

# Flint “Water Warrior” Tony Palladeno Jr. dies tragically of COVID-19

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Tony Palladeno Jr., a well known and outspoken Flint, Michigan water activist, passed away from complications of COVID-19 on January 10 at the age of 60. He had been hospitalized since December 16 at Hurley Hospital in Flint where he was placed on a respirator. Tony worked for the *Flint Journal* for 24 years.

An impoverished working class city of 90,000 north of Detroit, Flint is the home of the historic sit-down strike of the 1930s against General Motors and the site of one of the greatest public health crimes in American history—the poisoning of the entire city’s water system with lead which began in 2014.

Tony was a determined and principled opponent of the poisoning of the city’s water, as well as the political cover-up that continues today. Tony seemed to be everywhere; he rarely missed a protest, a rally, or town hall meeting. He worked tirelessly to advocate for Flint’s residents by exposing the dangerous effects of drinking water tainted with lead. Tony’s death is one of countless tragedies which now occur daily due to the homicidal “herd immunity” approach to the coronavirus pandemic taken at every level of government.

Many heartfelt messages of support have been sent to his wife Leah and their family. Leisa Sutton, a Flint resident, wrote on Facebook, “We were fortunate to know a man who would give you the shirt off his back if he thought you needed it. Always had a ready ear, a contagious smile, and a sincerely amazing spirit. He loved being of service to his fellow humans and had an amazing pride and genuine passion for his hometown and his adopted communities.”

Florlisa Fowler, another Flint water activist, wrote on Facebook, “Lost a dear friend and fellow Flintstone / Water Warrior Tony Palladeno Jr, today. Flint will

never be the same without you! We lost a true fighter. Our condolences to his wife, and family! Godspeed Tony, RIP we will miss you dearly!”

The lead-in-water poisoning was triggered by the decision of Republican Governor Rick Snyder, together with local and state Democrats and backed by the Obama administration, to switch the water supply from Detroit’s long-reliable system to the heavily polluted Flint River in April 2014 without adding any corrosion controls. Behind the switch were financial and corporate interests involved in the money-making Karegnondi Water Authority (KWA) scheme. Thousands of residents were poisoned by lead, which leached from the system’s pipes, and suffered innumerable negative health effects. Tony became active very soon after the impact of the water switch became apparent to residents, causing rashes, hair loss, and later miscarriages, and deaths.

Florlisa organized the Flint Water Class Action Facebook group, immediately after she heard a local TV news report September 8, 2014, announcing that General Motors’ Flint Engine plant would be switching away from the Flint River source, because the parts were being corroded from the water. “I set up the Facebook page to make Flint residents aware and to give us a voice. Our first protest was in December of that year. Tony showed up. He was carrying a bright orange sign and water bottle, screaming at the cars and people going by to bring attention to what was going on with our water. He was telling us how it also affected him and those he cared about in Flint.”

The many protests organized and joined by Tony and others connected residents with scientist Marc Edwards of Virginia Tech and Flint pediatrician Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha, who documented the dangerous levels of lead contamination in the drinking water. The

ongoing protests initiated by Tony and other Flint residents finally broke through the wall of silence put up by the entire political establishment, which until then ignored and denied residents' stories of rashes and illnesses. Through the courageous and unstinting efforts of residents, the Flint water crisis became known not only in the US but throughout the world.

Tony had a knack for speaking bluntly and compassionately. During the second year of the water crisis he contrasted the compassion of residents and workers with the indifference of the government.

As donations of bottled water were pouring in daily from residents and support groups, he noted it “shows the compassion and grief others feel towards Flint’s dilemma—which the residents had no say over. More to the point and I might be out on a ledge here, but I keep seeing and feeling like the good people of Katrina (Hurricane Katrina, 2005) on their roofs begging our government for help! Our government has not stepped in. Why?”

The political establishment was fearful of the growing unity of black and white workers joining together to mount a fight against those responsible for the poisoning. In 2016 hearings were held by the Michigan Civil Rights Commission to investigate whether racial discrimination played a role in Flint's water quality problems, then two years old. Governor Rick Snyder appointed an eight-member panel with the aim of presenting the water poisoning as a racial issue, with the support of the Democratic Party. The report, issued in February 2017, claimed without evidence that race was the decisive factor in the impact of the city’s water crisis. Tony rejected this. He was quoted in the *Detroit Free Press*: “This is not a black and white thing because this is killing all of us.”

On April 20, 2017, Tony, his wife and four other residents were arrested at a town hall meeting, called by Democratic Mayor Karen Weaver, and Governor Snyder’s “fixer” Rich Baird, held provocatively at a church rather than a public venue. The event, ostensibly to allow residents to air “feedback, questions and concerns,” was filled with heavily armed police who handcuffed and dragged them off for exercising their freedom of speech. Nearly eight years since the onset of the water crisis, and the six residents are the only people who have been arrested. Not one public figure or elected official has been arrested or put on trial.

Florlisa explained, “Tony and I had many talks. We wanted to do more, but the COVID situation made it difficult. He never sold out. He was a firm believer that we needed to change things for the betterment of the people, for a better quality of life.

“The Flint water crisis was a prelude to what is happening with the pandemic. It’s all about money over the health and lives of the working class. The water crisis was the same way—money over our lives. Now they’re forcing everybody back to work, for the benefit of the corporations. It’s like there was a veil over your eyes, you think you have a safety net, and then something like this happens and it opens your eyes and your mind because you realize that the safety net has been ripped from under you. The water crisis and the pandemic are experiences that are life-changing. It gives you a broader perspective, it changes your entire life.”

Tony Palladeno was imbued with the fighting spirit of the working class, and his contributions will be carried forward by workers and youth now entering into struggle against the entire ruling class and the capitalist system.



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