

“It’s all about putting money over our lives”

Flint residents speak out on Kentucky water crisis

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Workers and young people in Flint, Michigan are angry to learn about the water crisis in Martin County, Kentucky, where many residents still have little or no access to water because of decaying and inadequately maintained infrastructure. Like the Flint residents who fought the lead poisoning of their water supply, the working-class residents of eastern Kentucky are confronting the hostile indifference of the authorities.

Gary Michael Hunt, a 38-year-old former coal miner, was choked and handcuffed by a state trooper during an emergency public meeting last week because he criticized the inaction of officials. The incident, captured on video and viewed hundreds of thousands of times, evoked popular revulsion towards county officials and statements of solidarity with Hunt.

On Thursday, the water tower in Martin County was leaking so badly that treated water was spraying on the ground, creating a slab of frozen water, 10 feet long by 6 feet wide. Some residents estimate that the storage container has been leaking for at least two weeks. To add insult to injury, county authorities want to raise rates by 49.5 percent for water, which the authorities admit is laden with dangerous chemicals stemming from the breaking of a coal slurry dam two decades ago.

Florlisa Fowler is a Flint mother who has been actively involved in the fight in the former auto industry center since the onset of the water crisis in mid-2014. Last April, six Flint workers were arrested at a public town hall meeting when they protested the threat to impose liens on their homes for nonpayment of poisoned water.

“I feel for Gary Michael Hunt in Kentucky,” she told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “I’ve seen it here. It’s the exact same situation. We’ve been there. It’s just a different location. If you can’t speak out in a public forum, then why have one? Why should you be arrested

for speaking out? I feel for those people in Martin County from the bottom of my heart. It’s just a matter of time before safe and clean water is a major issue in every city in the nation and the world. This affects the working class and the poor.

“People feel the same way as Gary Michael Hunt and the Louisiana teacher [Deyshia Hargrave who was arrested last week for speaking out at a school board meeting]. They may not have stood up yet, but it is coming. We’re hitting a boiling point. We have nothing to lose and they will soon see there’s more of us than them.

“They want to beat us down, and they figure if they beat us, others will be afraid. In the 1930s, the Flint autoworkers stood up against General Motors. Their working conditions were deplorable. They actually stood up, by sitting down in the auto plants. Through their numbers and by uniting, they were able to create better conditions for the working class everywhere. I’m not talking about hundreds, but hundreds of thousands, of millions of workers—this is what is coming.

“They are using censorship because they want to silence us, so we won’t get together. We all face the same issues. The toxic dumping, the lack of adequate housing for the working class, the low pay, and inflation—where is the equality? This system doesn’t take care of the elderly, the sick or the poor. Yesterday, more than 1,500 people lined up for 100 jobs at the new Lear facility coming to Flint. A line worker’s pay would only be \$13 an hour. That’s not even a livable wage.”

Prior to the 2016 presidential elections, a parade of politicians from Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders to Barack Obama descended on the city making all sorts of promises to help. To this day, nothing has been done to address the immense public health crisis or to make whole

for economic damage they suffered. Most of the dangerous lead pipe infrastructure remains in Flint, not to mention throughout the rest of the US, where many other industrial cities have even higher levels of lead in the water.

Addressing herself to the Martin County residents, Florlisa continued, “Let me tell you about trying to pressure the politicians. Listen to us, to what has happened to us. Politicians on both sides of the aisle gave us no real response. They left us here to die. They handed out some band aids.

“Appealing to politicians has not done a darn thing. We’ve just been spinning our wheels, while they are busy furthering their own agenda and pocketbooks. It’s about money and greed. We in Flint and Kentucky are both being thrown under the bus. It didn’t matter who was elected.

Hillary Clinton would be doing the same thing as Trump. Officials are trying to say everything is better in Flint because they replaced some of the short lead lines, but they have not replaced or made fundamental improvements to the infrastructure. They altered information, lied and covered up the lead poisoning and all the other contaminants. These are social and economic crimes.”

Nakiya Wakes miscarried twins during the Flint crisis. Lead in water is known to have caused a spike in miscarriages in the city. “What is happening in Kentucky is very similar to what they did to us in Flint,” she said. “There they had coal mines, here we had General Motors. Our water comes out—it’s not a trickle like in Kentucky—but it’s got lead and other chemicals. We’re really in the same predicament. The government is doing them the same way they did us. We’re getting arrested for speaking out and telling the truth. It’s the same in Kentucky.

“We cannot let the government divide us. The whole situation is very political. It’s all about putting money over our lives. They are trying to save money and do not care about what lead and other poisonous chemicals are doing to our bodies and our children. I could not believe they print on the back of their water bills in Kentucky that the water can cause cancer!

“And here’s a warning about the big media: after a while they will all be gone with nothing left behind. I am so fed up.”

Lina, a student at the University of Michigan in Flint, said, “It is clear from their actions and lack of action that the government does not consider water a basic human

right. There has been a lot of talk recently about this new health care bill and I think that the question of water should be the very first thing that is considered, but it’s not.

“Everyone should have access to clean water. Flint hasn’t had clean water in almost four years now. And why is that? This is a question we really need to be asking ourselves. It’s not because the money doesn’t exist. The media has completely dropped the issue even though it is not resolved, it is shoved aside and out of sight. It is very upsetting to see that the same thing is happening in Kentucky.

“I think the Democratic Party and the Republican parties are both corrupt and responsible. They do not have the same priorities as ordinary people. They are busy trying to deport immigrants and trying to help the people who are already at the top stay at the top.”

Another U of M student, Omar, who studies molecular biology, said, “I support the workers in Kentucky who are fighting for access to water. They should not stop fighting. No one should be able to stop you from speaking.”

He added, “The fight for free unrestricted Internet is very related to struggles like the one in Kentucky. I hear about many political issues on social media, and especially things like police shootings, which the mainstream media will try and cover up. Social media is one of the only news platforms that is unfiltered and not controlled by other interests where these stories can get around. If they restrict social media and censor the Internet it might turn out we never hear about these issues at all. The fight against censorship is very related to these other struggles.”

Tradeil, another student, told WSWs reporters, “It is very messed up that these workers are not being treated with respect and dignity. I support the idea of linking up these struggles of workers in Flint and Kentucky and Puerto Rico. The US government has bankrupted all of us. They take money from us college students and a lot of other people who are all working very hard. We are the ones who contribute to the system and we have no say in how it’s run. We need to unite and demand that the money goes to what we decide.”



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