

# Detroit professor advances “structural racism” theory of Flint water crisis

James Brewer  
1 September 2016

Wayne State University Professor Peter J. Hammer submitted a document serving as written testimony to the Michigan Civil Rights Commission last month claiming, “the water crisis in Flint needs to be understood from a perspective of strategic and structural racism.” This is not a new premise. Hillary Clinton made this assertion early in the Democratic Party primary campaign, and the capitalist press, most notably the *New York Times* and the *Huffington Post*, have in recent months been increasingly promoting this position. However, Hammer’s is perhaps the most explicit attempt to divert popular outrage over the Flint disaster along the lines of racial politics.

The theory of “strategic-structural racism” is being advanced in order to obscure the real nature of the crime committed against the people of Flint and narrow the focus of public anger. The poisoning of the entire population of the seventh-largest city in Michigan is a crime of capitalism.

The social gains made by the working class through mass struggles since the 1930s—including the General Motors sit-down strike in Flint—are being clawed back systematically. This social counterrevolution goes far beyond Flint, extending to every capitalist country on the planet, affecting workers of all races and nationalities.

Professor Hammer is the Director of the Damon J. Keith Center for Civil Rights at Wayne State University Law School. His document, “The Flint Water Crisis, KWA [Karegnondi Water Authority] and Strategic-Structural Racism,” is published under the auspices of his department. It presents evidence proving that the decisions made in relation to Flint’s water by state authorities were driven by the political considerations of an elite clique. Much of the evidence has already been made public, and some new facts are revealed. None of these facts, however, back up Hammer’s claims that racism is at the root of the crisis.

Hammer simply asserts that Flint’s financial distress was the “consequence of decades of structural racism, deindustrialization, white flight, economic deprivation and isolation.” The paper is peppered with racially-charged concepts, such as “white privilege,” in order to blow smoke

around its selective presentation of the historical background to the Flint water crisis.

A review of the background of this crisis makes clear that it is the product of a *class* policy, with representatives of the ruling class, both black and white, implementing measures to benefit a corporate and financial elite.

Flint, a racially diverse city—56.6 percent black and 37.4 percent white, according to US census figures—was systematically poisoned starting in April 2014. The city’s 44-year-long source of treated Great Lakes water was suddenly disconnected and switched to the Flint River—long known to be contaminated with industrial pollutants—and then piped into homes without proper treatment. When residents—both black and white—protested the foul-smelling and discolored water that was coming from their taps and demanded a return to their original water source, they were ignored.

Residents were told that the water was perfectly fit to drink and met all the standards of the federal Safe Drinking Water statutes. Only later was it revealed that sampling was falsified to cover up the real state of the lead-tainted water. State-appointed emergency managers—financial dictators with the power to unilaterally make decisions overriding elected officials—declared that it was a financial impossibility to return to the city’s original treated water source.

To present this, as Hammer does, as a product of structural racism is to obscure the underlying class character of capitalist society. The shutdown of Flint’s auto industry and the economic devastation visited on the city as a consequence was part of a wholesale assault on the working class as a whole.

The collapse of the housing bubble further exacerbated the crisis in Flint, with foreclosures soaring in the period between 2005 and 2009.

After the 2008 crash, speculators aimed at new sources of easy cash: municipal debt. In the state of Michigan, a shadowy project involving the utilization of municipal bankruptcy and emergency management was hatched.

Detroit, the state's largest city, had been ravaged for years by deindustrialization, and, more recently, its municipal economy was victim to corruption and predatory lending practices.

Flint was also part of this process, with a string of state appointed emergency managers brought in to slash city services and attack city workers.

Detroit's forced bankruptcy reorganization in 2014, which paralleled the Flint water crisis, was made possible by antidemocratic and conspiratorial political and legal chicanery. It was endorsed at every step by the capitalist media and both political parties at the highest levels, along with predominantly African American local politicians. Indeed, the Obama administration's justice department even sent an *amicus curiae* (friend of the court) brief to make clear that the proceedings had the blessings of the president.

The city's three major assets were targeted for plunder: the pension funds of city workers, the artwork of the Detroit Institute of Arts and, most significantly for the people of Flint, the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD), one of the largest public water systems in the country.

The DWSD system served approximately 4 million residents in the metropolitan Detroit area, with the city of Flint being its largest customer. Its revenues were approximately \$1 billion each month. Detroit's emergency manager, Kevyn Orr, was determined to monetize all these assets. Because Detroit's city charter prohibited profits being made from the operation of the DWSD, Orr and his fellow conspirators "regionalized" the system under a newly created Great Lakes Water Authority to do an end-run around the legal protections for the public.

The DWSD could be considered the crown jewel of Detroit, including its 70-mile pipeline and Lake Huron treatment facility, completed in the early 1970s to provide treated water to Flint. Cutting Flint off from the DWSD would create conditions to weaken the system and prepare a future privatization of either all or parts of it, falling in line with the plans of the conspirators.

This pamphlet presents a selection from the record of the WSWS as the crisis unfolded.

Professor Hammer indeed notes the determination of well-placed individuals to commit the city of Flint to the construction of the KWA pipeline, pointing out that the emergency manager at the time, Ed Kurtz, signed the contract for an unnecessarily larger daily volume than the city council even agreed to in March of 2013. The conspirators behind KWA needed that larger commitment to get bond authorization to build the pipeline they wanted.

Because Flint's credit rating was so bad, it was necessary to find a loophole to allow KWA funding to not count toward the city's debt limit. The Michigan Department of

Environmental Quality was recruited to issue what was referred to internally as a "sweetheart ACO" (Administrative Consent Order) to push the deal through.

As these facts demonstrate, the decision to shift the Flint water source from the DWSD to the Flint River, setting in motion the Flint tragedy, was not a product of racism, but cold economic and business calculation on the part of a rapacious financial elite and their political servants, a large portion of whom in Flint and Detroit were African American. This is what Hammer seeks to cover up.

Along these lines it should be noted that Hammer himself cut his legal teeth in the Exxon Valdez oil spill case in 1993—defending Exxon Oil Company.

Now that the KWA pipeline construction is completed, the question of how the untreated water from Lake Huron will be treated is yet to be decided. Upgrades and improvements to Flint's water treatment plant (WTP) are needed costing millions of dollars. Months of testing will be required before KWA water can be delivered into the Flint system. However, state and local politicians, including Flint's mayor, Karen Weaver, who is African American, insist there is "no choice" but to proceed with this irrational and reckless plan.

In addition, according to the Flint Water Interagency Coordinating Committee set up by Michigan Governor Rick Snyder, water rates for residents—already the highest in the US—are poised to double over the next two years. This outrageous situation, predicated on the capitalist "free market," not racism, is completely unacceptable for Flint residents. However, Hammer's elaborate theory contributes nothing to an understanding of the Flint water crisis and is in fact no more than an attempt to "change the narrative."

The promotion of racial politics by individuals is aimed at undermining class-consciousness and fueling divisions within the working class. It is also aimed at fostering illusions in the Obama administration and the Democratic Party through a narrow focus on issues such as race and gender.

The Flint disaster is a crime of capitalism. It can only be answered by the independent mobilization of all sections of the working class—black, white and immigrant—in a struggle for the socialist reorganization of society.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**