

“The state trooper choked me because I was telling the truth”

Former coal miner in Eastern Kentucky speaks about police assault at public meeting

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Nearly a quarter of a million people have viewed the online video of Gary Michael Hunt being assaulted and handcuffed by a Kentucky state trooper because he criticized local authorities at an emergency public meeting of the Martin County Fiscal Court and demanded clean and safe water for the area’s residents.

As the WSWWS reported, an estimated 1,400 residents of the eastern Kentucky county have been without water for days because of leaking pipes and decaying infrastructure in the economically depressed former coal mining area. The cash-strapped water district cut off water to residents after water pressure decreased rapidly due to freezing temperatures. Nine days after the shutoff, area residents still do not have regular water service.

The incident took place just days after a deputy marshal in Vermilion Parish, Louisiana threw down Deyshia Hargrave and arrested the young middle school teacher because she challenged the vote by local school board authorities to give the school superintendent a hefty raise while school employees have not had a pay increase in a decade.

Hunt, 38, worked in the coalmines for eleven years until he badly injured his back and knee on the job. The father of two children spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* about the attempt to forcibly silence him. “The state trooper choked me and had his hand around my throat. I’m not a pushover and I said you can put me in jail for 20 years; when I get back, you’ll still hear my opinion.”

Hunt said he was told he was being arrested for “disorderly conduct” and removed from the meeting. The trooper later told Hunt he was not under arrest, but he issued him a citation for “menacing.” Hunt is due in court on February 26.

On Tuesday, Hunt said water at his home was trickling in at “about the size of a pencil, with too little pressure to shower.” The Hunt family has gone a full five days without a drop of water and four days with only a dribble.

“I am tired of begging people for water. I went to that

meeting to speak up. It’s about my kids. I’ll stand up for my kids until the day I die. It’s about the future. Why should my child have to bathe by pouring a barrel of rainwater over him? They showed me what they really think the night of the meeting. They treated me like a dog because I’m poor.”

Commenting on the efforts to silence other workers at public meetings, Hunt told the WSWWS, “The coal miners, shoe shiners, teachers, it doesn’t matter. We have to come together. They choked me because I was telling the truth.”

Not only is the availability of water a major issue, with water outages all too frequent, but the quality of water in the area has been an ongoing problem for years. Many trace the problem to the coal mine owners who made billions in profits from the labor of the working class and then abandoned the area, leaving behind an environmental and economic disaster.

Martin County was the scene of the October 11, 2000 disaster when the bottom of a coal slurry impoundment owned by Massey Energy broke, sending an estimated 306 million gallons of thick, black waste into two tributaries of the Tug Fork River. “I remember the Massey spill, it was crazy,” Hunt told the WSWWS. “People were hysterical. The authorities didn’t take any precautions. All they did was to clean up the eyesores. It was like covering over crap with orange paint and calling it an improvement.”

Cynically posturing as a friend of the miners, Trump is lifting whatever environmental and safety regulations remain on the coal bosses.

“All we know is coal,” said Hunt, who told the WSWWS he voted for Trump in hopes that conditions would improve. The former coal miner responded to the class issues when this reporter said the entire political system, from the billionaire president and the Republicans, to Obama, Clinton and the Democrats, all served the interests of the super-rich at the expense of the working class.

“It’s not fair. You have teachers not getting raises,” Hunt said, “while we taxpayers end up paying the salaries of the

top people. Judges and politicians have stolen from the honest hardworking people. Bill Gates, Warren Buffett, and maybe the Wal-Mart owners—those handful is what's killing the working class people today. I'm for the working class. It's all over the world. Those born with a silver spoon in their mouth never worked a day in their life. They're the only ones who can make money. People need to realize that the same people are getting richer and richer. It's absolutely sad the way this country has gotten. One hundred percent of both parties are filthy rich. They never worked a day in their life. But for us, if you want a job here, you have to go 100 miles to get one."

Significantly, 54 years ago, Martin County was the site where President Lyndon Johnson declared his "War on Poverty" in 1964. Along with neighboring Pike and Harlan counties, the area was the scene of fierce class battles from the 1930s all the way to the 1980s. The decades-long deindustrialization of the area and the betrayals of struggles like the AT Massey and Pittston strikes by the United Mine Workers union, along with the repudiation by the Democratic Party of past social reforms, have left the area in destitution and ill-health.

Today, nearly every family in Martin County has harrowing stories about the prevalence of cancer. The water throughout the county has excessive amounts of two chemicals—trihalomethanes and haloacetic acids, or THMs and HAA5s—left over from the authorities' efforts to disinfect the local rivers after the Massey slurry dam disaster. At elevated levels, THMs and HAA5s can irritate the eyes and skin, and they have been shown to cause cancer in lab animals. Warnings on the district's water bills suggest that infants, the elderly and people with compromised immune systems consult their doctors about exposure risks.

Martin County officials insist the water is fine, however, despite repeated violations of federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) limits. But Kentucky Division of Water records show the county's drinking water has exceeded EPA limits for certain chemicals multiple times every year since 2005. The county has been over the federal limits in eight of the last 10 tests for HAA5s and six of the last 10 tests for total TTHMs.

Incredibly, notices of the violation of federal drinking water standards are frequently printed on the back of the water bills for Martin County Water District customers! In September 2017, the notice stated that TTHMs and HAA5s were above the maximum contaminant level (MCL) for the second quarter of 2017.

The notice read:

"Some people who drink water containing TTHMs in excess of the MCL over many years may experience problems with their liver, kidneys, or central nervous system,

and may have an increased risk of getting cancer. Some people who drink water containing haloacetic acids in excess of the MCL over many years may have an increased risk of getting cancer."

The county is seeking to address its financial problems by forcing residents to pay 49.5 percent more for the poisoned water. Hunt, who told the WWSW that water rates are already very high, said, "Last month I paid \$193 for water and went several days without water. It is time for the working class to take this country back. We need to stand up for what's right."

The plight of workers in Martin County has struck a chord in Flint, Michigan, where working class residents have fought a years-long battle against the lead poisoning of their water and the criminal indifference of Democrats and Republicans alike. The similarity of the situations in Kentucky and Flint underscores the fact that all workers, regardless of race, face the same struggle and the same enemies.

Tony Palladeno has been fighting the water poisoning in Flint for nearly four years. Last April, Tony, his wife Leah and four others were arrested at a public meeting for demanding answers about the threat to foreclose on homes of those who either would not or could not pay for water that was not safe to use.

Tony, who formerly worked in the mail room and maintenance department at the *Flint Journal* newspaper, told the WWSW, "What is going on today is the attempt to take everything from us that has been fought for through the sit-down strikes in Flint to the fight of the coal miners against black lung. Like the worker in Kentucky and the teacher in Louisiana, six of us from Flint were arrested at a public meeting. They slammed down my wife Leah and bruised her badly. Arrests at public meetings are becoming the new norm. But don't get used to it! We workers have to stick together. My message to the people in eastern Kentucky is don't let them divide you. The Democrats and Republicans are the same! They're trying to eliminate the working class."



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