Norwood Jewell, the UAW and the Flint water crisis

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10 April 2019

One facet of the water crisis in Flint, Michigan that has gotten little or no attention is the close connections between the United Auto Workers union and local Democratic politicians whose decisions resulted in the lead poisoning of the city of 96,000 residents.

The issue has risen to the surface due to last week's conviction on conspiracy charges of former UAW Vice President Norwood Jewell, who pled guilty to taking tens of thousands of dollars in bribes from Fiat Chrysler. Jewell is the highest-ranking UAW official convicted so far in the illegal scheme involving auto executives paying off union officials to sign and enforce pro-company contracts.

Before coming over to the UAW-Chrysler Department, where he negotiated the 2015 sellout of 37,000 Fiat Chrysler workers, Jewell was director of UAW Region 1-C in Flint. That was between 2010 and 2014, after which he briefly headed the UAW's General Motors department.

Jewell worked his way up the ladder of the UAW bureaucracy, after first being hired into a management position at GM in the early 1980s and later being appointed UAW plant chairman at GM's Flint Metal Center in the mid-1990s.

As regional director, Jewell was a key political backer of Mayor Dayne Walling, who pushed the button on April 24, 2014 that shut off the city's connection to the Detroit water system and switched to the polluted Flint River. With cameras rolling, Walling lifted a glass of river water, toasting, "Here's to Flint!"

The water supply shift led to a devastating public health crisis, with an unknown number of children and other residents suffering lifelong physical and mental damage, and outbreaks of Legionnaires' disease in Genesee County that resulted in at least a dozen deaths.

Walling was the first president of the Karegnondi Water Authority (KWA), the money-making venture to build a new $285 million raw water pipeline to transfer water from Lake Huron to homes and businesses in Flint. The new pipeline was to run parallel to an existing treated-water pipeline owned by the Detroit Water and Sewerage System, which had supplied Flint for more than half a century. Getting Flint, the largest city in Genesee County, to buy into the KWA was key to the whole criminal operation, which promised large profits to bondholders, developers and other corporate and financial interests.

A little more than a year before the ill-fated switch, on March 25, 2013, Jewell stood before the Flint City Council to make the pitch for the KWA project, with Mayor Walling sitting behind him. In comments that can be seen in this YouTube video Jewell said, "I believe in facts, and the facts support the Karegnondi line for Flint. It's coming to Genesee County, whether Flint is a part of it or not… GM pays a big water bill, and we've lost enough GM business in this town to take a chance that the water rates from Detroit will go up double-digits as they have year after year."

Flint, he continued, shouldn't be held hostage to the city of Detroit anymore. "If you like emergency managers, vote against Karegnondi, because you're helping the city of Detroit is what you're doing… We need to get off of the politics of this and get to the dollars and cents."

The Democratic City Council voted 7-1 to approve the plan to get raw water--16 million gallons a day (MGD) from the KWA and 2 MGD from the Flint River--which would supposedly be treated by the city's water treatment facility. The plant, which had operated only four times a year as a backup system, had neither the capacity nor the manpower to treat raw water.

The KWA was indeed all about dollars and cents. Like the 2013-14 bankruptcy restructuring of Detroit, a financial crisis in Flint—the product of decades of plant closings and mass layoffs by GM—was used by Republican Governor Rick Snyder and his Democratic treasury secretary, former investment banker Andy Dillon, to implement long-standing plans to loot public assets. The state-appointed emergency manager, Mayor Walling and other local Democrats, and UAW bureaucrats like Jewell, falsely presented the KWA as a cost-savings measure.

In reality, it increased the bond obligations of the economically distressed city and funneled public money to contractors building the new pipeline as well as landowners who had property along its path.

One of the beneficiaries was multimillionaire businessman Don Williamson, Flint's mayor from 2003 to 2009 and a major backer of the KWA scheme. Williamson was praised by Genesee County Prosecutor David Leyton as "a great capitalist" who "could turn about anything into a profit."

Williamson enjoyed the closest relationship with UAW Region 1-C Director Cal Rapson, Norwood Jewell's boss at the regional office. In 2007, Rapson shocked many Flint residents by personally endorsing the reelection of Mayor Williamson, who in 1991 had notoriously denounced autoworkers as "low-life scumbags" and ordered his managers to dump a load of manure near UAW pickets striking against his auto parts plant in

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Shiawassee County.

After retiring from his post as UAW vice president in 2010, Rapson took a job as the public relations director for a chain of GM car dealerships owned by Williamson's wife. On top of that, Rapson got an administrative position on the company-funded UAW Retiree Medical Benefits Trust fund, now worth $63 billion.

