the GM Board of Directors from 1913 until his death at the age of 97 in 1973. In a 1970 interview with writer Studs Terkel, Mott said sit-down strikers should have been shot for illegally occupying GM's factories in 1936-37.

In February, GM and the United Auto Workers (UAW) announced they were donating \$3 million over five years. The annual donation of \$600,000 is equivalent to about what GM made in profits every half hour in 2015, when it pulled in \$11 billion in profits.

Flint was synonymous for decades with car production. In 1978, the city's car factories employed 80,000 autoworkers. After decades of plant closings and layoffs, carried out in collaboration with the UAW, the total number of GM workers today stands at about 5,000. Flint's official poverty rate of 40.1 percent makes it the second-most poverty-stricken city of its size in America, behind Youngstown, Ohio, another former icon of American industry.

A staggering two-thirds of the city's children live in poverty, a figure 10 percent higher than that in Detroit, America's poorest large city. Flint's population has shrunk to 102,000 from a high point of 200,000 in 1969 and most of its historic buildings have either been demolished or stand vacant.

Flint has long been starved of resources due to tax abatements demanded by GM and the consequences of the automaker's deindustrialization of the city beginning in the 1990s. After reaping incalculable profits in the Vehicle City over eight decades, GM largely abandoned Flint, leaving behind little except abandoned factories, ruined neighborhoods and land and waterways saturated with toxic waste.

In October 2014, GM quietly switched its water supply from the Flint River—which it had long used as a dumping ground for pollutants—to an untainted water supply from a neighboring township. Neither GM nor the UAW alerted the residents of the problem of drinking the very same water that was corroding the parts produced in The engine plant. It would take another 11 months—during which time state and local officials ignored resident complaints and scientific evidence—before Snyder would provide funds for the city to reconnect to the Detroit water system, its original water source.

Flint's population has received an outpouring of support from workers and their families from throughout the United States in the form of bottled water, filters, food and money.

In its May 11 press release, the Mott Foundation asserted that the 10 foundations “will work together to help the city of Flint recover and rise from its water crisis.” The statement cited the foundation's president Ridgway White, who said, “Flint's water crisis is far from over. While some funds and services have been provided, we're still waiting for the state and federal governments to step up, replace damaged infrastructure and make long-term commitments to the health and education of children.”

As White should know perfectly well, those governments will do no such thing.

“This money is really focused on providing a sense of hope for the citizens of Flint. Providing them with a reason to stay in Flint,” said White. The spokesman would seem to be unaware that many in Flint would like to leave but cannot because their already low property values have plummeted as a result of the poisoning of the city's water supply.

Historically, charity has played the role of a safety valve in class society. It is used as a palliative to temporarily cover up the worst social afflictions. It not only does nothing to solve the source of the problem, production for profit, it is intended to demobilize and demoralize the working class and make it dependent on the “generosity” of the wealthy. No one can seriously suggest that social problems will be solved in this manner.

In fact, Obama himself put forward charity as the solution to Flint's water crisis. “Flint's recovery is everybody's responsibility.” The “everybody” conveniently omitted any specific commitment of resources from the federal

government. He explained that recovery from the water crisis “is not a government effort alone.” Obama devoted his remarks to praising the efforts of community groups, pipefitters, plumbers, grade school children, and inmates at an Indiana prison who donated \$2,500. In case there was any doubt, Obama pointed to volunteers who provided enough water to fill the equivalent of three Olympic-sized swimming pools—as though this was a solution to providing safe and clean water for the city's 100,000 people.

There is something intrinsically degrading and demeaning about the charity of the super-rich. A society in need of philanthropists is one rooted in inequality. The co-founder of modern socialism, Frederick Engels, poured appropriate scorn on the wealthy who placed themselves “before the world as mighty benefactors of humanity” for giving back “to the plundered victims the hundredth part of what belongs to them!” He denounced charity “which degrades him who gives more than him who takes; charity which treads the downtrodden still deeper in the dust.”

There is growing anger after Obama's speech and the continued lack of resources. Gladyes Williamson worked at GM's Buick plant in Flint for 17 years until a carpal tunnel injury forced her to retire. She told the WSWS, “If anyone would have told me when I was working that I would be at the top end of poverty now, I wouldn't have believed it. The sit-down strikes made it possible for workers to buy a house. The UAW has sold out so much that a working autoworker can't even buy a car!”

About Obama's speech, she said, “What I saw was an attitude that has choked the life out of Flint starting with GM and the UAW cutting the heads off the people that make up Flint. As the manufacturing jobs left, our government helped GM turn its back on the retirees and they never looked back. Now this government from a state level to Washington, DC has done the same thing and the president coming here and out and out slamming Flint's population as a third-world class people is just the last straw and I'm actually sick to my stomach.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact