

“People were being arrested for nothing”

Flint residents denounce arrests at town hall meeting

Our reporters
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Six residents of Flint, Michigan were arrested at an April 20 “town hall meeting” held by the city’s Democratic mayor, Karen Weaver, and state officials. The residents, who include longtime opponents of the poisoning of the city’s water and the political cover-up that followed, were handcuffed and dragged off by heavily armed police for exercising their freedom of speech.

According to the ABC-TV affiliate, the residents, who include Tony Palladeno Jr., his wife Leah and local activist Abel Delgado, were held in Flint City lockup overnight and released on Friday, April 21. The Flint police department told the local media outlet they will request the prosecutor’s office to file the following charges: disorderly conduct, assaulting a police officer, interfering with police and disruptive behavior.

Armed police in bulletproof vests had a heavy presence at the meeting, which was allegedly called to allow resident to air their “feedback, questions and concerns” after the mayor’s announcement of a new water plan. Many residents questioned the selection of venue, the House of Prayer Missionary Church, rather than a public space, given that this was supposed to be a free and open discussion.

The event opened with a provocation by Flint Chief of Police Tim Johnson, who told the audience of over 100 that no disruptions or profanity would be tolerated and that since it was a “house of God,” all males had to remove their hats. “I just want to make sure this meeting goes off the way it’s supposed to and that everybody’s respecting everyone,” Johnson declared. “Please don’t be in here trying to disrupt this meeting, because if you do, I’m going to escort you out and I’m only going to take you to the back door and then you’re

going to jail. I’m not going to play with nobody tonight.”

During the event, several residents expressed the view that the meeting should not have been held in a church, evoking applause. One person, who was recording the proceedings on his cell phone, shouted, “I can’t wear a hat, but you can wear a pistol?” He was quickly escorted out of the meeting and arrested.

Aaron Kottke of the group Flint Rising told the *World Socialist Web Site* that he witnessed the abusive police action. “People were told they had to take their hats off to enter the church. People were arrested for no reason. There was a heavily militarized police force there which was not necessary.”

Kottke said that when he saw people being arrested he went outside to witness it. “People were being arrested for nothing. They were not being disruptive. And the people who were arrested outside were arrested just for being there.”

This included another resident who was apparently arrested for videoing the arrest of Palladeno on her cell phone.

A video from a local NBC news station showed an argument in the church vestibule between police and Palladeno. A representative of the church pointed to Palladeno and directed the police to “get him out of here,” adding, “This is my church.”

The mayor issued a statement Friday defending the police action, claiming it was necessary to make sure the “meeting was productive.”

At the march and rally held to mark the third anniversary of the city’s ill-fated switch over to the polluted Flint River, Palladeno told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “I’m still feeling it. It’s not right. It was a

setup.”

Palladeno was visibly upset explaining the arrests of his wife and the others. “She was the one that was slammed,” he said, adding, “I can’t say anything more” due to instructions from his attorney.

When asked about his First Amendment rights, Palladeno said the mayor opposed this. “That was taken from us the minute they put us in a church. It should have never happened that way.”

As of this writing it has not been reported whether the prosecutor’s office has filed charges against the six. An earlier report by the ABC-TV’s local affiliate said no charges had yet been filed.

A civil rights attorney contacted by the WWSWS said, “If they have not issued any charges it’s because they know what they did was illegal. You can’t arrest someone for not taking their hat off in church or not speaking properly. By arresting them, the city was sending a message that they will use force to silence opposition.”



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