# Flint's $600 million water settlement—a pittance to whitewash a massive social crime

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A $600 million preliminary settlement for Flint victims of lead-in-water poisoning was announced Thursday. The settlement is the result of over 20 civil lawsuits filed against the state of Michigan arising from the switch to the Flint River in April 2014. The switch was made without adding corrosion controls. Improperly treated water drawn from the polluted Flint River surged through the city's lead-lined pipes and coursed through the bodies of men, women and children for 18 months.

The settlement offered by the state of Michigan is a belated admission that as the result of state action Flint residents drank, cooked and bathed in poisoned water which caused deaths, illnesses as well as financial devastation for homeowners and small businesses. However, it is but a very pale reflection of the level of criminality carried out and covered up against the population of the working class city and the damage which it caused.

Those responsible include not only former Republican Governor Snyder, but the entire political establishment, both the Republican and Democratic parties, on every level—local, state and federal, as well as General Motors and the United Auto Workers. A who's who of politicians and celebrities have visited Flint, including Senator Bernie Sanders, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and former President Barack Obama, who infamously told residents to drink the tainted water. Bringing empty promises and staging phony hearings, the Democratic Party has regularly deployed Flint residents as props for their various election campaigns.

In 2014, months of protests by residents who were becoming ill, suffering hair loss and developing rashes from the foul-smelling, discolored water were ignored by politicians and the corporate media. Were it not for the initiative of Flint residents to seek outside water experts to carry out independent water sampling, the social crime may never have been exposed. The switch back to the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department, the source of the city's water for 50 years, took place in October 2015, but the damage had already been done and continues to this day.

The settlement and compensation payment details are expected to win court approval within 45-60 days. At a press conference held Thursday, attorneys Michael Pitt and Ted Leopold explained the outlines of the settlement fund. Approximately 80 percent of the fund, after the attorney fees are paid, will be allocated to children with the majority going to those who were six years and younger at the time of the switch to the Flint River.

In addition, compensation will also go to adults, businesses, and property owners. $12 million is targeted for children with special education needs and $35 million will be set aside for "forgotten children," including those in foster care who will be able to apply for compensation when they turn 18 years old.

The dollar amount for each individual will depend on how many residents apply for compensation and meet the evidence-based data requirements, including blood lead level documentation. For adults, the settlement establishes a filing process for those who want to submit damage claims to a court-approved claims administrator.

Significantly, state agencies and employees, including Rick Snyder, will no longer be defendants if a federal court judge, a state Court of Appeals Judge and Genesee Circuit Court Judge Joseph Farah accept the settlement. This means that none of the individuals who oversaw the sordid operation which resulted in the poisoning of an entire city will face justice in court.

Lawsuits will continue against the US Environmental Protection Agency and Veolia, an environmental consulting and private global water company, as well as the engineering firm, Lockwood, Andrews and Newman. Both private companies gave their okay for the antiquated Flint Water Treatment Plant to be used to treat the Flint River water.

Prior to Thursday's press conference, both Michigan Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer and Attorney General Dana Nessel praised the "historic" settlement, alluding to the possibility of finally having closure. They both conveniently neglected to state what everyone in Flint knows: that not a single person has ever been prosecuted, convicted or jailed for this crime.

In fact, Whitmer, who replaced Republican Governor Rick Snyder in 2018, acted not to arrest and hold accountable those who were responsible for the worst man-made health crisis in US history, but to wipe the slate clean. In June 2019, Nessel dismissed all pending criminal charges—including involuntary manslaughter—against eight officials implicated in the water poisoning of the Flint population.

That a large percentage of the settlement is targeted for children demonstrates the callous disregard for human life by those overseeing and covering up the water crisis at the time. The harmful effects of ingesting lead have been well known since the beginning of the last century. The impact on young children is especially profound because of the rapid development of their bodies, including potential damage to the brain and nervous

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system. How many Flint children have been prevented from reaching their full human potential?

The lead poisoning is known to have caused as many as 276 miscarriages and the fertility rate in Flint fell 12 percent. Adults and children were sickened in countless other ways, suffering from diseases of the digestive, endocrine, renal and immune systems, as well as the heart and lungs. To this day, residents are still living with illnesses caused by the poisoned water.

Many lives have been needlessly lost. The untreated water not only poisoned the population with lead, but it also contributed to two significant spikes of Legionnaires' disease, in June 2014 and May 2015. The failure to properly treat the water created ideal growth conditions for the deadly legionella bacteria, as well as other bacteria. Snyder and other government officials did not acknowledge the Legionnaires' outbreaks until January 2016.

Thirteen Flint residents died from Legionnaires', including the youngest victim, 30-year-old Jassmine McBride, in February 2019. A study suggests that 119 deaths attributed to pneumonia during the time the city relied on the Flint River water were likely due to undiagnosed Legionnaires' disease.

General Motors and the United Auto Workers (UAW) union are also accomplices who will not be held to account. Both GM and the UAW concealed what they knew about the deadly effects of the lead poisoning from the population. By October 2014, surfaces of parts at GM's Flint Engine plant were being corroded and eaten away to the point they no longer fit properly. The auto corporation quietly switched its water source without so much as a warning to the tens of thousands of Flint residents. If the water was rusting engine parts, what was it doing to the population?

Former UAW Vice President Norwood Jewell, who was convicted of taking tens of thousands of dollars in bribes from Fiat Chrysler, was also a figure in the Flint water crisis. When he was a regional director, Jewell was a key political backer of Flint Democratic Mayor Dayne Walling, who pushed the button on April 24, 2014 that shut off the city's connection to the Detroit water system.

More importantly, along with Walling, Jewell was a proponent 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 operated by the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department, which had supplied Flint for more than half a century. The KWA was key to the whole operation, promising large profits to bondholders, developers and other corporate and financial interests.

In March 2013, Jewell stood before the Flint City Council to make the pitch for the KWA project, with Mayor Walling sitting behind him. Speaking like a member of upper management, he said, "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." 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.

The KWA was indeed all about making money. 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 Snyder and his Democratic state treasurer, former investment banker Andy Dillon, to implement longstanding plans to loot public assets.

Six years since the onset of the water poisoning, Flint residents are still paying water bills which are among the highest in the United States. Residents pay for water they do not drink because they do not trust it. They instead rely on bottled water—from charitable donations or paid for out of their own pockets—since the state ended its free distributions. The replacement of lead service lines has yet to be completed.

It is worth noting that in Whitmer's remarks to the Democratic National Convention Monday night, delivered live from a UAW union hall in Lansing, Michigan, she made no mention of the Flint water poisoning or the toll it has taken on the population. All the capitalist politicians are eager to put the Flint water crisis behind them, and hope the $600 million settlement will appease workers, at least temporarily.

But Flint has become known throughout the world for the poisoning of the population as a result of the ruling elite placing profits over the lives of ordinary people. This experience is now the experience of tens of millions of workers in the United States and throughout the world.

As the coronavirus pandemic has raged uncontrollably throughout the US, the ruling elites have shown the same disregard for the safety and well-being of the population as they have for Flint. The inept and inhumane response by the political establishment to the Flint crisis is duplicated many times over in the response to the pandemic by the Trump administration and its Democratic Party accomplices.

What has changed since the onset of the water crisis in 2014 is the emergence of the working class in opposition to the ruling oligarchy's subordination of all considerations of public health to protecting Wall Street. This emerging movement is the force to which Flint workers and youth must turn—not to the Democratic and Republican stooges of the financial oligarchy. This is the force that can put an end to the capitalist profit system—the source of poverty, oppression, inequality and war.

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