

# Flint workers denounce foreclosure threat over water bills

Jerry White  
18 May 2017

Angry workers in Flint, Michigan piled into a City Council meeting Wednesday to oppose city plans to put tax liens on their houses and strip them of their homes if they failed to pay back bills for water still poisoned with lead and bacteria. Under intense pressure from residents, the Democratic-controlled city council hurriedly convened an emergency session, just two days before the May 19 deadline to impose liens on some 8,000 homes, or a fifth of the city's 40,000 occupied homes.

The threat to seize workers' homes has provoked popular outrage in the city, which used to be the manufacturing hub of General Motors. Three years ago, an emergency manager appointed by Republican Governor Rick Snyder ordered a switch of the city's water supply from Great Lakes water pumped and treated by the Detroit water system to heavily polluted and untreated water from the Flint River. This move, approved by Snyder's Democratic Party state treasurer, Andy Dillon, precipitated the lead poisoning of city residents and a massive public health crisis that continues to this day.

The rage and pointed comments by residents exposed the deep alienation of the largely working-class population from the entire political establishment, which carried out this crime to funnel more money into the hands of wealthy bondholders, private contractors and real estate developers. Over the last three years, Democrats and Republicans alike, from Governor Snyder to President Obama, have sought to cover up this crime and mollify public anger with bogus promises that have brought no relief.

Declaring that lead levels had fallen below unsafe levels, Governor Snyder cut off subsidies that were paying up to two-thirds of residents' water bills. The city then began mass water shutoffs, followed by the

foreclosure threat. The state government is also suspending its bottled water distribution program.

City Council President Kerry L. Nelson opened the meeting by asking for a prayer, which included, "Please God, give the people trust in their government." This was followed by an explicit threat by Nelson to have any resident arrested for "disorderly conduct" if they did not obey the council's rules, including limiting their comments to three minutes.

Several cops were present by the public microphone and throughout the auditorium to enforce the threat. Last month, six residents were arrested at a town hall meeting convened by Mayor Karen Weaver. This was aimed at intimidating and silencing residents angered over claims that the water is safe and that they could lose their homes if they did not pay their water bills. Afterwards, Weaver, another Democrat, said that, although she did not want to see people lose their homes, she had no choice but to enforce the city ordinance.

"You're not going to take my property for this stinking water," declared one angry resident at yesterday's meeting.

Another worker, Jackie said, "People have huge water bills, and you are going to attach liens on their houses? If you take their houses who is going to live in them then? Where are they going to go? These families didn't cause the problem, we didn't ask for it. Our lives have been turned upside down. Our health is bad, our children are sick, and God only knows what is going to happen to them as they grow older. There has got to be another way."

"Where is the dignity of the people of Flint?" Nadika said. "Although the water is not fit to drink, we need the water to clean our houses and flush our toilets. Now I have a lien on my house that I struggled a long time to

pay for. I've been on my own since I was 18 years old, and I've never had a problem paying my water bill. I'm 60-plus now. I don't feel like I should pay for this water. It was a cover-up. They didn't let the people of Flint know about this until after it started killing people and our kids got sick and broke out in rashes. I would love for the people of Flint and my people to have justice and dignity."

Another worker, Chris, said, "Our rates are too high, and we have bad water. You need to lower the rates and make it more affordable. We know the water is no good. How can people be charged for water if they are not using it? You're the legislative body, but I want to know what you have changed in the last four years—the answer is nothing."

"Actions were taken by state officials to cause Flint to enter a financial crisis. We know the same players were involved in the water that has caused us physical harm. And now the same players are applying pressure on the city to collect more money. Why should we agree with those culprits who are strangling the people to get more money? Investors are positioning themselves to buy these foreclosed houses. I am sure the cost for the city of Flint of massive foreclosures and homelessness will be far higher than what we are trying to collect with the water."

"We're supposed to clean our body parts when General Motors won't clean its car parts with this water," another worker said.

A disabled veteran said, "I was sent all over the world, and I saw the miserable water in countries like the Philippines and other Third World countries. I never thought when I came back home to Flint that it would be the same. If ISIS or Al Qaeda poisoned the water we would be dropping bombs on them. But no one was arrested for poisoning Flint. I fought the war on terror, but I don't know what is more frightening, fighting a bunch of guys with guns and bombs or living in fear of what is going to come out of my faucet."

To contain public anger, City Council President Kerry Nelson, working with the American Civil Liberties Union and the NAACP, quickly cobbled together a resolution for a temporary moratorium on issuing the liens, which was passed by the council.

The measure does not provide debt forgiveness for residents who have been charged for poisoned water. It only blocks the amount accumulated between April

2014 and "until such time as unfiltered tap water is deemed potable (safe to drink or to use for food preparation without risk of health problems)" from being transferred to a homeowner's tax debt. This means the additional unpaid bills accumulated in the meantime can be imposed as a tax lien whenever some unnamed body deems the water safe or after a one-year limit set by the City Council.

The resolution also does not eliminate tax liens imposed prior to April 2014 or do anything to recover the homes of workers who lost their homes prior to that date.

In any case, the resolution, which was not even reviewed before the meeting by the council's legal representative, other council members, let alone the public, may not be enforceable. It could also be quickly vetoed by Mayor Weaver, who did not bother to attend the meeting.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**