

“The water is milky white and smells like bleach”

Kentucky residents told it may take a decade to get clean, safe water

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Officials from the Martin County Water District Board on Saturday informed residents of the eastern Kentucky county that it could take a decade to repair and upgrade the area’s infrastructure before they could have access to safe, clean water.

Working class residents of the former coal mining area have had no water or only intermittent service for weeks after the county’s antiquated and understaffed treatment plant, which was built in the 1960s, and its poorly maintained pumps and pipe system failed due to freezing and bursting lines. The district is currently losing half of its clean water due to leaks.

Residents who do have service are complaining of contaminated and smelly water, and the spread of rashes, bringing to mind the public health disaster that erupted due to the lead poisoning of the water supply in Flint, Michigan. To add insult to injury, the county is implementing a 49 percent increase in water rates.

“You might compare this to Flint, Michigan,” Jared Goforth, a local farmer and handyman in Martin County, said in a heartfelt video appeal posted to YouTube. “Without clean water, you can’t live, you can’t have businesses, kids can’t go to school. It’s flu season and the kids need to wash their hands every time they can. You can’t drink from the water fountains and they are giving out bottled water. Don’t take for granted if you have clean drinking water for your family, because there are a lot of people who don’t.

“We’re not the only county that has trouble, but we’re in dire need of help and good leadership here in Martin County, Kentucky. I wanted to share this with everybody, so they can understand some of the trouble we are having here in an Appalachia now that the coal industry is gone. There are hardly any coal mines left,

people are out of work and they can’t afford the water bills that they have now.”

A week ago, Gary Michael Hunt, a former miner, was accosted by a state trooper and removed from a water district meeting for criticizing officials and demanding clean and safe water for the area’s residents. A video of the trooper grabbing Hunt by the throat and threatening him with arrest has been viewed and shared a quarter of a million times.

Workers who attended Saturday’s meeting told the *World Socialist Web Site* they were met by the county sheriff and several deputies, along with threats from board officials. “The first thing they said was this was not a question and answer meeting and was only to update us,” BarbiAnn Maynard told the WSW. “If anyone opened our mouths, they told us, we would be escorted out of the meeting.”

“The officials said they had no maps from before 1991 and had no idea where the pipes could be deteriorating, dry-rotting or busting,” Maynard said. “It was like finding a needle in a haystack.”

“When someone raised a question,” she continued, “the cops stared at him, and then the board voted to have a private meeting and they shuffled us out. The sheriff and two cops were standing behind the reporters to see what they were writing. That’s intimidation. They’re not communicating with people—they’re being bullies and saying, ‘It’s our way or no way.’”

Maynard said area residents were boiling their water like “we’re in a Third World country.” Some county residents have water, but “it’s milky white and smells like bleach. I washed my face with it and my eyes were burning.”

Officials claim the crisis is due to the loss of

population in the economically distressed county, which has led to a collapse in revenue and sustainable deficits. “I told them, the population is going down because they’re killing people,” said Maynard, who said she has been fighting for clean water since 2000, when a coal slurry dam owned by Massey Energy burst, sending 300 million gallons of black sludge down two tributaries of the Tug River.

Because of the district’s debt load, contractors are providing replacement parts on a cash-only basis. Instead of replacing lines, the district is making its employees work 100 hours a week to take out the old lines, clean them, and stick them back in the ground. “It’s a band aid and a lollypop,” Maynard said. “They look like they are doing something, but they’re not fixing the problem. They’re telling us it will take at least another 10 years.”

The county treats surface water, which is withdrawn from Crum Reservoir and replenished from the Tug River, which separates eastern Kentucky and southern West Virginia. Due to the current crisis, the county has been forced to buy additional treated water from Kermit, West Virginia, whose source is the Tug River Fork.

The district’s 2016 water quality report acknowledges that these water sources are contaminated by the coal industry, oil and gas industries and that with each rainfall, “herbicides, pesticides, fertilizers, animal manure and household chemicals are washed from impervious surfaces and other land areas into storm drains, ditches, sinkholes or streams that flow into our nearby waterways.”

Maynard said her review of water quality reports showed that the county repeatedly exceeded containment limits set by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). “The county failed tests for two cancer causing chemicals six times in 2005, seven times in 2006, 10 times in 2007, five times in 2008, 14 times in 2009, and 15 times in 2017.

“Every time the water is up, the creeks that run from where the mines are into the river are a different color, somewhere between a brown and black. I don’t know if they’re just leaking or if the mining companies are intentionally leaking it out. When I was young there were catfish in the creeks. Now there is nothing alive in them and there aren’t as many animals around.”

“My mom got cancer at 29 and died at 49,” Maynard

said. “The cancer rates and dementia rates around here are very high. In a five-mile stretch, 20 people had cancer 10 years ago and the dementia rate is off the charts. I know people get dementia and cancer, but when it is this condensed there has got to be a common denominator. Even our water bills have a warning on the back saying the water may cause cancer.”

“Clean water is a basic human right,” she said. “We’re living in the heart of the billion-dollar coalfields. In five minutes I can walk to two states and three counties; across the Tug River in Mingo County, West Virginia. I had family that was involved in the Matewan Massacre and the fights to unionize in the 1920s and 1930s. People here are not afraid to stand up and voice our opinion. My momma told me to stand your ground and not back down.”

Gary Michael Hunt told the WSWS, “We’ve got water but there is almost no pressure in the taps.” Hunt told the WSWS that he had worked for Alpha Natural Resources, which bought out the Massey Energy mines in the area, from 2007 until he got hurt in 2013. “These companies have made millions and millions but never put anything back. They just put profits before people.”

Hunt, who recently listened to the WSWS webinar on “Organize Resistance to Internet Censorship,” denounced the efforts by the government and technology monopolies like Google and Facebook to suppress free speech on the Internet. Comparing these efforts to the police repression of critics like himself and Louisiana school teacher Deyshia Hargrave, who was arrested for speaking out at a local school board meeting, he said, “They shouldn’t be allowed to censor anybody. The truth is the truth.”



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