

Flint mayor announces city will continue pipeline deal at center of lead water crisis

James Brewer
23 June 2016

Flint, Michigan's Democratic Party Mayor Karen Weaver stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Michigan Governor Rick Snyder Tuesday and announced that the city had no choice but to adhere to the Karegnondi Water Authority (KWA) pipeline scheme that was forced upon its 100,000 citizens by state-appointed financial managers in 2013. Since those contracts were signed, untold suffering and damage have been inflicted on Flint residents.

Weaver announced at the Flint City Hall press conference on Tuesday, "We've gotten information that these are binding contracts." She added, "I would have made some different decisions, but decisions were made and we have to play the hands that we're dealt."

In other words, the backroom deals that were made between financial interests, speculators and political cronies that led the city into its water disaster are protected by the full force of law.

With callous disregard for public health, Flint was cut off from its decades-long source of treated Lake Huron water, provided by the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department, in April 2014. The city switched to water from the polluted Flint River distributed through an archaic water treatment facility that had been effectively mothballed for 50 years. The Flint River was to be a temporary source pending completion of the KWA pipeline, which would bring in untreated water from Lake Huron, also to be processed at Flint's treatment facility.

When residents complained about the quality of the foul, lead-contaminated water and repeated boil-water alerts, local, state and federal officials covered up the disaster and insisted that there was no alternative but to continue drawing from the Flint River pending completion of the KWA pipeline.

However, when repeated protests by city residents

forced the issue to the national spotlight, funds were made available last October by Snyder to return to the original water source while construction continued on the KWA. The pipeline is to be completed this summer, but will not be operational for another year.

The KWA was a scheme hatched after the economic collapse of 2008 and came to fruition at roughly the same time as the forced bankruptcy of Detroit. It fit neatly with the conspiracy to monetize the city's assets, the most valued of which is the DWSD's municipal water system. Switching the source of Flint water away from the DWSD would undermine its economic viability and create better conditions for justifying its privatization.

The legal groundwork for forcing the bankruptcy required the efforts of both Democratic and Republican politicians. Billions of dollars in workers' pension funds, which had been protected from plunder in the Michigan Constitution since 1963, were targeted. US bankruptcy Judge Steven Rhodes ruled in December 2013 that federal bankruptcy law trumped the state constitution, allowing creditors access to workers' hard-earned pensions. The Obama administration submitted an *amicus curiae* (friend of the court) brief supporting the bankruptcy.

The Flint catastrophe, just as the forced bankruptcy of Detroit, was a bipartisan operation. While the Republican governor oversaw the destruction of the legal provisions protecting the population, he relied on Democratic Party officeholders to implement them. A case in point is the role of then-State Treasurer Andy Dillon, a Democrat who played a key role throughout the Flint water crisis.

By rights, the Flint disaster should lead to lengthy prison sentences for a whole coterie of conspirators.

Jeff Wright, the CEO of KWA and prime mover of

the pipeline scheme, stands to benefit greatly from Flint's commitment to 35 percent of the pipeline's construction costs. From the standpoint of providing safe drinking water to the city of Flint, the KWA project was completely irrational. The new pipeline to Lake Huron would be just six miles north of the existing DWSD pipeline that supplied water to the city for some 50 years.

Even once the KWA is completed, since Flint will still have to treat the water, itself the same problems with contaminated water will likely arise again.

Shortly after last month's public meeting of the KWA Board of Directors, where opposition to the KWA pipeline by Flint residents exploded, Weaver announced publicly that she was reconsidering the city's relationship with the KWA pipeline. At that meeting, angry residents denounced the pipeline scheme as a "conspiracy" and urged Weaver to "renegotiate" out of KWA. Animosity was directed at Wright personally for his role in pressuring the city to disconnect from DWSD water, and for using Flint's financial commitment to fund a pipeline that would be used mainly to supply raw water to petroleum hydraulic fracturing sites.

Wright revealed at the board meeting that the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) had mandated an additional minimum 90-day testing period before water from the new pipeline could be distributed to people's homes. This would require that the city be responsible for the building of an additional 3.5-mile pipeline at an unknown cost. Later estimates put the cost at \$7 to \$11 million annually, of which the state would only commit to \$4.2 million.

Weaver came under pressure after she made her misgivings over the KWA deal public. The press declared that whatever Weaver's decision, the city would be liable to pay a \$7 million a year bond payment for 28 years. On June 13, the *Detroit News* published a letter from Wright in its entirety, calling Weaver's statements "baffling, and simply not correct." He had earlier said that Weaver could cost Flint water customers millions due to her "hesitancy."

Weaver responded quickly by endorsing the continuation of the project.

The outcome is one more demonstration that the entire political and legal system exists to serve the interests of the capitalist class. Not only are none of

those most responsible for the lead water crisis being held to account, but the underlying conspiracy that created it is going ahead.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact