Lead poisoning in Milwaukee provokes political crisis

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The latest flashpoint in America's lead poisoning crisis has emerged in the city of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. On Wednesday, the city's mayor, Tom Barrett, publicly stated that all residents living in homes built before 1950-51 should install filters certified to remove lead on all faucets that provide water for drinking and cooking.

Last January, in the wake of the revelations of widespread lead poisoning in Flint, Michigan, the Milwaukee Water Works halted five miles of water main replacement projects in older neighborhoods where lead pipes, called laterals, were still used to connect the mains to residences. The city then estimated that replacing all lead pipes that delivered water to 70,000 older homes would cost from $511 million to $756 million.

The occasion for Barrett's declaration was a symposium on drinking water held in the city at Marquette University Law School. Professor Marc Edwards, the Virginia Tech civil engineer and water expert who defied Michigan state authorities in exposing the lead crisis in Flint's drinking water last summer, was in attendance. He told the assembly, "As long as the lead pipe is there, no one should consider the water safe."

Edwards also strongly endorsed the use of water filters, which cost around $30 each, and urged an educational program to inform the public about proper use and maintenance of the filters.

Milwaukee is a port city north of Chicago, on Lake Michigan, the second largest of the Great Lakes. Its water source is Lake Michigan. It is treated with corrosion control chemicals to prevent lead from leaching into the water. But, as Edwards told the 250 people in attendance on Wednesday, "No one that has a lead pipe, I don't feel, can ethically ever be told their water is safe to drink." And due to extremely variable results in water sampling, he added, "No matter how much you sample, I will never ever say that water is safe."

Barrett admitted that adding corrosion control chemicals into the water was a "band-aid approach" to preventing lead poisoning.

Blood-lead levels of children in Milwaukee in the most recent figures, from 2014, showed 8.6 percent of those tested as lead-poisoned, compared to 4.9 percent in Flint. Lead poisoning has permanent neurological effects on children, which can emerge as growth issues, immunological problems, loss of IQ, and sensory and behavioral problems. A 2013 study of Milwaukee fourth graders associated behavioral problems in school with lead exposure. Violent behavior in the adult population can often be traced to lead poisoning.

State Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Secretary Cathy Stepp was in attendance at the symposium. She could not give a statewide estimate for costs in replacing lead service lines, but the DNR estimates cost for each residence at $3,000 to $5,000. She made a rather nebulous declaration in regard to replacing the 176,000 lead service lines in Milwaukee, that "If it costs a lot of money to do that, then it costs a lot of money to do that."

Both Stepp and Barrett came under fire at the event by Milwaukee NAACP President Fred Royal, demanding that both the city and the state prioritize the replacement of lead service lines throughout the state. Barrett said, "We're going to be as aggressive as we can" in replacing the lead pipes, but pointed to the limited federal and state funding available and would not commit to a spending figure by the city.

Royal responded, "We're talking about whether it's economically feasible to save our children in

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Milwaukee," noting that the state and the city figured out how to pay for a new basketball arena for the Milwaukee Bucks.

Barrett then criticized Stepp for shorting Milwaukee on the statewide $14.5 million funding for replacing lead service lines. The city only got $2.6 million even though, he said, 40 percent of them were there. In the face of the hundreds of millions estimated by the city to replace the pipes, Democratic Mayor Barrett's finger-pointing at the Republican appointee of the DNR, Stepp, is an absurd evasion. In fact, just to provide the water filters for the 70,000 homes affected will cost $2.1 million, according to the city.

Even the city's estimate for replacing its portion of the lead pipes doesn't include replacing the portion of pipes within the property lines of the homes. According to Edwards, letting the lead pipes remain under the ground of the property owners "will poison children for generations." Such partial replacements, as mandated under the federal Lead and Copper Rule (LCR), can actually make the situation worse.

The *Sheboygan Press* reported that in a test of six homes in Milwaukee last year, after partial replacement of lead pipes, the lead in water samples was worse—in some cases "astronomically" worse. One of the home's water was sampled at 328 parts per billion (ppb) after the replacement, when before it was 6.5 ppb. The "action level" set by the US Environmental Protection Agency is 15 ppb.

While it is scientifically documented and stated by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) that there is no safe level of exposure to lead, the LCR-established "action level" is misleading. In fact, as Edwards pointed out on Wednesday, the existing regulations are "a total sick joke on the US population."

The LCR was first issued by the EPA in 1991 as part of the Safe Drinking Water Act. It was to be reviewed and modified every six years, but federal authorities, particularly within the EPA, failed to address that requirement. The "action level" remains at 15 ppb to this day. The establishment of the LCR followed the ban on the use of lead pipes in construction by just five years.

Until 1986, according to a 2008 report, "Lead pipes for carrying drinking water were well recognized as a cause of lead poisoning by the late 1800s in the United States." The title of this report borrows from 18th century satirist Jonathan Swift: "The Lead Industry and Lead Water Pipes 'A MODEST CAMPAIGN.'" It states that after municipalities began banning the use of lead starting in the 1920s, the Lead Industries Association (LIA) responded with "a prolonged and effective campaign to promote the use of lead pipes." It asserts: "The LIA's activities over several decades therefore contributed to the present-day public health and economic cost of lead water pipes."

The LCR itself came into being at a time when it could be described as "too little, too late." By its enactment, the existence of lead pipes in the country's water infrastructure was at a peak. Already by then, social spending was being slashed. Since 1978, federal spending on water infrastructure has been reduced by some 75 percent.

During his keynote speech at the Marquette event, Edwards called the lead-poisoning disaster across the country a "government-made problem." He noted that for many years cities, including Milwaukee, required that builders use lead pipes. He also denounced the "culture of corruption" in the EPA and the CDC.

Lead poisoning is a massive social issue. It has emerged, along with other social ills such as police killings, homelessness and urban blight, as a product of decades of attacks on the working class backed by both Democratic and Republican governments at all levels. Allocating the billions necessary to replace the water infrastructure requires a complete reversal of capitalist governmental policy implemented over decades—a socialist alternative.

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