

Kentucky water crisis outrage: Another US worker arrested for criticizing government officials

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For the second time in three days in the United States, an ordinary citizen who had the temerity to criticize government officials at a public meeting was handcuffed by police and removed. Following schoolteacher Deyshia Hargrave, arrested Monday for her comments at a school board meeting in Louisiana, it was the turn of Gary Michael Hunt, a former coal miner, forced by police to leave a public hearing on the water crisis in eastern Kentucky's Martin County.

A video posted Wednesday shows a police officer handcuffing Hunt during a public emergency meeting held to address the lack of water. The eastern Kentucky county, which is losing as much as 60 percent of treated water due to leaking pipes and old infrastructure, announced it was "conserving" water by shutting it off to residents at night, but some have been without running water for at least seven days.

During the Martin County Fiscal Emergency meeting, Hunt was handcuffed and told he was being arrested for using profanity while criticizing the district's response to the water crisis. The video then shows a law enforcement officer saying, "That's disorderly conduct," and "You're under arrest," before grabbing him by the throat and escorting him out of the courtroom.

"All I want is for the people of Martin County to have water," Hunt told the *Lexington Herald-Leader*. "It's time to get rid of the crooks. It's been time for a long time." Hunt said he was given a citation and must appear in court, but he wasn't taken to jail.

Hundreds of residents have had no water since Monday in this rural area, which borders West Virginia. Thousands of Martin County Water District customers saw their water pressure decrease dramatically during

last week's freezing cold. Due to the lack of investment in the infrastructure and the water distribution system, water was shut off—in many cases without even notifying residents.

To add insult to injury, the Martin County Water District is seeking a 49 percent rate increase. The water authority is seeking to blame working class families for the water crisis. District office manager Joe Hammond claimed that use was high because people were leaving water running to keep pipes from freezing.

A statement on Martin County Water District's Facebook page reads, "The primary causes for our current situation are a decrease in customers leading to lost revenue, coupled with an increase in utility costs to repair failing infrastructure. This shortfall has created an accounts payable debt as of November, 2017 of \$831,000. Plainly speaking, we owe \$831,000 in past due bills that we don't have the funds to pay."

BarbiAnn Maynard, a mother of two children who has been protesting the water situation in Martin County for several years told the WSWS, "The water officials are bullies! Their message is, 'if you try to stand up, we'll arrest you.' I don't blame him for cussing. And I'm not backing down. My mommy was also an activist, told me to stand up and fight and that's how we were raised."

This area has a long history of water problems which have severely impacted the health of this working class community, where many former coal miners live. BarbiAnn's mother was diagnosed with breast and lymph cancer when she was 29 years old. She lost her battle when she succumbed to brain cancer at the age of 48. BarbiAnn's sister has had a brain tumor since she was 14, her father has dementia and her neighbor's

father also has dementia. “The chemicals in the water are killing us. It’s contaminated,” she told the WSWS.

In 2000, Martin County was the site of one of the biggest environmental disasters in the southeastern United States. A spill occurred when the bottom of a coal slurry impoundment owned by Massey Energy broke into an abandoned underground mine below, sending an estimated 306,000,000 US gallons of toxic slurry containing arsenic and mercury into a nearby river. The spill killed everything in the water. The harmful effects continue today. Massey’s CEO at the time was Don Blankenship, convicted of lying to government safety officials after the Upper Big Branch mine disaster that killed 29 workers.

BarbiAnn further commented to the WSWS, “We have no hospital and no high school in Martin County, but we have three court houses! We don’t even have an after-hours clinic. The high school building was closed due its advanced state of disrepair, the students were moved into the middle school. The roads are disintegrating, breaking off, and in some places an entire lane is gone. We’re pretty much living in a third world country right now. This was an area of \$1 billion coal fields, but nothing was done for us. The poor will give you the shirt off their back, the rich will give you nothing. The people have to stand together.”

Although local officials have received several grants to upgrade the water delivery system, improvements were not carried out.

The *Lexington Herald-Leader* reported about 1,000 people in Martin County were still without water for a fifth day on Friday, and by Sunday several hundred were still without water. The water district began shutting off water to many customers at night on Monday.

Kathy Jude, who lives in Martin County, told the newspaper her husband’s grandfather has been without running water since Monday. She says she has had to use bottled water to bathe him.

A post on the Martin County Citizens United Facebook page reads: “On any given day in Martin County, Kentucky, the water system loses more water to leaks than it delivers to paying customers through their faucets. The water system is under a state investigation for the third time since 2002. Customers complain of frequent service interruptions and discolored water, and their bills come with a notice that

drinking the water could increase the risk of cancer.

“This is the state of infrastructure in a county that’s mined many millions of dollars worth of coal since the early 1900s, providing the power required for America’s industries and modern comforts. As with many coalfield communities, all the profit and advances the area’s laborers and natural resources made possible haven’t left much evidence of improvement in the local economy and infrastructure.

“Opening a tap is an exercise in trust which most of us take for granted. But in Martin County it’s just one more reason for residents to feel let down by the powers that be; one more chapter in the long story of how the people have lost faith in their government.”

Martin County, like other areas which once employed tens of thousands of coal miners, has been bled dry and poisoned by the coal bosses and the entire political establishment. The median income for a household in the county is \$18,279 and the median income for a family was \$21,574. About 33.30 percent of families and 37.00 percent of the population were below the poverty line, including 45.10 percent of those under age 18 and 26.90 percent of those age 65 or over.



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