

One year since the exposure of the Flint water crisis

Carlos Delgado, James Brewer
6 October 2016

The Socialist Equality Party is marking the first anniversary of the exposure of the Flint water crisis with a meeting in the city to provide a genuine political alternative for workers and young people. Details appear below.

One year ago, on October 1, 2015, Michigan Governor Rick Snyder finally admitted a “problem” in switching the water source of the city of Flint from the Detroit water system to the Flint River. That switch was made in April 2014. For close to 18 months, residents were forced to drink water laced with one health danger after another.

First, high levels of the bacteria *E. coli* appeared. Then there were erratic spikes in total trihalomethanes (TTHMs), a carcinogenic disinfection by-product resulting from over-chlorination to kill bacteria. After a few months of pumping corrosive Flint River water through the pipes, without anti-corrosion agents, lead began leaching from the damaged pipes into the water of Flint homes and schools.

In spite of the complaints and protests by residents almost immediately after the April 2014 switch, and several boil-water alerts, state and local officials maintained that the water was safe to drink and that it complied with federal safe water standards.

The Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) and the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), organizations nominally tasked with protecting the population and the environment, instead conspired to cover up the crisis and hide the dangerous amounts of lead in the water. It was only through the determined efforts of city residents, scientific researchers and local doctors, who refused to back down in the face of official stonewalling and intimidation, that the poisoning of Flint became widely known.

On September 24, 2015, Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha, a pediatrician at Flint’s Hurley Children’s Hospital, held a press conference to publicize the results of her study of blood-lead levels of Flint children. Her findings revealed a spike in blood poisoning since the city’s water source was switched to the Flint River in 2014. She warned residents not drink tap water or use it to mix baby formula, since infants and young children are particularly susceptible to long-term health effects from lead poisoning. She urged authorities to switch the city back to the treated water piped from Lake Huron by the Detroit water system as soon as possible.

Less than two weeks earlier, Professor Marc Edwards of Virginia Tech University (VT) held a similar press conference outside the Flint City Hall to announce the findings of his team on the lead

levels in the tap water of residents. He issued a public warning to residents not to drink or cook with the water without filters certified to remove lead, exhorting them not to trust the statements of public officials who had been telling them the water was perfectly safe to drink. Edwards called the results of earlier testing done by city officials “smoke and mirrors,” which showed much lower levels of lead in the water than the VT tests.

Both Edwards and Hanna-Attisha were vilified by state and local officials. Brad Wurfel, the spokesman for the MDEQ, stated publicly that Edwards was “fanning political flames irresponsibly,” calling the VT study “pulling that rabbit out of that hat.”

Before going public with her data, Hanna-Attisha and her colleagues met with city officials who told her going back to the original water source would bankrupt the city. Immediately after her press conference, Governor Snyder himself accused Hanna-Attisha of “splicing and dicing” her figures.

Residents had been complaining since the April 2014 switch that the water was brown and carried a strong, acrid smell, but their concerns were repeatedly dismissed by local, state, and federal officials. After her child was diagnosed with lead poisoning, one resident, LeeAnne Walters, contacted Marc Edwards after the EPA refused to take action on high lead readings in her tap water.

Meanwhile, public anger had reached a boiling point. Residents protested throughout the city, demanding the replacement of the lead-based water infrastructure and the criminal prosecution of the Democratic and Republican politicians involved in the affair. After the lies were exposed and enormous damage was done to Flint’s water infrastructure, Snyder was forced to order the reconnection of the city to its original treated water source.

The establishment goes into damage control

Faced with a mounting political firestorm that was quickly spiraling out of their control, establishment political mouthpieces were dispatched to pacify the population. Media figures such as Rachel Maddow, celebrities such as Michael Moore, and political hucksters such as Jesse Jackson descended on the city to denounce the Republican governor, utterly ignoring or downplaying the role of Democrats, such as the city’s mayor and the state treasurer,

who helped facilitate the crisis.

The governor, meanwhile, put on a show of false contrition while repeatedly insisting that he had had no knowledge of the crisis until October 2015. E-mail records have shown that high-ranking officials in his administration were discussing the crisis for months prior to this. He appointed a “task force” and issued a “75-point plan” to create the illusion of action while making clear that the state would not be providing the necessary funds to meet the needs of the population.

