

Four years since beginning of Flint water crisis: Youth denounce government criminality

Our reporters
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Nearly 100 residents, including a large number of youth, participated in a rally on the front lawn of City Hall in Flint, Michigan Wednesday to mark the fourth anniversary of the city's water crisis.

On April 25, 2014, Dayne Walling, the city's mayor at the time, ended Flint's 50-year reliance on the Detroit water system. The switch was made to the heavily polluted Flint River—not to save money, but to make money from a new, private water system—the Karegnondi Water Authority (KWA). This reckless decision was compounded by the failure to add chemical corrosion controls, setting in motion an environmental and health disaster.

Wednesday's protest was organized by several groups, including Michigan United, Democracy Defense League, and Flint Rising, which are all in the orbit of the Democratic Party. Rally organizers lined up children and youth to give testimonials about Flint. The fighting spirit of the youth contrasted with the perspective of the organizers, which was based on fruitless appeals to capitalist politicians.

Supporters of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) distributed a statement from the WSWs, Four years on: Political lessons of the Flint water crisis.

Keishwaun Wade, a Flint high school student, told the rally, "It was a deliberate decision by our elected officials. They did not take into account our humanity and dignity which has been stripped away. They poisoned us. Our government failed us. Our voices have been ignored and silenced in spite of the truthfulness of our concerns. They are dismissing us and will not fix the problem. This is not the kind of society we should be striving for."

JoJo, a 19-year-old student from Mott Community College who studies Media Arts and Entertainment

Technology, made a documentary on the water crisis when she was 17. She spoke about the immense scope of the water crisis. "It's horrifying to think that what happened in Flint is now commonplace. The big celebrities came, once and then never again. Same with the big media. The situation in Flint is all about the money, and it's the same thing in the country."

She later told WSWs reporters that she agreed that workers of the world have to unite. "We're more alike than we are different." Referring to the vast amounts of wealth accumulated by the billionaires, she said, "It doesn't make sense. They don't want to use that money to help people—they just want it for themselves and for their lineage."

Sam Wayne, a member of the IYSSE at University of Michigan, addressed the crowd. He pointed to the bipartisan nature of the attack on workers in Flint: "It's been four years of Republicans and Democrats exploiting the suffering of Flint residents for political gains. It's been four years since the switch and no serious measures have been taken to address the health crisis."

He went on to explain, "While the residents were poisoned by toxic water, who has been locked up? Who has been held responsible? Not one local or state official. In fact, the only people who have been locked up from this crisis are six residents who demanded answers from Democratic Mayor Karen Weaver."

Sam received a warm response from the audience. After the event Dorí Asia Miller, a high school student, expressed her agreement. "The government is responsible for this. Even if nobody knew this was happening, it's still murder. If anybody else did it, they'd be charged for it and in front of a judge. It is the government. Anybody that is saying, 'It's fine, you can drink the water. We checked it.' No, they didn't. They didn't check the

houses that said they had high levels. They just presented the tests to make it look like the water was clean and safe to drink. But that's not really what happened. Anybody that was involved and pretended they didn't have anything to say, anybody that kept things hidden, and anybody that said there was nothing wrong—those are the people that are responsible.”

Dorí said the wave of teachers strikes throughout the US “show that people are not going to put up with it anymore. They want us to keep doing what we're doing, to continue to live and work in these conditions, but they're not doing anything to help us. They're not helping students get more books.

“In Flint, our grades and reading levels have dropped since the water crisis. We talked about this in a meeting a month ago, but nothing has changed. People have done all types of walkouts because they're not paying attention to us. So other states are noticing that it's not just them—they're noticing that it's not just one state, but everybody that's having a problem with this.

“All this money is going to different places, but they're not helping the people that are being affected by these conditions. We're not getting any type of money toward us. To think they're taking our water away—we don't have water PODS anymore. At my school, we don't have water that we can drink. We can't go into the office and ask for water, you have to buy it. You have to buy your own water bottles. How do they expect us to wash up at night when they've taken the water bottles away from us?

“And people are already making minimum wage. People aren't making enough to keep buying water. There's an average of more than one kid in each household in Flint. So how are we supposed to live like this when every two days we run out of a case of water? You can't wash up, brush your teeth, wash your face and hair, and clean your whole entire body with no water. There's money going to other places, but there's no money for us.”

Cynthia Jacobs is a foster mother and resident advisor at Flint/Genesee Job Corps. She said, “It's not just about Flint. It's ridiculous. Who can we count on to do what needs to be done? There's nobody really doing anything. Everybody's talking, but where's the free water bottles? The pipes are not done. Kids are still getting sick. And now they're not giving water [bottles] anymore. I had a foster child that had a high lead level. Who is going to pay for the medicine? I got in trouble by the doctor because they want [the bill] to be paid for by me. I can't afford her medicine. It's all messed up.”

Commenting on whether she believed Republicans and Democrats would do anything, she said,

“No! Come on now! They're not going to do anything! When I first came to Flint, it was beautiful. I came here in 1998. It was beautiful. It was a great place to live. I left and came back, and it has changed so much! You don't even recognize Flint.

“The system is not really for the people. We can't get what we need. How hard is it to get what we need? But if we worked together everybody could get what they need.”

When asked if she heard about the ongoing teachers strikes, she answered, “The teachers are supposed to be getting their money, but I don't know if that's true. The media says one thing, but I don't know. They hide a lot of things. They don't tell the truth. Go to the facts! Find the people! Talk to the people! We're living it. The unions aren't for the people. They're for the employers. The unions are supposed to be working for the people, but they don't care about them.”

Sunny Taylor drove to Flint from Indiana to attend the rally. “I used to have faith in the EPA [Environmental Protection Agency]. Now I am appalled. Everywhere there is a problem with getting safe, clean water. I read a report that Chicago has high levels of lead in the water and children face brain damage. I would say, don't trust the government. They did this, and they won't fix it. There's no hope with them because they don't consider water a human right.

“The Flint water crisis is not a local issue. It's everywhere. The infrastructure is bad and there are too many chemicals in the water systems.

Last month, after Sunny heard about the contaminated and intermittent water in Martin County, Kentucky, she traveled there to bring bottled water to residents. “It was my first time in Kentucky. There is so much poverty there, it made Flint look good. It really surprised me. It seems that no matter what the issue, it boils down to this—we need a revolution.”



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