

As federal emergency funding ends:

Flint residents describe conditions of ongoing water crisis

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The Flint water crisis, which began over two years ago with a bipartisan conspiracy to switch the city of Flint's water supply to the polluted Flint River, continues to inflict suffering on the city's residents. Despite government officials repeatedly asserting the need to "move past" the crisis and return the city "back to normal," residents who have been exposed to toxic levels of lead in their drinking water continue to view their circumstances with outrage. The crisis that engulfed the city and produced a powerful wave of opposition in the population continues to impact the daily lives of the city's people.

Federal emergency funding for the Flint water crisis ended on August 14th. Since then, the city has had to turn to state funding and private donations to meet the needs of the population. Researchers from Virginia Tech, while noting in a recent press conference that the lead levels have significantly decreased in many homes, still caution that the water remains unsafe to drink. Residents must continue to use water filters and drink bottled water, or risk exposing themselves to dangerously high amounts of lead.

Though widespread lead poisoning is an inevitable consequence of the deteriorating lead-based water system that is in place in Flint (and throughout the country), to date only 33 lead service lines have been replaced in the city. Plans to replace up to 250 lines have stalled due to funding problems, and there are no serious plans to replace the thousands more that exist throughout the city.

Despite clear evidence of criminal misconduct by local, state, and federal agencies throughout the crisis, only a handful of lower-level city and state employees have thus far faced indictment. The real architects of the disaster, including officials in both parties, going all the way up to the Obama administration itself, high-ranking department heads in the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality and the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and Michigan Governor Rick Snyder himself, are not held to account.

Government officials from Obama on down have repeatedly sent the message to Flint: "nothing will be done, so shut up and drink the water." They have made it clear that no serious measures will be taken to address the immediate needs of the population, much less the needs of an entire generation of children who will face developmental problems due to lead exposure. As the recent flooding in Louisiana has shown, the state views workers as essentially disposable.

Two Flint residents recently spoke with WSWs reporters about the conditions of life in the area.

Dorothy, a former truck driver and Oakland County Schools employee who has become a "Water Warrior" active in the fight to expose the Flint water crisis, denounced the role of the government in the affair.

"Our government's failed at everything as far as I'm concerned," she said. "I said it at the beginning and I'll say it again, I'm ashamed of the government. In 1974, when the Safe Drinking Water Act was passed, they told us we were supposed to have safe, affordable drinking water. And we don't!"

She described Governor Snyder's role in spearheading attacks on the working class. "Snyder's nothing but a damn thief. He's got \$550 million of the teachers' money. He's been ordered twice by the courts to give it back. Will he? No. Snyder wanted the retirement, he wanted the art, he wanted all of it. He's a city raider. And not just him. It's all government. It's happening all over. All of our states, and all over the world."

Dorothy denounced the role of the banks in extracting profit off the backs of working people through financial parasitism. "If Flint fails, it's going to the banks most likely. JP Morgan and Chase banks are the ones behind those bonds. They footed the bill [for the Karegnondi Water Authority]. And that was a scam from the get-go...They sell everybody on the dream of owning your own home, and so all the baby boomers are getting ready to retire, so then what

happens? The housing market crashes.

“This is part of the master plan to take everything away from the working class,” she said. “They’re still mad since the sit-down strike at Flint. They’re getting even. But they’ve gone too far. One of the Motts, years ago, when that sit-down strike occurred, said that they all should have been shot. And now [the Mott Foundation] claims to be helping us?”

Still, she expressed a determination to fight, stating, “I’m still betting on the Flintstones [a local expression for Flint citizens], because we’re not backing down. The majority of us are not backing down.”

Gladyes, a retired GM worker from the Flint engine plant, described the water situation in her home:

“I’m never drinking that water. I turn that water on, and the amount of chlorine takes my breath away. I never will drink that water again.”

Since the federal funding ended, residents no longer have access to bottled spring water, and instead get bottled purified water, which Gladyes’s bladder cancer doctor has advised her against drinking. A 2010 report by the President’s Cancer Panel stated that purified bottled water may contain more carcinogens than filtered tap water.

Reports from the city of Flint informed Gladyes that the TTHM (Total Trihalomethane—a byproduct of chemical disinfection) level in her water is very high, and Virginia Tech researchers found that her lead levels are still above 5 parts per billion (ppb), despite having no lead plumbing in her home. It is widely accepted that there is no safe level of lead exposure, even though the EPA action level is 15 ppb.

“My attorney told me I need to leave my house,” Gladyes said. “[Flint City Council member] Scott Kincaid told me, ‘You need to think about that. For your quality of life, you’ve got to leave.’ Now this is my city councilman telling me I should leave my home. And go where? Where do they want me to go on \$24,000 a year?”

Gladyes recently learned that her property taxes would be raised, despite the fact that home values have plummeted in the city. “Look around. I don’t have money. I don’t have a savings account. I don’t have anything but my home. And I’ve worked. How do you raise somebody’s taxes when you’re under a state of emergency and your house is valued at nothing? How do you do that? You do it illegally to push people out of their homes. Push me out! Where am I going to go?”

She described the role of the unions in betraying workers and opening the door for givebacks and concessions. “General Motors was able to discharge my stock. They discharged two generations of people’s stock. I never thought I was going to come out of General Motors at the high end of poverty. You could have never made me believe

that.

“That’s what GM did. They took these jobs out of America, plant by plant, and closed down the parts plants. And then the UAW shoved concessions down the working mans’ throats. I’m seeing the same go-around with every union around the world... [Verizon workers] were going through the same things that I went through with my UAW. And AT&T, they forced their workers back to work so that their union workers wouldn’t hook up with the Verizon workers and shut the lines down from sea to shining sea. It reminded me of the UAW when they forced us back to work with a crummy contract. They’ve shoved us right into the gutter at the top of the poverty level. All of these nurses, I put them in that category, too. These union workers, they’re all being fooled.

“Everything is so degraded and rotted. I worked on the machine floor and I was a setup man. And I could work ahead and get my job done, and I could have some downtime. But the union and management changed all that. Now they have you speeded up, and they have that clock working. And it doesn’t matter how many parts you get ahead, or how much you sweat, or how long. They’re just going to make you sweat longer, and you aren’t getting any downtime, because they tore all that up...You’re not even making the American dream, which is a house, a car, a vacation, an education. Those things are all gone. And the man and the woman are out of the house working two and three jobs, and they’re not making it.”

She denounced the presidential nominees of the two big business parties, pledging instead to vote for Jerry White and Niles Niemuth of the Socialist Equality Party. “What [White] is saying, you don’t have to take his word for it. All you have to do is watch how this is playing out. And it’s playing out just like he said. I’m voting for Jerry White.”



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