

Three years after the lead poisoning of Flint, residents face water shutoffs, home foreclosures

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More than three years after the decision to switch the water supply of Flint, Michigan to the polluted Flint River, virtually nothing has been done to address the catastrophic health consequences of the lead poisoning of tens of thousands of working-class residents. Instead, city officials have resumed water shutoffs and are threatening to foreclose on the homes of workers who fail to pay for water tainted by lead and other toxins.

The city's 100,000 mostly working-class and low-income residents have been exposed to high levels of water-borne bacteria, leading to at least 12 fatalities from Legionnaires' disease, and widespread lead poisoning. An untold number of Flint residents still suffer from rashes, breathing problems and other maladies caused by toxic levels of lead, which attacks the brain and central nervous system and can cause comas, convulsions and death.

The longer-term effects, particularly for the 9,000 children under six who were exposed, can include brain damage, learning disabilities and behavioral problems. The neurotoxin can be passed from mother to child for up to three generations, causing birth defects, mental retardation and increased infant mortality.

All of the promises to address this humanitarian crisis—from Republican Governor Rick Snyder and President Barack Obama to Democratic and Republican officials at the state and local level—have come to nothing. More than 20,000 residences are still hooked up to lead service lines and most of the city's corroded water mains remain in place. Claiming the water is safe, Snyder has stopped subsidizing residents' water bills and is ending the state's bottled water program.

Anticipating public outrage over the water shutoffs and foreclosure threats, Mayor Karen Weaver, a

Democrat, carried out a provocation at an April 20 town hall meeting, using heavily armed police to arrest residents and threaten them with charges ranging from disorderly conduct to felony assault on the police for the "crime" of demanding action to address their needs.

The poisoning of Flint is the result of a criminal conspiracy. A handful of bankers, financial speculators and companies in the water business, aided by bought-off politicians, concocted a scheme to build a new water pipeline and make millions of dollars at the expense of the health of the working class families of Flint. To carry through their plot, they took advantage of the antidemocratic emergency manager system that gives unchecked powers to officials answerable only to the banks.

Flint is a microcosm of American capitalism. The birthplace of General Motors, Flint, like so many other "rustbelt" cities and towns, has been devastated by plant closures and the gutting of social services. The destruction of tens of thousands of Flint auto jobs and resulting mass impoverishment stand as a testament to the rise to power of a new financial oligarchy, based on speculation and outright theft. The oligarchs, represented openly by the government of billionaires and generals under Donald Trump, are out to steal from the working class everything they can get their hands on—from pensions to the public school system to Medicaid, Medicare and Social Security.

Flint is part of a broader social counterrevolution, which has reached a new stage with the passage of the House bill to dismantle Medicaid, upon which 45,000 Flint residents rely for health coverage, and remove all restrictions on profit gouging by the health insurance and drug companies. The conscious aim of the

bipartisan assault on health care is to drive older workers into an early grave.

After determined protests by city residents brought the Flint water crisis and the official cover-up to the attention of a national and international audience, a parade of politicians, celebrities and media talking heads came to the city, including Hillary Clinton, Bernie Sanders and filmmaker Michael Moore. A year ago, President Obama signaled the beginning of the end of the charade of concern for the plight of Flint when he came, sipped a glass of water and all but declared, “Let them drink lead.”

Three years later, the politicians and the media are gone. In their place are the police and the blackjack.

What are the lessons of this bitter experience? Any struggle that is confined to making appeals to the powers-that-be is completely inadequate. A new strategy must be adopted, based on the mobilization in Flint and across the country of the working class—black and white, native-born and immigrant, employed and unemployed—in a common struggle against capitalism and the corporate-controlled political system. It must be completely independent of the Democratic Party and its political allies, such as the trade unions.

Workers must reject the claim that there is no money to meet social needs when trillions are squandered on war, bank bailouts and corporate tax cuts. General Motors just raked in record first-quarter profits and is handing out \$10 billion in dividend payments and stock buybacks to benefit its richest investors.

The Socialist Equality Party calls for the cancellation of all water bills and a multibillion-dollar program to take care of the long-term health needs of the city’s population and compensate Flint residents for the collapse of their home values and the huge expenses caused by the water crisis. We call for a public works program to hire the unemployed and rebuild the city.

The provision of safe and clean water must be guaranteed free of charge by ending private corporate control of the water system and turning it into a publicly owned and democratically controlled utility.

Clean water, along with decent schools, health care, housing and a secure retirement, is not a privilege. Workers must take the position that these are social rights. But securing these rights requires a struggle against the capitalist system and all of its parties and political representatives.



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