

Recall election fails to oust Flint, Michigan mayor

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Last Tuesday's recall mayoral election in Flint, Michigan was marked by mass abstention of voters during the city's ongoing lead water crisis. More than 81 percent of registered voters stayed away from the polls. With 18 candidates on the ballot, Flint Mayor Karen Weaver retained her seat and will serve out the two-year balance of her term.

Weaver had the backing of the national Democratic Party, including Jesse Jackson and the corporate media. Even with that, she received only 7,709 votes, or 53 percent of the total. Longtime city council member Scott Kincaid, who was backed by local unions, including the United Auto Workers, received 32 percent of the vote.

The election was the result of a recall initiative held in the summer in which nearly 9,000 people signed petitions to oust Weaver. After challenges by election officials, Weaver and the courts, nearly 6,000 were verified, surpassing the 5,750 signatures required to get the recall on the ballot. In the end, more people signed petitions for Weaver's recall than voted who for her.

Changes to make the recall of politicians more difficult were promoted by Republican Governor Rick Snyder and instituted by the state in 2012. Rather than a simple yes or no vote on the recall of the mayor, Tuesday's election allowed Weaver to run against 17 other mayoral candidates. Arthur Woodson, the initiator of the recall petition, was himself a mayoral candidate and received 2.4 percent of the vote.

The final recall language on the ballot was related to Weaver's decision to hire Rizzo, a trash hauler that was connected to a federal corruption investigation. Residents who signed the petition, however, were motivated in large part by Weaver's role in the water crisis. Previous petition submissions that included language linking Weaver to the ongoing water crisis

were rejected by the Genesee County Board of Elections.

During the petition verification process, Weaver not only challenged the signatures, but also used her position to send police officers to the homes of several residents, demanding to know if they really signed.

The catastrophic water and health disaster began in April 2014 when the city's water source was switched to the toxic Flint River without adding corrosion controls, causing lead to leach from the city's pipes into the water pumped into homes and businesses.

Residents' protests about the discolored and foul-tasting tap water, which was causing rashes, hair loss and numerous other health problems, were ignored for months. Finally, with help of researchers Marc Edwards and Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha, it was proven that there were high levels of lead in the water and in the blood of children in the city.

The water was switched back to the Detroit system in October 2015. But the damage had already been done after 18 months of poisoned water. During that time, Flint endured one of the largest outbreaks ever of Legionnaires' disease, killing 12 people.

Both Democrats and Republicans were involved in the actions of Flint that produced the crisis and the subsequent cover-up of what happened. The decision to switch the city's water source to a project run by the Karegnondi Water Authority (KWA) was made by the city's emergency manager, Darnell Earley, appointed by the state and overseen by Michigan Governor Rick Snyder, a Republican. It was carried out by Mayor Dayne Walling, a Democrat, and was approved by the Democratic Party-controlled city council.

Republican and Democratic officials in the state Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) and the Obama administration Environmental Protection

Agency conspired to cover up and deny the water crisis. After Flint, Genesee County, and the state of Michigan declared a state of emergency in the city in early in 2016, Obama refused to do so on the grounds that the disaster was manmade, committing a paltry \$5 million to relief—amounting \$50 per resident.

Weaver was swept into office in November 2015 by pledging to fix the water crisis. However, she has been instrumental in attacking the very residents who have fought to bring the water crisis to light.

Six Flint residents were arrested at an April 2017 “town hall” meeting held in a church organized by Weaver and state officials. Richard Baird, Snyder’s right-hand man and a financial backer of Weaver, was a moderator at the meeting. The residents, who included 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.

In addition, thousands of residents have been threatened with home foreclosure for non-payment of water bills. The water rates in Flint are among the highest in the US. Most residents are still using bottled water for drinking, cooking and bathing, yet are expected to pay for water they cannot safely use.

Weaver helped to cover up the role of the Democratic Party in the Flint crisis. In March 2016, one of the presidential debates between Clinton and Sanders was held in Flint. The working class was used as a backdrop for their campaigns. Moreover, Obama’s visit to Flint in May 2016 became notorious when he told Flint workers to stop complaining and “drink the water.”

While Weaver has presented herself as a champion of the residents of Flint, the reality is quite different. To date, Weaver’s “Fast Start Program,” which many Flint workers have renamed “Slow Start,” has only replaced 5,200 lead lines, and the remaining 30,000 will not be completed until 2020.

Weaver has flipflopped on which water source will be used by the city going forward. At first, she along with Snyder, supported the continuation of the KWA. Now, she, Snyder and most of the political establishment support the Great Lakes Water Authority (GLWA). The main issue is not the health of the population, as they claim, but making sure the \$7 million owed to KWA bondholders will be paid. Tuesday’s election will most likely insure the 30-year GLWA agreement will be

signed, and it will be the mechanism for the payback to the bondholders.

None of the candidates in the Flint mayoral elections offered a way forward for Flint workers. They all accept that the rights and interests of the workers of Flint will remain subordinate to the profit interests of the giant banks and corporations that profited off of the Flint water crisis. None have any solution to the broader social conditions—in Flint and beyond—of which the water crisis is itself only one part.

The water crisis in Flint—like Hurricane Katrina, the financial crash of 2008 and the BP oil spill—has revealed the reality of American capitalist society. Everything is done to serve the interests of the corporate and financial elite, who are rewarded for their crimes with bank bailouts, deregulation and tax cuts, while workers and their families see their schools and basic services destroyed, their pensions looted and their wages and living standards decimated.

What is required is the political mobilization of the working class as an independent force to break the stranglehold of the corporate and financial aristocracy over society. The \$7 million debt owed to KWA bondholders must be cancelled. The banks and multi-billion-dollar corporations must be nationalized under workers control to provide the resources to make the population of Flint whole, including the full replacement of all pipes and water infrastructure and the provision of free, high-quality health care for all.



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