Congressional hearings on the issue were largely an excuse for grandstanding and sanctimony, as Democrats and Republicans alike sought to shift the blame onto their political adversaries while casting themselves and their allies as utterly without fault. A criminal investigation into the crisis has produced a handful of indictments for low-level employees of the MDEQ and the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, citing the Nuremberg trials as precedent that “following orders” was not a valid defense. Yet the high-ranking officials who actually issued the orders, including Snyder, EPA Region 5 Administrator Susan Hedman, and MDEQ Director Dan Wyant, have not been formally charged with any crime.

Democratic presidential candidates Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders used the city of Flint as a backdrop for a televised debate, offering hollow promises and cheap rhetoric before deserting the city and dropping any mention of it from their campaigns. Current Flint Mayor Karen Weaver was paraded during the Democratic National Convention in a cynical attempt to give Hillary Clinton’s right-wing platform a “humanitarian” gloss.

More recently, Republican candidate Donald Trump visited a church in the city as part of his campaign, receiving a hostile response from the residents in attendance. The Clinton campaign, meanwhile, has dispatched Clinton’s daughter Chelsea to the city to proclaim personal outrage over the lack of federal funding for the crisis. Politicians from both political parties have used Flint residents as convenient props to bolster their electioneering, offering meaningless compassion and tissue-thin promises before retreating back to lavish fundraising events with the millionaires and billionaires whom they serve.

Of a piece with the agendas of all the above political operatives is the campaign to frame the Flint crisis as a racial attack. Clinton herself encouraged this outlook when she proclaimed her so-called outrage at what was done to the city and declared that this would never have happened to a “white community in the suburbs.” The decisions made in Flint were made on behalf of financial interests who sought to exploit the financial crisis of a deindustrialized city to find new revenue sources—in other words, this was a crime of capitalism.

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

Theories of structural racism and racial bias being behind the Flint water crisis are being pushed by the establishment in an attempt to change the subject of the crime against the working class. Flint is a very integrated city, with a racially mixed population. Black Democratic Party politicians were just as responsible as white Republicans. More significantly, it is a city that expresses what has been done to the working class as a whole.

GM employed more than 80,000 in Flint in the city’s heyday. Today, only 8,000 are employed at the auto giant in Flint.

What has really been done to address the crisis?

Serious and persistent damage has been done to Flint’s residents—especially children—and water infrastructure by the reckless actions carried out on behalf of the financial aristocracy in America. Residents are still without safe water and will be at least until next year.

The Genesee County Health Department issued a recent warning of an outbreak of shigellosis, a bacterial infection that is spread most commonly due to lack of proper hygiene. Because residents fear the water that is coming through their home and school taps, the long-established practice of washing hands has suffered. The health effects, according to the alert, can include “gastrointestinal illness which includes mild to severe diarrhea. Other symptoms include fever, nausea, vomiting, cramps, and stools containing blood and/or mucus.” The number of cases in Genesee County, of which Flint is by far the largest population center, is 85—the highest in the state.

Democratic Mayor Karen Weaver, who was elected last November on the pledge of addressing the water crisis, initiated a feeble “Fast Start” program to begin the replacement of lead service lines in the city. Up to now, only 171 lines have been replaced and researchers have revised estimates drastically upwards to more than double the number—up 25,000—of lead service lines will need to be replaced.

Astonishingly, Flint residents pay the highest water rates in the country, for the privilege of being poisoned. And officials envision that they will double in the next two years as the plan to hook up to the KWA pipeline moves forward with millions in new unanticipated costs.

The pitiful federal funding by the Obama administration ended last August, and a funding package is still being debated in Congress that, even if passed, will be a tiny fraction of the funds required for both medical needs and infrastructure repair.

The Socialist Equality Party demands that a massive public works program, with trillions of dollars in funds, be initiated to systematically rebuild America’s infrastructure. Medical care and decent public education must be provided for every member of society.

Niles Niemuth, the Socialist Equality’s candidate for US vice president, will address an important meeting being held this evening, October 6, at 7 p.m. at the University of Michigan, Flint, in the Murchie Sciences Building, Room 109.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact