

Officials declare Pittsburgh's water unsafe to drink

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More than 100,000 Pittsburgh residents were advised to boil their water early last week before drinking, using it for cooking and other common uses after tests of city reservoirs revealed high levels of bacteria.

The state Department of Environmental Protection ordered the advisory on Tuesday, January 31, based on samples from the city's Highland Park reservoirs, which showed insufficient levels of chlorine used to kill disease-causing pathogens, such as bacteria, viruses and protozoans, that commonly grow in water supply reservoirs. City officials said one of the city's main filtration and treatment plants operated by the Pittsburgh Water and Sewer Authority (PWSA) had failed.

City officials lifted the boil water advisory—which also affected hospitals, schools and restaurants—on Thursday, after declaring that there were no more traces of bacteria in the water, which can cause diarrhea and other sicknesses. After declaring the crisis over, the city's Democratic Mayor Bill Peduto said he would empanel financial and legal advisory teams to examine the restructuring of PWSA, a move which was widely interpreted as a step towards setting up a so-called public-private partnership to privatize the system.

Within hours of issuing the warning area stores ran out of bottled water and restaurants, coffee shops and other businesses were forced to close. Pittsburgh Public Schools were closed on Wednesday as school and kitchen staff scrambled to turn off water fountains, obtain bottled water for students and staff, and find ways for preparing meals. Tens of thousands of parents were forced to scramble for childcare or had to stay home from work.

Many daycare centers were also forced to close and many senior centers were forced to operate without drinking water Wednesday morning. Area hospitals

said they were open and had contingencies in place for such emergencies.

The Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection was unable to say how long low levels of chlorine had existed in the water. The PWSA advisory read in part, “DO NOT DRINK THE WATER WITHOUT FIRST FLUSHING THE TAP FOR A MINIMUM OF 1 MINUTE [AND] BOILING THE FRESH WATER FIRST. Bring the fresh water to a boil, let it boil for 1 minute, and let the water cool before using, or use bottled water. Fresh boiled water or bottled water should be used for drinking, making ice, brushing teeth, washing dishes, and food preparation until further notice. Boiling kills bacteria and other organisms in the water.

“Inadequately treated or inadequately protected water may contain disease-causing organisms. These organisms can cause symptoms such as diarrhea, nausea, cramps, and associated headaches.”

Marsha, who was picking up bottled water at one of the 11 water distribution sites set up Wednesday, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “This is ridiculous. I have two small children and it's almost impossible to keep them from drinking the water. What happens if they wash their hands and then put them in their mouth?

“I had to stay home from work today because school was canceled. My neighbor has two babies and she couldn't make formula until she got someone to drive her around to a lot of stores until she found some bottled water.

“The cost of water is outrageous. I usually pay over \$80 a month just for water. Over the summer it was lead and now this. They never fix anything. Our street is full of broken pavement right along the water and sewer lines. You know they are leaking and broken, but the city won't fix it.”

The water crisis in Pittsburgh is another example of the impact of decaying infrastructure and decades of official neglect, which was brought to light by the protests the residents of Flint, Michigan carried out against the lead poisoning of their water. While trillions have been squandered on war and handed to the financial aristocracy, public services have been starved on funding. Cash strapped cities like Pittsburgh, Detroit and others have run up massive debts and debt-servicing costs and have slashed jobs and turned to private contractors.

Last summer, testing found lead in the drinking water in 43 percent of the homes throughout the city. 17 percent had lead levels above 15 parts per billion (ppb), the level above which the government considers unsafe. Some homes had levels as high as 88 ppb. At the time, Marc Edwards, the Virginia Tech professor who helped expose the water crisis in Flint, told a local TV station, “The levels in Pittsburgh are comparable to those reported in Flint.”

The problem has not been resolved. The city has replaced less than 1 percent of the lead service lines running into residential homes. The city never distributed bottled water and merely told residents to run the water for a minute before drinking it or hire a contractor to replace the service line at their own expense.

The Pittsburgh Water and Sewage Authority was formed 20 years ago in a move towards the privatization of the city’s water system. Authority executives, private contractors and Wall Street speculators have reaped huge payouts and profits while city residents see brown, rusty and contaminated water, deteriorating services, pot-holed streets and skyrocketing bills.

In 2008, the PWSA took out a \$400 million variable rate bond in which lawyers, brokers and bankers made millions on the deal. Interest rate on the bonds shot up and the authority is now spending over 44 percent of its operating budget on interest and principal payments alone.

In 2012, the city turned management of the water system over to Paris, France-based Veolia, the largest water privatizer in the world, which was also deeply implicated in the Flint water crisis. The company took a \$4.9 million performance improvement payment after instituting an aggressive shutoff policy for residents

behind on their bills that left thousands of homes without water. Water bills have doubled and Pittsburgh now has the highest water rate in the region.



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