

# Democratic gubernatorial town hall in Flint: No policies to address lead poisoning disaster

Our reporters  
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Four Michigan Democrats running for governor in the 2018 election spoke at a town hall forum on August 12. The event, billed as the kick-off in the contest for the Democratic gubernatorial nomination, was held in Flint, the former center of General Motors auto production and symbol of social devastation caused by mass layoffs and plant closures. The city of 100,000 recently gained national and international attention as a result of a health crisis caused by the lead poisoning of its water supply by state and local authorities.

The decision to hold the initial Democratic campaign event in Flint was presented as a sign of the Democratic Party's sensitivity to the ongoing problems faced by Flint residents as a result of the water crisis, and the party's commitment to address them. The Democrats are fearful of the anger among Flint workers and youth over the failure of the government to take any serious measures to address the water crisis. Their aim is to contain and dissipate that anger.

What the town hall forum in fact demonstrated was the indifference of the Democratic Party to the crisis facing Flint workers and its inability to propose any serious policies to address either the immediate crisis or the longer-term economic and health issues facing Flint residents, especially children, whose mental and physical development has been jeopardized by exposure to toxic levels of lead. The event was an exercise in cynicism and political evasion.

The four candidates were former Michigan Senate minority leader Gretchen Whitmer; former global vice president of Xerox Bill Cobbs; former director of the Detroit Department of Health Abdul El-Sayed; and chemical testing company CEO Shri Thanedar.

The candidates themselves represent something of a cross-section of the political and corporate interests that make up the Democratic Party. Whitmer, as a leading

figure in the Michigan state Senate, played a pivotal role in the so-called "Grand Bargain"—a set of measures that facilitated the attack on workers in the 2013-2014 Detroit bankruptcy.

Cobbs was a top executive at Xerox when the company was slashing thousands of jobs and engaged in a multibillion-dollar accounting fraud scheme.

Thanedar is a wealthy CEO who has owned and managed several multimillion-dollar business in the pharmaceutical and chemical testing industry.

El-Sayed, despite having recently served as Detroit's director of public health, has been silent on the public health crisis caused by Detroit water shutoffs.

The event was held at 5:30 pm on a Saturday at University of Michigan-Flint, a predominantly commuter school. The room had only about 150 seats, the majority of which were filled by the four candidates' entourages. The organizers had no desire to draw a large audience.

It was not a debate, as the moderator was quick to point out. Candidates were asked to frame their own responses to a set of pre-selected questions and were instructed not to reply to other candidates or ask them questions.

There was not a trace of spontaneity in any of the remarks or questions. Candidates recited canned speeches and stock phrases, while avoiding any genuine discussion of the issues that are of grave concern to the people of the city and the state.

They repeatedly denounced Republican Governor Rick Snyder and his use of the anti-democratic "emergency manager" law, but did not mention the Democrats' own complicity in the law's implementation. Democratic Governor Jennifer Granholm greatly expanded the use of emergency managers before giving way to Snyder. In Flint, the

Democratic-led City Council and Democratic Mayor Dayne Walling agreed not to contest the appointment of an emergency manager when one was installed in 2011.

The candidates sought to place all of the responsibility for the Flint water crisis at the feet of Snyder and the Republicans, willfully covering over the fact that the poisoning of the city was carried out with the aid of a Democratic state treasurer, a Democratic mayor and a Democratic emergency manager, and under the eye of a federal Environmental Protection Agency led by the Democratic Obama administration.

There have been repeated attempts by both big business parties to depict the poisoning of the Flint water supply as a racial attack—a claim that flies in the face of the fact that 40 percent of the city’s population is white. This is an attempt to cover up the financial interests behind the decision to switch the water supply from the Detroit-based system to a new water pipeline project and use the polluted Flint River as the city’s water source on an interim basis. Bankers, bondholders and corporations plotted to carry out the switch with an eye to making huge profits, using the de facto dictatorship of the emergency manager setup to make the change without any democratic input or control from the residents.

The racial narrative is above all aimed at dividing the working class along racial lines. This became all the more critical for the big business parties when protests erupted bringing together workers and youth of all races and ethnicities.

Candidates at the August 12 town hall advanced this reactionary perspective. Cobbs and Whitmer characterized the emergency manager law as racist and Whitmer called the poisoning of the water supply a racist act.

Virtually nothing was proposed to actually address health issues and financial burdens facing Flint residents as a result of the continuing water crisis. None of the candidates spoke of restructuring the water system to remove lead pipes or providing funds to compensate residents for the collapse of their home values and the cost of current medical treatment, let alone the massive medical and other costs families will face going forward as a result of the physical toll of lead poisoning, particularly on children.

The same applies to the question of social inequality.

Cobbs’ proposal for an infrastructure project to provide jobs at \$17.50 per hour “for anyone who wants one” was virtually the only mention of increased spending at the August 12 event. Cobbs felt it was safe to propose this measure—itsself totally inadequate—only because he knew it would never be passed by the state legislature.

The day before the forum, two of the sites that provide clean drinking water to the people of Flint were closed down as part of the state’s attempt to force people to return to drinking the city’s tap water. Only seven such sites remain open, and the state plans to close down three more on September 5.

Whitmer summed up the Democrats’ view when she stated, “We can’t undo the damage that has been done by the Snyder administration, but what we can do is provide people a path so that they can be successful and so that they can take care of themselves.” In other words, the Democrats have no intention of addressing the immense social crisis, and workers are expected to make do on their own.



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