

State water official fired over Flint, Michigan water crisis awarded full back pay

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A mediator ruled last month that the director of the Michigan Office of Drinking Water was wrongfully fired in 2016. The official, Liane Shekter Smith, was awarded full back pay and compensation, amounting to \$199,880.

Shekter Smith was responsible for the safety of the state's drinking water during the operation that switched the city of Flint from its treated Great Lakes water source to improperly treated water from the historically toxic Flint River. As head of the department, she oversaw the conspiracy to ignore legally-required treatment, falsify sampling methods and lie to the public about the operation.

She infamously lied in an August 2015 meeting to two concerned Flint mothers whose children were lead-poisoned, telling them that the city's water complied with federal standards. That meeting was also attended by Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) officials. She also asserted that the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) field expert who discovered the issue was "being handled."

When an MDEQ spokesman called the EPA expert a "rogue employee," Shekter Smith gloated to the mothers that his report would never see the light of day. She was fired in 2016 after the criminal events of the Flint water crisis were brought to light.

The Associated Press obtained the 22-page ruling issued in September by arbitrator Sheldon J. Stark. In it he said, "politics and the need for a public scapegoat" were behind Shekter Smith's termination. The state, according to Stark, failed to present evidence that the firing was justified. The arbitrator continued that her record in government was "exemplary."

The use of the term "exemplary" compels one to keep from laughing. Clearly, Stark is addressing this to the establishment elite. The qualifications for that badge of honor require one to be a conformist toady who is willing to be a liar-for-hire for her higher-ups.

LeeAnn Walters, credited as being the resident most responsible for exposing the lead-in-water crisis in Flint, was one of the mothers who met with Shekter Smith six years ago. "As far as I am concerned the judicial system just spit in the face of every Flint resident who died or was harmed due to her actions," Walters told the *World Socialist Web Site*, adding, "She should NOT be getting financially compensated for killing and harming innocent children and people. This narrative that she is not to blame is despicable and a lie because of the position she held.

"She, along with other members of MDEQ, should be in jail!"

Professor Marc Edwards headed the team from Virginia Tech that conducted the independent sampling of Flint's water and exposed the state's lie that the city's water was safe to drink. He subsequently conducted his own investigation into the officials responsible. On hearing of the ruling, he commented to the WWS: "While there are many misconceptions about wrongdoing during the Flint water crisis, the facts proving Ms. Smith's misconduct are indisputable.

"The arbitrator understands nothing about engineering and scientific ethics—Ms. Shekter Smith was no scapegoat, and this failure of government at all levels continues to the present day.

"If Ms. Shekter Smith is not guilty, then no one is. She and her team were the key instigators of the Flint water crisis."

Perhaps the most blatant perversion of justice around the Flint monstrosity, the ruling in favor of Shekter Smith captures the essence of the years of false promises to uncover and punish the wrongdoing behind the Flint water crisis. In 2016, criminal indictments of officials were announced, to a great rhetorical flourish, by then-Attorney General Bill Schuette.

"The families of Flint will not be forgotten. We will

provide the justice they deserve. And in Michigan, the system is not rigged,” Schuette proclaimed at the time. “There is one system of justice. It applies to everybody. Equally. No matter who you are. Period.”

In January 2019, after the electoral defeat of Republican Governor Rick Snyder, Shekter Smith was among several MDEQ officials who were allowed to plea bargain down to insignificant charges. Months later, all charges against the remaining defendants were dropped “without prejudice,” amid claims that those cases could be refiled later. But because those who plea-bargained, including Shekter Smith, were therefore protected against prosecution by the US Constitution’s Double Jeopardy Clause, the known conspirators in the crime were off the hook.

Apparently, it was not enough for Shekter Smith to avoid the inside of a jail cell. She filed a grievance with the state of Michigan for wrongful termination and demanded back pay.

Shekter Smith was the only official who was actually fired in the aftermath of the exposure of the water crisis, no doubt because she became a public embarrassment to the Snyder administration. The other defendants who plea-bargained before Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer took office, who likewise played foul roles, were put on paid leave by the new administration.

For all the hype from both Democrats and Republicans about “justice,” the investigative efforts and millions in taxpayer expense amount to nothing but smoke. The crime against Flint was and continues to be a crime of capitalism. The drive by ruling class for profit is what motivated the scheme to take the city off its water source of 50 years and illegally commit its financial resources to a reckless plan which forced 100,000 men women and children to drink toxic water.

Neither the Democratic nor Republican parties can provide an avenue for working class people to seek justice, because the bottom line is that they protect their own.



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