Five years since the poisoning of Flint's water supply: Part two

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PART ONE| PART TWO

This is the second article in a two-part series drawing a balance sheet of five years of the water crisis in Flint, Michigan. The first part *was posted on May 14.*

Cost-cutting or profiteering?

The capitalist media portrayed the Flint water crisis as the result of an attempt to reduce expenses and ease the city's financial crisis. In fact, it was part of the drive by powerful financial interests and their political mouthpieces in both parties to exploit the collapse of the economic base of deindustrialized cities such as Detroit and Flint, whose position was further undermined by the Wall Street crash of 2008, in order to plunder public assets, claw back whatever remained of the past social gains of workers—pensions, health care, education, etc.—and repay with interest the losses suffered by the financial elite in the financial meltdown.

The model for Flint was the 2013 forced bankruptcy of Detroit, which was backed by the Obama administration. The former world center of auto production was thrown into bankruptcy by a state-appointed emergency manager, Wall Street lawyer and Democrat Kevyn Orr, in a conspiracy to "monetize" the city's main assets, including the world-class Detroit Institute of Arts, the pension and health care funds of retired city workers, and the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department, one of the largest municipally owned and operated water systems in the country.

Water had become a lucrative avenue for capitalist speculation. Private water companies such as Veolia and American Water and bottlers such as Nestlé Water, Pepsi and Coca Cola were expanding their operations, and municipal water systems such Detroit's were targeted for privatization. Part of the bankruptcy operation was the splitting up of the DWSD and the creation of the "regionalized" Great Lakes Water Authority (GLWA), which took over delivering water to Detroit suburbs, allowing the new entity to do an end run around legal protections against profiteering provided by the City Charter.

An orgy of profiteering followed, using "public-private partnerships" to subcontract operations to private companies employing low-wage workers and terminating some 80 percent of the DWSD workforce, including skilled workers. At the same time, the state utilized the emergency manager dictatorship to compel Flint to take on new debt to finance the construction of the KWA pipeline and sever its 50-year relationship with the Detroit water system.

The whole water-switching operation was a conspiracy, criminal in every sense of the word. It served no useful social function at all. Proponents of the KWA, including Wright and Jewell, falsely promised that the scheme would lower the exorbitant water rates paid by Flint residents. The existing DWSD pipeline was designed to accommodate the city's growth beyond its peak in the late 1970s, so with GM's abandonment of the city it was functioning well below its capacity.

The construction of the new raw-water pipeline was a scheme by fat cats to make money at the expense of the people of Flint, whom they look upon, with a mixture of fear and contempt, as objects for exploitation. Technically, the KWA is a public water utility, but private entities profit from the scheme in three different ways:

• The fabrication of the pipes and the construction of the pipeline was done by private enterprises. Maintenance can be outsourced to private companies in much the same way as was done in Detroit.

• The servicing of the $240 million in bonds is a lucrative investment for speculators. As has been noted, Flint is still liable for about 35 percent, even though the city won't be utilizing the KWA. (This is being paid by the Great Lakes Water Authority as part of its 30-year contract to supply water to Flint.) Despite the suffering of the Flint population throughout the ordeal, there was never any question that the bondholders should be paid off in full.

• Sales of KWA raw water to private corporations such as Detroit Edison, which will use three million gallons a day for cooling purposes, will generate substantial revenues. The KWA also stands to gain from the potential reopening of hydro-fracturing ("fracking") natural gas sites in Michigan. The fracking process requires the injection of huge quantities of "fracking fluid"—mostly water—deep into the earth to create fissures in the gas-bearing layers of rock. Access to a vast supply of water is critical for these environmentally dangerous operations.

The Democratic Party and the racial narrative

At the height of the scandal, a flood of celebrities, candidates, media talking heads and assorted scoundrels descended on Flint to gain notoriety and burnish their careers by posturing as advocates of the Flint residents. Their main function was to cover up the fundamental political and class issues in the water crisis.

In 2016, celebrities associated with the Democratic Party, including filmmaker Michael Moore and Jesse Jackson, visited Flint to proclaim that Snyder and his administration were solely responsible for the crime against Flint. Obama's appointed head of the Environmental Protection Agency, Gina McCarthy, made a late appearance to declare the federal body she headed bore no responsibility for the catastrophe. Liberal television host and commentator Rachel Maddow broadcast a program from Flint to denounce the Republicans.

Presidential Candidate Hillary Clinton made a February, 2016 campaign visit to Flint, feigning outrage and injecting a toxic racial interpretation of the catastrophe. Clinton's comments opened the floodgates for a campaign in the capitalist media arguing that racism was at the root of the

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crime against Flint. Racial and identity politics became a central plank in Clinton's program, serving to obscure the reactionary character of her pro-war, pro-Wall Street policies.

The most disgusting Democratic intervention in Flint was the May, 2016 visit by President Barack Obama. "Shut up and drink the water," was his effective message. Saying that as a child he ate paint chips and he turned out okay, he dismissed the seriousness of the lead poisoning. "The kids will be just fine," he proclaimed, after sipping what purported to be a glass of Flint tap water.

Since then, numerous supposedly "left" organizations have moved into Flint to promote insular protest and identity politics aimed at channeling social anger and opposition into the dead end of the Democratic Party.

