

IYSSE meeting draws together Flint, Puerto Rico, Kentucky workers to discuss water crisis

Our reporter
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On Wednesday evening, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), the youth movement of the Socialist Equality Party, held an in-person and online meeting drawing participants from Flint, Puerto Rico and Kentucky to discuss the water crisis and a socialist perspective upon which the working class can fight to defend its social rights.

The well-attended meeting was held at the University of Michigan—Flint, with online participation from workers and youth in Puerto Rico and Martin County, Kentucky.

The residents of all three areas, like those in many other cities in America and around the world, face a water crisis of disastrous proportions. In Flint, Michigan, the health of an unknown number of residents, including children, has been irreparably damaged by lead poisoning due to a conspiracy hatched by corporations, banks and local and state officials, Democratic and Republican, to switch the city's water supply to the polluted Flint river in April, 2014.

In Martin County, Kentucky, residents struggle to survive with a water supply that is sporadic and unreliable, and which delivers a colored, foul-smelling liquid—the outcome of decades of infrastructure neglect by the government and pollution by the mining corporations.

In Puerto Rico, hundreds of thousands are still without running water nearly six months after Hurricane Irma battered the island.

The Socialist Equality Party meeting provided a unique forum where workers and youth could come together to discuss the root causes of the disasters they face and the broader social and political issues raised by these conditions, as well as a socialist perspective for a unified struggle. Present in the meeting hall in Flint were workers, residents and student youth. A number of Flint workers who have been in the forefront of the struggle against the poisoning of the city's water supply attended and contributed to the discussion.

When SEP and IYSSE member Genevieve Leigh noted at the beginning of her opening report that the meeting would hear contributions from workers and youth in Puerto Rico and Kentucky, the Flint audience responded with spontaneous applause. This reflected the sense of class solidarity and

determination that animated the entire event, bolstered by confirmation of the commonality of the problems faced by working people across the country and internationally.

Leigh's report reviewed the situation in all three regions. She noted the international character of the water crisis, referring to the fact that the population in Cape Town, South Africa is facing a cut-off of running water within a matter of months.

"What this demonstrates," she said, "is that the fundamental division in society is not race, gender or ethnicity, but class."

Highlighting the indifference and hostility of both big business parties in the US to the working class population, Leigh played video clips of Obama telling Flint residents to "drink the water" and Trump contemptuously tossing paper towel rolls to Puerto Rican residents.

A common theme emerged from the contributions of speakers in the different locations: In each case, workers faced media indifference and corporate-government efforts to shut them up.

BarbiAnn Maynard spoke from Martin County, once labelled the "billion-dollar coal field" in Appalachia. She read out a notice that has been included in her water bill for more than 10 years: "If you have a severely compromised immune system, have an infant, are pregnant or are elderly, you may be at an increased risk and should seek advice from your health care provider before drinking this water."

She noted, "Our water company, when they report on the complaints, they either say that we're crazy or we don't know what we're talking about." She explained that there was a growing incidence of cancer and dementia throughout the region, which had taken the life of her own mother.

"What they are putting in our water that they're giving us is killing us," she said.

Gary Michael Hunt, a former Kentucky coal miner who was shown on a video last month being strangled by a local sheriff as he protested the town's water crisis, also addressed the meeting. Referring to multi-millionaire coal magnate James Booth, Hunt noted that "one guy owns everything here." He continued, "And what he doesn't own is what he doesn't want... It seems like the more the worker works, the less he gets."

From Puerto Rico, IYSSE member and WSWs correspondent Anthony Castro provided details on the horrific conditions on the island and the indifference of the Trump administration. He noted that many thousands of people have been forced to resort to washboards to wash their clothes in rivers and streams, prompting retailers to jack up the price of such items.

In Flint, residents discussed their own experiences. A student asked the speakers for an explanation of the SEP's plan for "getting into office" and making "real change."

World Socialist Web Site Labor Editor Jerry White responded by explaining that the water crisis could be understood only in the context of a situation where "workers throughout the United States, in South Africa and internationally are facing, in the 21st century, the greatest levels of social inequality in world history." He pointed out that five billionaires own the same amount of wealth as half the human race. The water crisis was not a case of "bad weather," but the outcome of a "deliberate policy of social counterrevolution pursued over four decades."

Reviewing the great class battles of Kentucky miners and Flint autoworkers in the 1920s and 1930s, White explained that the working class "has never achieved a single thing through appeals to the powers-that-be," who "have a vested interest in looting society, in impoverishing the working class, and, in fact, lowering the life expectancy of workers."

The lesson of the previous struggles, he stressed, was the need for a revolutionary leadership and socialist perspective, uniting the working class of all ethnicities and countries in a common struggle. "We are seeking to establish genuine democracy, in which we, the working class, organize ourselves politically, independently of the two big business parties, and seize political power into our own hands." This, he continued, was necessary to redistribute society's wealth and reorganize the economy on a socialist and rationally planned basis.

Workers in the audience spoke powerfully on the need to base the fight against toxic or inadequate water supplies on a struggle for social equality, directed against capitalism.

Gladys, a 64-year-old retired General Motors worker and Flint resident, said, "I watched my grandparents, who worked at GM, I watched capitalism take their life, sweat, money. I watched it take my mum and dad's generation. Capitalism does nothing but feed the rich. It robs the working man of his life sustenance. They move on from one generation to the next generation, promising lies. I've never seen, in three generations, a generation come out to the good with capitalism..."

"They exploited the world's waters, and now, here we are, the whole world, with no water." She then turned and made a direct appeal to the younger generation in the audience. "I really hope that this new generation that's coming up through these colleges, that have good heads on their shoulders, that they see the mistakes that have been made by the working man, who has bought into capitalism, who has nothing to show for it!"

Another Flint resident, Florlisa, told the audience: "What we've seen is that this is not just about Flint... Just last night I saw a video of Ohio, where it looks like chocolate milk coming out of the faucet.

"This is about the haves and the have-nots. The rich are eating the poor. They're burying the poor. It's time to eat the rich."

Barry Grey, the US national editor of the *World Socialist Web Site*, spoke from the floor on the connection between these issues and the 20th anniversary of the first publication, in 1998, of the WSWs.

"This website is your instrument, to organize, to educate, to mobilize, and to build a world movement of the working class to actually put an end to capitalism," Grey said. "We have a tradition: the Marxist tradition. We base ourselves on the historical legacy of the great leaders of the working class. The leaders of the Russian Revolution: Trotsky, who led the fight against Stalin and the perversion of that revolution... This year we are celebrating 20 years of the WSWs. We are going to use it for the building of a mass, socialist movement in this country and all over the world. Join us."

The meeting concluded with an appeal for all those present to join and build the IYSSE and the Socialist Equality Party as the revolutionary leadership of the working class. The perspective advanced by the speakers met with a powerful response among those present. Student attendees signed up to form a new IYSSE club at University of Michigan—Flint. Audience members in Flint remained behind after the meeting for further discussion and spoke to WSWs reporters.



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