

Michigan: Two million gallons of untreated sewage spill into Flint River

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Almost five and a half years into the still unresolved Flint water crisis, in which government officials at all levels criminally conspired to allow residents to drink lead- and bacteria-poisoned water for 18 months before acknowledging the problem, the city reported on Sunday that its Wastewater Treatment Plant spilled 2 million gallons of stormwater and sewage into the Flint River after heavy rain over the weekend.

Genesee County issued a public advisory that people should avoid all contact with the Flint River. As of this writing six days later, there are no reports in the press or on government websites that the advisory has been lifted.

It goes without saying that exposure to or ingestion of raw or partially treated sewage, as the city maintains is the case here, can cause immediate harmful effects. The multiple risks present stem from exposure to viruses such as rotavirus that can cause stomach flu-like symptoms, bacteria such as *E. coli* which can result in kidney failure and death, and parasites such as *Cryptosporidiosis*, which can cause diarrhea and fevers. Aside from these, which result from contact in some form, simply inhaling raw sewage fumes can cause asphyxiation and tissue damage.

The Environmental Protection Agency estimates that in the United States 7 million people on average per year, i.e., a population that would rank as the second largest city in the US, become ill from exposure to raw sewage, and 7 percent of these severely or fatally ill. While some of the illnesses are due to ingestion through drinking water, a majority are the result of external contact, often resulting from municipal spills.

Late Saturday night, over 2.2 inches of rain fell in the Flint area in just a three-hour period. On Sunday, August 18, the city issued a statement that the water plant had discharged untreated sewage “due to sudden

flash flooding which exceeded the plant’s primary settling tanks causing overflow onto the ground and into storm sewers.”

The Flint River has long been known to be highly polluted due to the unrestrained dumping of toxic waste into it by General Motors for the better part of a century. GM’s callous disregard for the working class that built the company could be seen not only in its driving down of autoworker wages to poverty level with the full complicity of the United Auto Workers union every step of the way since the 1970s, but also in the level of pollution left behind by the rapacious company on site after abandoned site in search of cheaper labor sources.

Six months after the switch was made to the Flint River for drinking water—when the entire political establishment was still lying to the public and saying that the brown, fowl-smelling water from the Flint River was safe to drink—it was revealed that GM had stopped using Flint River water in its production because the highly acidic water was corroding its parts.

These experiences of Flint residents, and indeed of the country and world, are not just passing without serious consideration. Workers are drawing conclusions as to the backwardness and irrationality that prevails under capitalism. These are expressed in some of the readers’ comments on the articles in the press on the recent spill.

On MLive, in response to GM’s role in Flint and the fact that it has paid virtually no taxes for years, Chukobuk wrote, “Just raise industrial user sewer rates by a factor of ten. What else is GM going to use its vast federal income tax break for from the Tax and Jobs Cut Act? Laying off another 12,000 employees? Oh, sorry, that’s the Tax Cut and Jobs Act.”

Comments also reflect the growing understanding of

the roles that capitalism itself and rampant inequality play in such crises. Nocoded wrote, “All part of the plan ... defund infrastructure until it rots, then drive people to purchase bottled water from corporations like Nestle. They will try to privatize your air too, as soon as they figure out how. Only room for the rich in the future we’re building, the rest of us peasants can eat bugs and starve slowly.”

Narrator, another commenter, gave expression to the widespread hostility that exists within the working class to the explosion of US militarism and its unending and wasteful imperialist wars abroad. “How about we build 2 less bombers for our Team America World Police and give the millions to Flint to help Americans instead of the Military Industrial Complex?”

“Derisory” only begins to describe the reaction to the current spill by officials at all levels of government. As with many other cities throughout the country, there are no effective protocols or mechanisms in place, nor plans to create them, to deal with the inevitability of such spills.

Earlier this year, in seeking its first loan in almost 20 years to upgrade the aging and crumbling Wastewater Treatment Plant—some of the main pipes were built in 1927—Flint’s director of the Department of Public Works, Rob Bincsik, said, “We’re going to get to a point where we can’t treat our wastewater and sewage anymore. We won’t have to talk about drinking water anymore, because we’ll talk about nothing but the raw sewage that gets discharged into the Flint River.”

Having correctly prophesied in June of this year the impending breakdown, the same official explained yesterday, “The condition of infrastructure and needed capital investment at the wastewater treatment plant had nothing to do with the recent discharge into the Flint River.” The utter disdain for the working class by those at the top who pollute the water supply at will and continue to conduct themselves with criminal negligence or worse is staggering.

It was not the facility’s ill preparedness for heavy rain that caused the problem, Bincsik reasoned, but the rain itself!

“The duration and intensity of the rain event caused an immediate and significant increase in flow, subsequently causing the primary tanks to overflow untreated sewage into the storm sewer and ultimately the river,” Bincsik said. “Wastewater treatment plant

staff did everything possible to minimize the discharge event, but they are really at the mercy of Mother Nature in situations such as this.”

Two days after the spill, it was revealed that months ago city officials actually sought a waiver from the county requirement that it test the river water for bacteria after just such a sewage spill. “[Sewage discharges are] actually ‘cleaner’ than the river water, so it’s [sic] impact on the river is positive, if anything,” Robert Case, Flint’s water pollution control division manager, explained to MLive after his waiver request was denied.

One reader, MBell, responded at the time, “So let me get this straight. After having one of the worst water crises in history and a complete mismanagement on all levels of government this guy that works for the city where this happened wants to stop testing the water after a sewage spill?! The logic being that sewage spills are ‘cleaner’ than the river and that a sewage spill would actually benefit the river. This guy needs to be fired plain and simple ...

“Wouldn’t you want to err on the side of caution? I think the most important aspect of Case’s job would be to protect the public and make sure the water is not further damaged by a sewage spill. Not saying the Flint River is great or anything because we know how polluted it is. However, I think testing and monitoring the water should be a top priority.”



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