

As classes begin, Detroit schools shut off drinking water due to high levels of lead and copper

Eula Holmes, Patrick Martin
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The Detroit Public School system has shut off drinking water at every one of the 106 school buildings it operates because of elevated levels of lead and copper found in water testing at 16 out of 24 schools.

The announcement is an admission that the catastrophic conditions in Flint, Michigan, caused by the profit-driven decision to shift the city's water system to polluted water from the Flint River, are replicated for school children in Detroit, the largest city in Michigan and the poorest big city in America.

The notice to teachers and parents about the decision to cut off water avoids the obvious implication: for years, hundreds of thousands of school children and thousands of teachers have been exposed to poisoning by lead, copper and other toxins, with incalculable consequences on their long-term health.

A spokeswoman for the school district told the *Detroit Free Press* that there was "no evidence at all that children have been impacted from a health standpoint," but the district has said that it will not be carrying out any tests on the students to check for high lead levels.

Officials of the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department and the Great Lakes Water Authority said there was no excess lead or copper in the water being delivered to school buildings, indicating that the source of the pollution was internal to the buildings themselves, the result of decades of inadequate investment in their plumbing infrastructure.

Superintendent Nikolai Vitti sent a robocall to parents on Sunday, August 26, alerting them to the lead-tainted and copper-tainted water coming into DPS water fountains and kitchens where school lunches are prepared. On Monday, as teachers entered schools to

prepare for the new year, they were alerted that lead had been found in some schools and not others. Those schools found to have lead would have water coolers and water bottles available.

On Tuesday, teachers received a note from the superintendent informing them of test results showing excess lead or copper levels in water at 16 of the 24 schools tested. Coupled with earlier tests from 2016 and the spring of 2018, this brought to 34 the number of schools where drinking water has been turned off.

Vitti said that water was being shut off at all schools "out of an abundance of caution... until a deeper and broader analysis can be conducted to determine the long-term solutions for all schools."

While the protests of workers in Flint exposed the actions of local and federal officials that led to the poisoning of the city's water, similar conditions exist throughout the United States. A 2017 study carried out by Reuters identified 3,810 neighborhood areas with childhood lead poisoning rates at least double those found in Flint.

The pollution of the water supply is particularly devastating for children, whose brains and bodies, rapidly developing, are especially at risk from toxins like lead.

As far back as 2010, a study conducted by the Detroit Department of Health and Wellness and the Detroit Public Schools (DPS) correlated health records of students when they were under age 5 with the current student rosters. It correlated high lead exposure among Detroit children in their early years to later school-age learning deficits. It found that children exposed to lead in early childhood were more likely to be designated for special education services later. These children are

also more likely to have lower test scores in elementary and middle school.

What is happening to Detroit school children, as was the case in Flint, is a social crime committed by the capitalist ruling class.

In the aftermath of the 2013 bankruptcy of Detroit—used to cut pensions, benefits and wages for city workers and retirees—local official and the national media have engaged in a propaganda campaign claiming that “Detroit is back.” However, the restructuring of Detroit has been carried out in the interests of the city’s ruling elite, including Quicken Loans founder Dan Gilbert. Resources have been allocated to build up only a small section of the city, from downtown to midtown, while working class areas and the city’s overall infrastructure continue to deteriorate.

The Democratic and Republican politicians—including Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan, Michigan Governor Rick Snyder, former President Barack Obama and President Donald Trump—share the responsibility for this crisis. The Obama administration presided over and supported the Detroit bankruptcy as well as the 2009 restructuring of the auto industry, which led to a halving of wages for new hires.

Snyder and his predecessor, Democrat Jennifer Granholm, imposed emergency managers on the Detroit schools, the city of Flint, and finally the city of Detroit, eventually forcing the city into bankruptcy and restructuring the Detroit school district. All these measures were aimed at ensuring that Wall Street bondholders received their payment, no matter what the consequences for the working people of Detroit and their children.

The exposure of water contamination is fueling anger among Detroit teachers, who engaged in wildcat sickouts in 2016 to protest horrendous conditions in the schools, including the presence of vermin, their feces and other toxins. These walkouts were shut down by the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT), which for decades has colluded with Democrats and Republicans to close schools, lay off teachers and destroy school workers’ wages and benefits.

This year has seen a wave of teacher struggles against low wages and the consequences of decades of budget cuts. The statewide strikes and protests in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona, Colorado, Kentucky and

North Carolina in the spring are being followed by strikes in several districts in the state of Washington as schools open. Teachers in Los Angeles, the second largest district in the US, are currently voting on strike authorization.

As in Detroit, the role of the unions, the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), has been to isolate each section of teachers from teachers in other states and districts and from the working class as a whole. The unions are seeking to prevent a united movement of teachers and all workers against the bipartisan war on public schools.

The WSWs calls on teachers in Detroit and throughout the country to form rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, to mobilize parents, students and broader sections of the working class against the catastrophic conditions in the public-school systems.

Protests against the poisoning of water must be connected to the demand for a massive infusion of resources to rebuild schools and public infrastructure and raise the wages and benefits for educators. The development of independent organizations of struggle must be connected to the political mobilization of the working class against both big business parties and the capitalist profit system.



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