

Flint residents threatened with water shutoffs

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21 November 2016

Residents of Flint, Michigan, who still do not have access to clean drinking water after a two-year lead-in-water crisis, will soon begin receiving water shutoff notices, according to city officials.

Flint residents, who pay the highest water rates in the country for unsafe drinking water, will receive notices in the coming days stating that, unless they pay their current balances and at least 10 percent of their past due balances, their water will be shut off.

Shutoff warnings have already gone out to commercial water customers in the city, including owners of large-sized apartment buildings. Entire apartment communities face the possibility of water shutoffs and forced relocations if the commercial bills, some with amounts in the hundreds of thousands of dollars, are not paid.

The renewed assault on workers' right to water is being carried out in line with a state directive stating that the city must achieve a 70 percent collection rate on water bills or else risk losing the "water relief" funding the state has allocated. Under the current arrangement, commercial customers receive a 20 percent credit on water bills, while residential customers receive a 65 percent credit. The credits do little to relieve the financial burden on Flint residents, more than 40 percent of whom live below the poverty line while still paying the highest water rates in the country. Residents who are unable to pay their bill will lose even this paltry credit.

Additionally, according to a recent report from the Michigan Department of Treasury, water bills in the city are set to double over the next five years.

The Flint water crisis began in April 2014, when a bipartisan conspiracy of local, state, and federal officials worked to switch the city's treated water supply from the Detroit system to the heavily polluted Flint River. This was done supposedly as an interim water source until the city was able to connect to the

Karegnondi Water Authority pipeline when construction was completed. This was presented to residents as a "cost saving" measure that would ultimately reduce their water bills. In fact, it was an attempt by powerful financial interests to seize control of both Flint's and Detroit's water systems for monetization and eventual privatization.

The corrosive river water destroyed the protective scale inside the pipes, causing lead to leach into the water. Lead is a potent, irreversible neurotoxin that can cause permanent neurological damage, particularly to children and infants.

Health experts maintain that the city's water remains unsafe for human consumption and may still contain dangerous amounts of lead and other harmful compounds. Residents must use water filters and drink bottled water in order to live. Efforts at replacing lead service lines in the city have proceeded at a snail's pace, with only a scant fraction of the thousands of lines having been replaced. A bill to grant a small amount of federal funding for lead pipe replacement remains mired in Congress, which has entered its lame duck session. Meanwhile, the city is seeking a renewal of its state of emergency, which was first declared in December 2015.

Earlier this month, a federal judge ordered the state of Michigan to begin door-to-door bottled water delivery to Flint residents. Until now, Flint residents have had to obtain bottled water for drinking, cooking, and other uses from distribution sites in the city, placing a particularly heavy burden on residents who lack the transportation or physical ability to reach the sites.

In his decision, judge David M. Lawson said, "In modern society, when we turn on a faucet, we expect safe drinking water to flow out. As the evidence shows, that is no longer the case in Flint. The Flint water crisis has in effect turned back the clock to a time when people traveled to central water sources to fill their

buckets and carry the water home.”

The state of Michigan has announced its intention to challenge the federal court order. In a motion for a stay, the state argued that the order places an “immediate insurmountable burden” on the state. A spokeswoman from the governor’s office stated that the “herculean effort required by the court order would be on the magnitude of a large-scale military operation,” and warned that complying with the order would require the activation of the National Guard.

The bipartisan attack on Flint residents was likely a strong contributing factor to the dropoff in voter turnout in the 2016 election. More than 5,000 fewer residents of Genesee County, where Flint is the largest city, cast their votes in the 2016 election compared to 2012. The abstentions occurred despite a parade of politicians who visited the city for debates and publicity stunts, including Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump.

With the entire political establishment now prostrating before Trump, Democratic officials have sought to foster illusions that his fascistic incoming government will offer relief to the citizens of Flint. Many have signaled their willingness to collaborate with him in further attacks on Flint residents. Democratic US Representative Dan Kildee recently told reporters “I will work with Republicans and Democrats, including President-elect Trump, to make sure the people of Flint get the resources they need to recover,” as though such resources will not be even more hoarded by the reactionary financial elite whom Trump represents.

The callous and vengeful attitude of government officials toward Flint residents is more than an expression of individual corruption or malevolence. It is the essential attitude of the capitalist state, which views workers as expendable tools in the profit drive of the corporate elite. The resources necessary for the rebuilding of Flint and the water infrastructure across the US require more than just the reversal of decades of spending cuts, but trillions of dollars to be invested in the social needs of the population.



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