

Four years on: Political lessons of the Flint water crisis

James Brewer, Barry Grey
25 April 2018

Four years ago, on April 25, 2014, the mayor of Flint, Michigan, Dayne Walling, pushed a button ending the city's 50-year reliance on the Detroit water system and shifting instead to water from the heavily polluted Flint River. This act set in motion an environmental and health disaster with few precedents in American history.

The shift from a safe water source to one that was suspect, at best, was carried out under the auspices of Republican Governor Rick Snyder, his Democratic state treasurer, Andy Dillon, and an emergency manager appointed by the state to impose the austerity measures dictated by the banks. Over the previous three-and-a-half decades, the city had been plunged into mass poverty and insolvency by the desertion of its primary employer, General Motors, which, after taking in billions in profits from the labor of Flint workers, closed virtually all of its plants, leaving behind empty lots, rotting buildings and toxic waste.

The chief beneficiary of the change in the water supply was a new, private water authority, the Karegnondi Water Authority (KWA), which was backed by big investors who saw an opportunity to make a killing by utilizing the unlimited powers of the emergency manager to effect the switch-over.

Residents soon began to complain of foul-smelling, discolored water coming out of their spigots. There was an eruption of skin rashes, respiratory problems and hair loss. State environmental and health officials told residents who complained that the water was safe. Nothing was done to address the mounting crisis.

Though it was concealed from the public at the time, one of the largest outbreaks in US history of Legionnaires' disease, a particularly deadly form of pneumonia, sickened close to 100 people and killed at least 12 in the Flint area.

The same officials who told Flint residents the water was safe had been warned before the shift to the Flint River that the city's antiquated water treatment plant was not up to the task of rendering the water safe for drinking, cooking or washing.

The most elementary safeguards were not taken, including

treating the caustic Flint River water with corrosion control chemicals to prevent the leaching of lead from the city's ancient lead water pipes into the residents' water supply. The cover-up by state officials was abetted by the federal Environmental Protection Agency. EPA officials appointed by the Obama administration backed up the lies of the Michigan authorities.

The Flint population of 100,000, largely working class and low-income, was systematically poisoned by toxic levels of lead. The fertility and birth rates in the city fell sharply. There was a rash of miscarriages. The long-term damage to children remains unknown, although lead is known to harm the brain and stunt mental and emotional development.

Were it not for the independent initiative taken by Flint residents themselves in seeking outside water experts to do independent sampling and expose the lies of the government, the social crime committed against them would never have been exposed. Flint workers and youth organized protest demonstrations that began to shake the Snyder administration, which shifted from brazen cover-up to a strategy of containment and damage-control, aided by the Obama administration and local Democratic officials.

The United Auto Workers and other trade unions did nothing. Their main concern was to protect their relationship with the Democratic Party and the corporate establishment.

To this day, four years later, not a single top official has been prosecuted. The KWA continues to operate, even though Flint has shifted back to the Detroit-based water system. The only people who have been arrested are six Flint residents. They were hauled off to jail last April for demanding answers from Democratic Mayor Karen Weaver at a town hall meeting.

At the height of the scandal, during the 2016 election campaign, the Democratic presidential candidates Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders went to Flint to exploit the situation for their own electoral gain. Soon after, they and the media brigades that had swooped into the town vanished, never to return.

In May of that year, Obama finally made an appearance in

Flint. He notoriously minimized the impact of lead poisoning on children, took a sip of what he said was Flint tap water, and told Flint workers, in effect, to “shut up and drink the water.”

Four years after the switch, no serious measures have been taken to address the health crisis in Flint. Earlier this month the state government halted the provision of free bottled water, signaling an end even to the pretense of official concern and action on behalf of the tens of thousands of people it victimized.

Just four days earlier, the Snyder administration granted Nestlé Water, the world’s largest bottler of water, the right to increase by almost 200 percent the amount of water it draws from Michigan aquifers. For a \$200 administrative fee, Nestlé can draw 570,000 gallons per day.

The experience of Flint workers is a major experience of the working class as a whole, not just in the United States, but internationally. Residents of the devastated former coal mining region of Martin County, Kentucky have been demonstrating against the cutoff of their water supply. Toxic levels of lead have been found in water systems all across the country.

The collapse of basic social infrastructure and the indifference of the corporate-financial elite and its bribed politicians of both parties have been seen in one disaster after another over the past decade, from Hurricane Katrina to the BP oil spill to the hurricanes last year in Houston, Florida and Puerto Rico. In a country where three billionaires—Jeff Bezos, Bill Gates and Warren Buffett—have more wealth than the bottom 170 million people, and corporations are sitting on a cash hoard of some \$2 trillion, workers are told there is “no money” for safe water, education, health care, housing, a living wage or decent pensions.

A central lesson of the past four years is the dead end of all perspectives based on seeking to appeal to and pressure the ruling class and its political stooges to halt their attacks on working class living standards and address the needs of the people. Those organizations that work to tie the working class to the pro-corporate business enterprises that call themselves “unions” and to the Democratic Party are betraying the struggle of Flint workers and the working class as a whole.

What above all has changed since the onset of the Flint water crisis is the emergence of a new upsurge of the working class. Since the start of 2018, a wave of teachers’ strikes and protests organized by rank-and-file teachers in defiance of the unions—West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona, Colorado, Kentucky and elsewhere—has shown that the decades-long suppression of the class struggle by the unions is coming to an end. And the new movement of the working

class is international. Major strikes and workers’ protests have broken out in Britain, France, Germany, Spain, Greece, Eastern Europe, Iran, Tunisia and Africa.

High school students have organized mass protests in the US and internationally to oppose the horrific conditions faced by the young generation.

This movement of the working class is the force to which Flint workers and youth must turn, not the stooges of the financial oligarchy in the Democratic and Republican parties. This is the force that can put an end to the capitalist profit system—the source of poverty, oppression, inequality and war.

The precondition for guaranteeing safe and free water for all, along with all of the other social rights of the working class, is ending the economic dictatorship of the corporate-financial oligarchy. The vast fortunes of the ruling elite must be seized and used to meet the social needs of the majority.

The trillions squandered on war and militarism must be reallocated to meet social needs. The Pentagon war machine must be shut down and the unity of workers of all countries, races and nationalities forged to put an end to war and the profit system that breeds it.

Ownership and control of natural resources and utilities such as water and electricity, along with manufacturing, communications, technology, transportation, must be taken out of private hands. These economic levers must be turned into publicly owned enterprises under the democratic control of the working class. This is the only way to end economic parasitism and social inequality. The wealth is there to provide good-paying jobs, health care, education, housing, and pensions for all. The issue is: who will control the wealth? The super-rich or the masses of working people?

The Socialist Equality Party and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality call on Flint workers and youth to take up the struggle to build a socialist movement of the working class. This requires above all the building of a new political leadership in the working class. Join and help build the SEP and the IYSSE today!



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact