

Questions emerge following shutoff of water to Detroit schools

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School Superintendent Nikolai Vitti recently conducted a series of “community water meetings” to discuss the water crisis that emerged in the Detroit public schools system after his August 26 announcement that the water in all 106 schools in the district would be shut off due to high levels of lead and copper. However, the meetings raised more questions than they answered.

Vitti, who was appointed last year, and his staff have been trying to minimize the significance of the discovery of deadly toxins in the schools’ water. He described his decision to shut off the drinking water at all 106 schools in response to the findings that 16 of 24 schools tested had high levels of lead and or copper as using an “abundance of caution.”

Starting September 10 and running through September 18, meetings were held at four different high schools around Detroit. Vitti made the case that his administration acted proactively to come up with what he called a “permanent” solution—the installation of “hydration stations” at all 106 schools. At a cost of \$2 million, one station would be put in place by next school year for every 100 students, providing filtered water for drinking and filling water bottles. In the meantime, water coolers and bottled water would be supplied.

Considering that the district serves some 45,000 students, turnout for the “community water meetings” was sparse. Questions that were asked by teachers, parents and residents expressed skepticism over Vitti’s glib presentation of what is certainly a catastrophic situation given the demonstrated harmful effects of lead and copper in drinking water.

Some expressed concern not just about the schools, but also about the quality of the water throughout the city. A teacher asked how could educators take responsibility for educating the children without knowledge of factors like lead poisoning. Others wanted to know how the bankruptcy proceedings in Detroit affected the safety of

the drinking water.

Vitti feigned empathy with the concerns expressed by parents, but asserted several times that his administration has no authority beyond the district all the while touting his own response.

During Tuesday’s meeting, teacher Katrina Brown challenged Vitti’s claim of proactivity. She pointed out that when six Detroit schools had their water shut off due to the discovery of elevated lead levels last spring, teachers and students at the rest of the schools weren’t informed, allowing them to drink tainted water at the end of the school year and over the summer. “We had a right to know,” she said.

In response, Vitti claimed that Brown “had her facts wrong” and that they had no information about the rest of the schools before late August, so they could not have taken any action.

On Wednesday, however, 33 additional schools were found to have tainted water, bringing the total, after some 70 percent have been tested, to more than half of all schools.

Socialist Equality Party congressional candidate Niles Neimuth also spoke at Tuesday’s water meeting. He made the point that it was untenable to claim to solve the problem of water contamination with the shortsighted plan being presented. A full study of Detroit’s water system should be commissioned to guide a vast public works project to rebuild the infrastructure and ensure that every citizen had access to clean safe water.

Another SEP member pointed out that the claim that there was no money to address such a project was a lie and that the resources of the multibillionaires, such as Dan Gilbert and Ilitch family in Detroit could and should be confiscated to finance it. Vitti responded with bile. “What we need is for the people who spout rhetoric about political revolution, to get a job. They need to wake up every morning and work to better the lives of our

children.”

Vitti’s response, a mixture of arrogance and indifference, was a pathetic attempt to deflect attention away from the criminal neglect by the entire corporate-controlled political establishment in Detroit, long dominated by the Democratic Party, of the health and safety of the public.

The lead crisis in Detroit schools goes back several years. In 2010, 58 percent of the 40,000 Detroit children tested for lead in their bloodstream had over 5µg/dL (micrograms per deciliter), the limit above which the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) considers an “elevated blood level.”

At the time, poisoning of children was attributed to lead in paint, soil and the environment that surrounds poor, urban youth, with old, poorly maintained housing. Despite the fact that houses and buildings in urban areas contained a high percentage of lead pipes (as it was only in 1987 that federal laws banned their use) the CDC at the time was just beginning to acknowledge lead-contaminated water as a significant factor in poisoning children.

Lead is one of the deadliest neurotoxins. When ingested, it enters the bloodstream and makes its way into bodily systems, having the most devastating impact on infants and young children, whose developing bodies are more susceptible to the toxin. From the bloodstream, lead tricks the body into absorbing it though it were calcium, particularly damaging the synapses of the brain. Many times this results in learning disabilities, behavior and emotional disorders and often criminal behavior.

There is no cure for lead poisoning. And its effects can be life-long.

After the Flint water crisis made millions more alert to the dangers of lead-contaminated drinking water, schools began to more carefully monitor their water. In 2016, Detroit school officials announced that nearly one-third of all elementary and middle schools tested for lead and copper were above the US Environmental Protection Agency’s (EPA) action level of 15 parts per billion (ppb), one school testing at 1,500 ppb! The water at 15 schools was shut off as a result.

Experts say the extent of the health risks are underestimated. Dr. Marc Edwards, the Virginia Tech professor who conducted the independent testing of the water in Flint, was quoted in the *Detroit Free Press* to say the EPA standards are inadequate. “They’re voluntary and out of date by 30 years,” he said.

Katrina Brown filed a lawsuit against Mayor Mike Duggan and other officials claiming she and others at J.R.

King Academy were poisoned and that she faced retaliation when she raised opposition to the way the water crisis was being handled. She claimed she was pressured into leaving her job at that school.

Her experience leaves her disinclined to let Vitti’s claim stand of “abundance of caution.”

Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD) claims the source of the lead and copper is internal to the school buildings themselves, a statement that is accepted as fact by school administrators without further questioning. DWSD Director Gary Brown claims that the water leaving the treatment plant is in “pristine” condition and that there is no lead in either the transmission or distribution systems.

This assertion cannot be trusted. In conjunction with the Detroit bankruptcy, the DWSD was ravaged. In the interest of “monetizing” Detroit’s most lucrative asset, it was dismantled and broken up into the “regionalized” Great Lakes Water Authority while over 80 percent of its employees were terminated.

Detroit’s Emergency Manager could not find a buyer to purchase the DWSD flat out. That would have forced any private company to accept too much responsibility for maintaining the vast system. Instead, the strategy became to cut costs by firing its workers and subcontract with water companies who employ cheap labor to operate and maintain the system.

This reinforces the call by the WSWs for the independent mobilization of parents and teachers against the catastrophic conditions in the schools, a product of the looting of societies resources by the super-rich, through the building of workplace and neighborhood committees. The demand must be advanced for a massive infusion of resources to adequately fund the schools and repair the decayed and failing infrastructure.

Mehring Books has recently published an account of the Flint water crisis titled, *Flint: A crime of capitalism*, available for purchase here.



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