“We’re being punished for not being able to pay the city for the poison”

Flint residents speak out on water crisis

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Residents of the city of Flint continue to demand relief from the devastating public health crisis caused by the switch of the city’s water supply to untreated water from the polluted Flint River in April 2014. Three years after this criminal act, driven by the profit interests of wealthy bondholders and politically connected private contractors, residents of the former manufacturing hub of General Motors continue to suffer ill health, devastating medical costs and the collapse of home values.

To add insult to injury, Governor Rick Snyder, claiming that the water is now safe, has ended water bill subsidies and will soon end the distribution of bottled water. The city, seeking to squeeze $6 million dollars from residents to pay off the bondholders, has resumed mass water shutoffs and has threatened 8,000 residents with tax liens and the potential foreclosure of their homes if they do not pay for water that is still tainted with lead, bacteria and other toxins. To silence and intimidate residents, the city’s Democratic mayor, Karen Weaver, and the Flint police chief oversaw the arrest of six residents at a “town hall meeting” on April 20.

With anger reaching a boiling point just days before the May 19 deadline to impose tax liens, the Democratic-controlled city government, working with the American Civil Liberties Union and the NAACP, passed a resolution for a one-year moratorium on the issuing of tax liens for outstanding water bills incurred 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].”

The temporary measure does not provide debt forgiveness for residents who have been charged for poisoned water. Moreover, additional unpaid bills accumulated during the moratorium 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.

On Thursday, city prosecutors who had been holding charges over the head of residents as a serious felony assault on a police officer, decided not to pursue criminal charges against the six workers who were arrested and held overnight in jail after the police provocation at the April 20 town hall meeting.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to residents after the City Council meeting on May 17. Charles McFadden, a retired GM worker, spoke about the spread of disease due to the poisoned water. “H. pylori, that’s some kind of bacteria that I never heard of. I had two rounds of heavy, heavy antibiotics that lasted two weeks. I had to wait a month to see if it cleared. I went in and I wasn’t clear, so I had to get another series of antibiotics. In the meantime, the antibiotics had me in a knot, they had me sick and chilled.

“It seems like they are trying to run everybody of a certain income out of Flint, period. They bailed out General Motors on my back. They are still taking money from the older workers. They keep hollering that ‘GM workers never pay for their health care.’ Yes, I did, I got a $2.54 raise and a dollar went to my health care. At the end of all this, when I retire, what do you do? You cut my pension. Then you are supposed to pay my Medicare. When the UAW went back in negotiations for the bailout, the $92 that was supposed to was supposed go for Medicare in my pension check—I don’t get it.

“They want us to die. Here’s the Catch-22: if you make a certain amount of money you can’t qualify for government help. Well, everybody here used to work for GM and they made $3 too much. You don’t qualify.

“The Democrats will give you a chance to see a dollar. The Republicans say we aren’t even going to let you see

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it because you'll want to get your hands on it.' I lost all respect for Obama when he came here and said drink the water."

Keri Webber explained how doctors accidently discovered that lead had gotten in her daughter's bones. "In 2013, we were in a car crash. My daughter had to have open hip surgery and they were doing a bone scan. The doctors pulled me out of the room and they asked what had we done to her. She was diagnosed with blood toxicity, at 15 years old.

"We still did not know about the lead in the water and one morning in August 2015, my husband is sitting down at a computer and he loses half the vision in his eye. A few days after we learn our dog is in sudden liver failure. Then in July, August, September, October into early November my oldest kid has pneumonia that they cannot kill. Despite six antibiotics and all the medication, her lungs were getting worse, not better. So, the doctor took a sputum sample and sent it to the (CDC) Center for Disease Control to find out what kind of bacteria he could not kill. We were informed after she got better that 'oops, it was Legionnaires' disease.'

"CDC finally showed up at the house and they talked to the whole family and they asked my daughter did she drink and did she take drugs, was that why her liver was bad? Her liver enzymes were off the charts. Then she started to have abdominal pains and her gall bladder was going at 16. This was in 2016 and by then we knew about the lead and they found it in her bones. Then they did a CAT scan to see if she had gallstones and they found out she had a fatty liver. Everything on this kid was discovered by accident.

"My husband's blood pressure is out of control even though he is on medicine. His vision will never come back. He's lead poisoned, my daughter is lead poisoned and the other girl and I have lead in us. Last week, I had a mini-stroke.

"My husband and I are on Social Security Disability—$2,700 a month for a family of four. His medical bills just from his stroke, the cardiologists, the two eye specialists—$10,000, on us. I've taken this all the way up to the state government, to Richard Baird [Governor Rick Snyder's closest aide and Flint's 'transformational manager'] and they say, 'We'd love to help, but.'"

Melissa Mays, who has played a central role in the exposure of the government cover-up, told the WSWS, "The tax liens are not legal. They need to be stopped. It is not legal to charge us for a product or service that has no value, or in the case of our water, less than zero. The water bills are not legal and the residents deny the legality of the bills and the liens. Making 8,002 people homeless because they cannot afford to or refuse to pay for poison is not right. A moratorium is a good first step but the ordinance and law need to be changed. Period."

Flint resident Jeannie Stewart is a single mother of an 11-year-old autistic child. She told the WSWS, "My son was one of the thousands of children who were poisoned. We are still seeing the effects of the poisoning on his behavior as well as skin rashes, hair loss, and digestive problems.

"Due to my son's disability keeping gainful employment in our current economy is nearly impossible, so we live on a fixed income. My current water bill runs $125 a month, for water I cannot use. I have been unable to pay the full amount every month so now I am behind over $1,000. My home is supposed to have the water lines replaced within the month. But they are saying they will not replace lines in homes with past due bills. I do not have $1,000 to pay it off. I am a single mother who struggles to keep my head above water. I cannot believe that in America in 2017 this is how we treat our citizens."

She added that the US said it carried out a missile strike in Syria for poisoning its own people, "when the people of Flint have been poisoned for over three years now. Now we're being punished for not being able to pay the city for the poison.

"I'm going to be hit when they close the water pods [points of distribution for bottled water]…. In my home, we use approximately a case of water a day. Without the water pods I do not know how we will manage. I cannot afford to buy cases of water nor can I afford to live outside of the city. Without the water pods we would be forced to use water we know is toxic. I don't know how anyone with a conscience could allow an entire city with thousands of children residing in it to be poisoned further. We need these pods to continue until every home in Flint has safe water."

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