Besieged by scandal and facing a recall campaign, Williamson resigned in 2009. Following the tenure of an interim mayor, Dayne Walling won the 2011 election with the backing and financial support of UAW Region 1-C.

"Jewell was the kingmaker for all the politicians in the Flint area," Steve, a well-informed and lifelong Flint resident, told the *World Socialist Web Site*.

He continued: "If you were delivered the endorsement of the UAW, it meant a position and a lot of money. Dayne Walling got a lot of UAW money in his campaign for mayor. The KWA made a lot of money for the guys that built the pipeline and property owners who were paid 'easements' for allowing the pipe to go through their land."

Williamson, he said, owned a golf course and the KWA pipeline ran right through it. Jeff Wright, who worked closely with Williamson on the project, also received large amounts of money when he ran for Genesee County drain commissioner, before becoming CEO of the KWA project.

"The first time there was a scheme to build a pipeline was in 1962," Steve said, adding that it was funded by Charles Mott, a co-founder of GM who was on the company's board until his death in 1973. "The city manager and at least four local politicians were sent to prison over the scheme," Steve noted.

"GM walked away from Flint and escaped any clean-up of its contaminated sites, including the Flint River," he continued. "Jewell and the other bigwig UAW guys were brainwashed by GM. They didn't represent the workers, they represented GM. Guys like Jewell did not have an education past high school and all of a sudden they were making hundreds of thousands of dollars as union executives and living a lifestyle no shop worker could."

Soon after the switch to the Flint River, GM stopped using the toxic water because it was corroding parts at its Flint engine plant. Although UAW officials were aware of this, they did nothing to warn city residents, even as local protests grew against Walling and other city and state officials, who denied that anything was wrong with the water.

"Jewell was tight with Williamson and then Dayne Walling, and they would throw parties at the Brass Bell on Bristol Road to raise money for their UAW caucus," Jim Mattis, a GM worker in Flint, told the WSWS. "When I came over from Chevy Gear & Axle in Detroit to the Flint Metal Stamping plant in 1995, Jewell was Cal Rapson's protégé and part of his political machine. I tried running for a union position against them and within days I was fired on bogus charges of hitting a foreman. I filed a lawsuit, but it took me nine years to get my job back and I lost my seniority and my money."

As plant chairman of UAW Local 659 at the Flint Metal Center in 1998, Jewell had played a key role in the defeat of a two-month GM strike in Flint. The UAW signed an agreement that set up a new labor-management structure to enforce a 15 percent productivity increase and the elimination of 500 jobs.

The sellout paved the way for GM to spin off its Delphi parts division in 1999. The new company would close 24 US plants, wipe out 11,500 jobs worldwide and declare bankruptcy in 2005. The concessions the UAW handed over to Delphi set the stage for the 2007 "transformational" contract with the Big Three automakers that established the two-tier wage system and the multibillion-dollar VEBA trust fund for the UAW.

Although the UAW was founded in the mid-1930s through mass industrial struggles, including the 1936-37 sit-down strike in Flint, the subsequent purging of the socialist and left-wing militants who built the union led to its consolidation as a pro-capitalist organization allied with the Democratic Party. In the 1980s, in the face of the decline of US industry and growing international competition, the UAW adopted the corporatist program of labor-management partnership and did everything in its power to suppress the opposition of rank-and-file workers to plant closures, wage cuts and speedup.

GM, with 440,000 workers in 1982, including 80,000 in Flint alone, had the biggest and richest labor-management programs. Over the last 40 years, GM has transferred literally hundreds of millions of dollars to the UAW through these programs, even as the number of GM hourly workers has fallen to 54,000, with barely 6,000 in Flint.

"The UAW has become a labor organization that didn't need members and the strike fund is used as a personal bank for the UAW leaders," Thomas Adams told the WSWS. Adams is a former Buick City worker and professor who taught at Wayne State University and authored *UAW, Inc., The Triumph of Capital*. He added, "Joint funds associated with the labor-management programs were used to purchase the union."

Addressing a federal judge in Detroit last week, Jewell pleaded guilty for his part in the illegal bribery scheme, telling the judge, "I wasn't perfect." Even more outrageous were the remarks of the attorney whose law firm received $218,000 from the UAW last year to defend Jewell. "This man was a legend" in Flint before being sent into the "cesspool" of corruption at the UAW-Chrysler department, he told reporters.

As the record shows, far from swimming in pristine waters before wallowing in the cesspool of the UAW-Chrysler Training Center in Detroit, Jewell and the UAW in Flint were about as clean as the toxic waters of the Flint River.

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