

As officials end subsidies and resume water cutoffs

Michigan blames Flint water crisis on racism: Part two

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PART ONE | PART TWO

This is the second part of a two-part article. Part one was posted March 3.

Falsification of history

In the section called, “What’s past is prologue,” the racist premise of the MCRC report is made clear: “When telling the story of Flint, the common narrative is of a city that rose to the highest of heights on the back of the automobile during the first two-thirds of the 20th century, and then crashed along with the auto industry in the century’s last 30 years. This is a simplified, sanitized, version of history written from a white person’s perspective.” (Page 23)

It is ironic that the release of the MCRC report fell almost exactly on the 80th anniversary of the victory of the 1936-1937 Flint sit-down strike. Yet the MCRC states: “This Commission believes it is critical to remember these early years of Flint’s history when being white bestowed certain benefits not available to African Americans.”

To back up its preordained conclusion, the MCRC expends all its effort in its narrative of Flint history on the racist housing policies authored by local officials and real estate companies. Segregation and block-busting were widespread in Flint as in all American cities.

One would hardly know from reading this document that Flint was the city where the titanic struggle was waged in 1936-37 against the intolerable conditions of life and work imposed by General Motors upon its workers. The only mention of the sit-down strikes is the fact that subsequent UAW organization drives “did not sit well” with GM tycoon C.S. Mott, who most certainly was a racist. His philanthropic activity in Flint was a reaction of the growing influence of

socialists.

Racism and segregation, official and unofficial, were widespread in Flint and around the country in the 1930s. But to speak, as the commission does, of “white privilege” in relation to the conditions of white workers in the city reveals a shocking degree of either ignorance, indifference, or both.

One only has to read accounts of workers who lived and worked in the 1930s. Geraldine Blankenship recalled the experience of working on the shop floor: “And I remember in 1936, before the strike, it was very, very hot, and down in the Chevrolet, there were people who were dropping over because of the heat. And the other workers were told, “just step over them until we can get them out of the way.” They didn’t slow down the line. They didn’t stop it. And they just dragged people away. It was terrible!”

In 1986, veteran sit-downer Kenny Malone talked about GM’s foreman system: “To keep your job you did anything the foreman asked. If you went hunting you brought him a piece of venison; if you went fishing, he got the largest fish; if you had a garden, he always got a basket of vegetables from it. And women, the foremen chased after your own wife, and if you wanted a job you let him.”

As far as the privileges of “whiteness,” Malone commented in 1987, “The law became really abusive. The city of Flint and city commissioner passed an ordinance that made it unlawful for more than two people to stop and talk in the streets. And they had policemen every 20 feet breaking it up. If you stopped to talk to someone, a cop would be there in just a few minutes saying. ‘Break it up, move on, move on!’ and you’d better move. He would club you down or throw you in jail.”

Genora Johnson-Dollinger, in her autobiography, *Striking Flint*, described life before the sit-downs: “Conditions in Flint before the strike were very, very depressing for working people. We had a large influx of workers come into the city from the deep South. They came north to find jobs, because there was no work back home. They came with their

furniture strapped on old jalopies and they'd move into the cheapest housing that they could find. Usually these were just little one or two-room structures with no inside plumbing and no inside heating arrangements. They just had kerosene heaters to heat their wash water, their bath water, and their homes. You could smell kerosene all over their clothing. They were very poor."

Among the workers who played leading roles in the sit-down strikes in Flint were socialists who were committed opponents of racism. They opposed attempts by the Klu Klux Klan and right-wing demagogues such as Detroit's Father Coughlin to establish factions within the plants. With the victory of the strikes, blacks were allowed for the first time to have jobs other than sweeping floors and cleanup.

During the 1941 drive to unionize Ford in Detroit, the company imported black workers from the South to serve as strikebreakers, a move that was eventually defeated under the leadership of workers who systematically combatted racism.

The Flint sit-down strike was the beginning of a mass movement of the working class against the miserable conditions imposed by capitalism. It was only this powerful force that extracted concessions from corporations and required the political system to adopt the Keynesian economic measures that enabled capitalism's continued survival. The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s stood on the shoulders of this working class movement.

Conclusion

Particularly foul is the persistent rejection of the concept of "colorblindness" throughout the report. According the MCRC, none of us can, or should, see past the skin color of others. We should accept that we are all racists! Presumably, that means anyone of any race must view other humans racially. Duke University Professor Eduardo Bonilla-Silva is cited declaring that "colorblindness represents modern-day bigotry or the common manifestation of the 'new racism.'" (Page 125.)

"We must recognize that being colorblind is not the solution, it is the problem," the committee declares. (Page 116.) This bleak and retrograde outlook insists that humanity can never be unified, but will forever be divided into black and white.

There is nothing "left" about such politics. They are thoroughly right-wing. They are an outright repudiation of the democratic and egalitarian impulse of the civil rights movement, as articulated by figures such as Martin Luther

King, Jr.

Included in the commission's recommendations is this: "Reject the idea that our society has or should become 'colorblind,' which perpetuates the status quo by ignoring or overlooking the impact of decisions made within a racialized system, as well as the implicit biases that assert themselves if we do not consciously recognize them." (Page 124.)

The arch-racist governor of Alabama, George Wallace, would have likewise rejected the concept of colorblindness: "In the name of the greatest people that have ever trod this earth, I draw the line in the dust and toss the gauntlet before the feet of tyranny, and I say segregation now, segregation tomorrow and segregation forever." (January, 1963.)

The logical conclusion from this premise is that what is needed is a policy of special privilege for blacks. Although the MCRC doesn't advocate an overtly race-based policy favoring blacks over whites when it comes to jobs, promotions, college admission, etc., such an approach flows from its arguments.

This corresponds entirely to the economic interests and narrow aspirations of the layer of upper-middle class blacks that has emerged over the past 40 years of programs such as affirmative action, even as the living standards of the working class as a whole, including blacks, have fallen. They want a bigger slice of the income and wealth of the top 10 percent for themselves, and could not care less about the masses, including the black masses.

Since the Flint revelations, poisoned water is being uncovered across the country in working class communities. The resources to remedy the disastrous state of the water infrastructure have been slashed by more than 75 percent over the last 50 years and the prospect of reversing this trend under Trump is laughable.

The MCRC report is the voice of the state-appointed body that was hand-picked by the same administration that oversaw the crime against Flint in the first place. Workers of every background should learn to recognize the continual efforts of official bodies and the media to inject racial politics as poison designed to divide the working class.



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