The United Auto Workers, which has carried out betrayal after betrayal of autoworkers, has funded and worked with organizations such as Michigan United and Black Lives Matter to promote a racialist agenda and pro-capitalist Democratic Party politics.

Flint itself gives the lie to the racial interpretation. It is, by some measures, the poorest city in the US, with a poverty rate of over 40 percent, while the child poverty rate is 58 percent. Black, white and Hispanic residents fought a united struggle to defend their right to clean water from the beginning. The city has a mixed population: 54 percent African-American, 40 percent white and 6 percent other. Many of the officials who presided over the disaster and lied to the population were black, including Snyder's urban affairs initiatives director Harvey Hollins, Emergency Manager Darnell Early and Flint Department of Public Works Director Howard Croft.

What is the situation in Flint after five years?

Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha wrote in an April 25 editorial in the *Washington Post*: "In the medical community, we still recommend that Flint residents drink only filtered tap water or bottled water, as the city is in the last phase of a massive public works project to replace the old lead pipes. This infrastructure work has the potential to disrupt more lead in the water system, and we don't want to risk exposing more people to lead. In less than a year, when those lead service lines are completely replaced, Flint residents shouldn't have to worry about getting a glass of clean tap water.

"But even then, there are reasons not to declare the water 'safe.' It is no compliment to say that Flint's water has the same lead levels as other communities. Across the United States, our regulations never intended for us to drink 'lead-free' water. Instead, the standard sets a non-health-based action level of 15 parts per billion, which is hopelessly outdated and allows a water system to get a passing grade even when testing reveals dangerously high levels of lead in 10 percent of sampled homes. The regulatory framework is set up like Russian roulette, with the future of children at stake."

In answer to the question of whether things have improved in Flint, residents answer in the negative.

Connie Faith Vaughn posted on Facebook: "Well we can't get homeowners insurance and our homes are only worth about a fifth of what they would be if they were located anyplace else. Hmmm….. No! My hair is falling out, my skin is ripping in painful places because I have to shower and these water bills are a JOKE!"

Shelley Reaves Thorn said: "No... I'm still buying water and I still get pissed remembering the $1,200 pipe bill I had to pay. Oh yes, a sky high monthly water bill for unusable water."

Flint residents still wait in long lines to obtain free bottled water from the last remaining source, provided by Nestlé Water.

After five years there can be no return to "normalcy," as establishment figures like the newly elected Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer are fond of promising. Compensating the victims of this crime requires paying medical bills, water bills, loss of home values and upgrading plumbing inside their homes. Instead, officials have attacked residents saddled with the highest water rates in the US by ending water subsidies, cutting off water and lights because of unpaid bills, terminating bottled water distribution and foreclosing on homes.

The Flint water disaster: A crime of capitalism

What has been done to the people of Flint is a particularly graphic expression of the social counterrevolution that has been carried out by the financial-corporate elite and both capitalist parties for decades. Detroit, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Youngstown, the coal regions of Appalachia and many other parts of America have been devastated by the relentless drive for profits. Corporate downsizing, wage-cutting, union-busting and whipsawing have pitted worker against worker and created intolerable conditions for masses of people, while the oligarchs have amassed unfathomable levels of wealth. All of this has been carried out with the indispensable collaboration of the pro-capitalist unions.

The assault on workers has been relentless. Natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina, the BP oil spill, tornadoes, floods and wildfires have exposed the decay of basic social infrastructure and the existence of widespread poverty. They have also revealed the indifference and incompetence of the ruling elite and its successive governments.

Flint joins a long list of man-made disasters, including the Hinkley, California hexavalent chromium groundwater contamination by Pacific Gas and Electricity in the 1950s and 60s and the 1970s Love Canal disaster in Niagara Falls, New York, where an entire working-class housing complex was built on top of a toxic landfill. Residents of Martin County, Kentucky are still battling for water, almost 20 years after a coal slurry impoundment owned by Massey Energy Company spilled hundreds of millions of gallons of toxic slurry into the local rivers, killing all life in them.

These disasters are the product of the reckless drive for private profit. They are rooted in the class character of the capitalist system.

The notoriety of the Flint crisis has drawn attention to the widespread character of the lead-in-water danger. Lead pipes were used throughout the country as late as 1987 due to the powerful lead industry lobby. The measures, such as corrosion control, mandated by federal regulations are merely band aids covering up disasters waiting to happen across the country. Yet spending on water infrastructure has been slashed by close to 80 percent since 1977, overseen by administrations of both Democrats and Republicans.

The social counterrevolution is an international phenomenon. All across Europe—Greece, Spain, Britain—as well as Asia, Africa and Latin America, there is massive growth of social inequality, as society is increasingly dominated by a thin layer of super-rich oligarchs.

There is no local or reform solution to the devastation inflicted on the workers of Flint by the American ruling class. The Flint disaster demonstrates the incompatibility between capitalist private ownership and control of the means of production—including water and electricity—and the most basic needs of the vast majority of the population—the working class.

The crisis can be addressed only through the fight to build a new revolutionary leadership of the working class—the Socialist Equality Party in the US and the Fourth International internationally—to unite and mobilize workers and youth in opposition to all of the parties and

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politicians of the ruling class, in order to put an end to capitalism and establish a socialist society based on social equality and the satisfaction of social needs, not the insatiable greed of corporate speculators and exploiters.

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