

East Kentucky residents hit by rate hikes and shutoffs of undrinkable water

Phyllis Steele
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The working-class residents of Martin County, Kentucky have been battling contaminated water and a collapsing water infrastructure for years in this former coal mining region. Now, to add insult to injury, they are being forced to pay more for undrinkable water.

The situation is part of a water crisis throughout the United States, which was brought to national and international attention by the protests and scientific exposures triggered by the lead poisoning of the water in Flint, Michigan.

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A study published February in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (PNAS) found that water contaminants cause 16 million cases of acute gastroenteritis each year. Between 9 and 45 million people were affected by drinking water quality violations across the US during each of the past 34 years.

Last month, the Kentucky Public Service Commission (PSC) announced its approval of a water rate increase and water surcharge that will sharply raise monthly water bills resident must pay. The increase includes a 17.5 percent hike for basic service and maintenance, plus an additional surcharge, which the Martin County Water Authority will use to pay off its \$900,000 debt to bondholders.

According to the PSC Press release of March 16, 2018, “The PSC granted Martin County Water an annual revenue increase of about 26.5 percent, consisting of an increase in base rates and a separate surcharge that will be used by the utility to pay its creditors. The average monthly residential bill will rise by \$11.17, or about 28 percent, going from \$39.90 to \$51.07.”

The county authorities have sought to claim that the increase is far less than the 49 percent hike they

originally sought. However, as one worker explained on the Martin County Water Warrior Facebook page, “If your average water bill is \$30, for example, this is what the PSC ruling did to you. $\$30 + 17.5\% = \35.25 plus the \$4.19 surcharge puts your bill at \$39.44. A flat 50% increase would put a \$30.00 water bill at \$45. Only about \$5 less. They did no favors for Martin County.”

The public service commission officials feigned sympathy for the outrage felt by residents, while making it clear that they had no choice but to foot the bill for years of government neglect and the payoff to wealthy Wall Street investors who control much of the utility bond market. If residents did not pay the “emergency relief requested,” the PSC claimed, they would be responsible for the closure of the water authority and an economic and social catastrophe.

Claiming they understood “the widespread opposition to raising rates for water service that has often been inadequate or, at times, non-existent,” the PSC officials said in a statement, nevertheless, “the district faces a dire situation.” Absent “some amount of the emergency relief requested, Martin District will be unable to continue operating within 60 to 90 days, leaving every customer with no water service, forcing residential customers to abandon their homes and commercial customers, including schools, to close. While raising water rates clearly places an increased burden upon Martin District’s customers, the alternative of not raising rates would create an even greater burden.”

Completely excluded is that the state or federal government, or the coal and other corporate interests that have made extracted billions in profits from the working class and left the area in a state of economic and environmental disaster, should be responsible to provide “emergency relief.” After decades of mine

closures and tax cuts to Big Coal, the state collected only \$100 million in coal severance taxes last year, down from \$310 million in 2011.

Governor Matt Bevin and the state legislature have done nothing to address the crisis. On the contrary, the General Assembly on Monday approved a “tax reform” measure that would slash taxes for wealthiest 1 percent of Kentuckians, but a tax increase for 95 percent of the state’s taxpayers. The corporate-controlled politicians claim that there is no money to provide clean and safe water, but they can find endless resources for the wealthy.

Teachers in Kentucky, who are fighting Bevin’s attack on pensions and retiree health benefits, are part of a nationwide revolt by educators, which has seen strikes and mass protests in West Virginia, Oklahoma and other states. Last week, hundreds of high school students walked out of classes to support protesting teachers in Pike County, just south of Martin County.

Shortly after the rate hike and surcharge was imposed last month, the main water pipe in the county broke. The breakage of the main pipe, located a mile from the antiquated water treatment plant, left the town of Inez and its 627 residents without running water and threatened to cut off water to the whole county. After the repair, there was at least a 24-hour wait for the pressure to build back up and then a boil advisory because of increased bacterial contamination.

The water authority is using third party collection agencies to pressure those who cannot or will not pay. They have also threatened to shut off residents who do not pay their bill within 20 days of receiving it, or five days after getting a written warning. Even after a family has their water turned off they will continue facing the harassment of bill collectors.

Martin County Water Authority claims it has \$650,000 in unpaid water bills, and more than 80 of Martin County’s 3,243 customers have already had their service cut off.

The rate increase came after the authority received grants totaling \$4.6 million from the Federal Abandoned Mine Lands Program and the Appalachian Regional Commission. The money falls well short of the estimated \$13.5 million needed for basic infrastructure repairs and hiring to maintain the long deteriorating water system.

The county’s water treatment system was built in

1968 and has faced a chronic shortage of parts and staffing. Water is drawn from the Tug Fork River, which has long been contaminated by the coal industry and sewerage, leading authorities to put a warning on the back of water bills about the danger of cancer-causing contaminants in the water. In 2000, the bursting of a coal slurry dam owned by Massey Energy sent more than 300 million gallons of sludge into two tributaries of the Tug Fork River.

Martin County has 20 different pump stations and tanks in need of attention. Instead, the bare minimum of repairs and improvements will be done on the water intake from the Tug Fork River, the Crum Reservoir Dam and the water treatment plant. This only guarantees that more disasters await county residents.

On the federal level, inadequate funding and budget cuts, implemented by both Democratic and Republican administrations, have led to poor monitoring of water quality by the Environmental Protection Agency. Scott Pruitt, Trump’s EPA chief, was long a shill for the oil and gas industry in Oklahoma and is seeking to eliminate whatever nominal protections still exist in federal clean water laws.

Flint, Michigan and Martin County, Kentucky have been proverbial canaries in the coal mine for the water crisis gripping the US and the world. Millions are deprived of the right to clean and safe water, as governments squander trillions on war and hand public assets to wealthy bondholders and private water companies like United Water, Nestles and Veolia. The efficient and safe distribution of such an essential resource as water—which dates back to ancient Mesopotamia—is ever more impossible for 21st century capitalism.



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