

# Flint, Michigan workers warn East Palestine residents: “You can’t trust the government!”

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At a town hall meeting February 16, hundreds of East Palestine, Ohio, residents demanded answers for the health threat to their community due to the intentional burning and release of toxic chemicals by Norfolk Southern railroad following the derailment of its 100-car train in their town.

Residents described inhaling toxic smoke, finding dead fish in local streams, pets getting sick and dying, the persistence of chemical smells and sickness. After a state EPA official dodged their questions and again claimed the water and soil was safe, someone from the crowd was heard shouting, “Flint, Michigan!”—referring to the residents of that city whose health concerns were ignored for eighteen months before the state government acknowledged in late 2015 that the city’s water system had been poisoned by lead.

In both cases, entire populations in largely working class communities were poisoned in the pursuit of profit. And one again both Democrats and Republicans at every level of government are working to conceal their complicity in these social crimes as they grandstand about how much they care. But reality is forcing the victims to draw parallels between East Palestine, Flint, Love Canal, New York; Newark, New Jersey; Martin County, Kentucky...and the list goes on.

The WSWS recently spoke to workers from Flint about the comparison of the disastrous derailment in East Palestine and the ongoing Flint water crisis which was set into motion nearly nine years ago.

Flint resident, Florlisa Fowler one of the water activists who helped make the voices of residents heard told the WSWS, “Like Flint, East Palestine was a man-made disaster.”

While residents who were living with the effects of lead and other contaminants in the water, the State of Michigan and the Environmental Protection Agency were telling the population that the water was safe to drink.

Fowler explained, “Obama came here with a crew to do a PR cleanup job. He came in 2016. By that time the whole world knew about how our water in Flint was poisoned. His job was to shut us up and tell us everything was okay with the water as he took a sip. Let them drink lead was the message!”

The shift from a safe water source to the Flint River in 2014 was done without adding corrosion control chemicals which would have prevented the leaching of lead from the city’s lead pipes. The switch was carried out under the auspices of former Republican Governor Rick Snyder, his Democratic state treasurer Andy Dillon, and an emergency manager appointed by the state to impose austerity measures dictated by the banks. The chief beneficiary of the water switch was a new private water entity, the Karegnondi Water Authority, a money-making enterprise backed by big investors.

Nearly 100,000 people were impacted by the Flint water poisoning which caused deaths, miscarriages, and developmental problems particularly in children. Not a single official or politician has been convicted in what was at the time one of the largest health and environmental crises in US history.

A GM worker who lived in Flint throughout the water crisis, which for many residents is still ongoing, described what she saw then: “I saw people whose hair had fallen out. Teeth had fallen out. I saw people with all kinds of skin problems. I saw one guy who had a hole in his neck. And I saw children who weren’t developing. Several children I saw were not able to speak even though they were of age to be able to.”

The worker continued: “I had a dog that died. My other dogs became untrainable.” She said that she knew there was a problem with the water even before the story broke in the news. “The water tasted horrible. I knew it wasn’t safe, and I quit drinking it.”

“The state gave us bottled water for a while,” the

worker said. “They didn’t fix the pipes. They’re still not all fixed.”

Asked if she was surprised at the government’s response to the Flint water crisis, the worker said, “No. They knew. They never cared. Just like Ohio. We’re going to see down the road in a couple of years it’s going to be the same as Flint. It’s so bad.”

The GM worker noted that Norfolk Southern was aware of the problems before the derailment occurred. “They already knew that area had a bad reputation.” She also mentioned that the same train had broken down two days prior to the derailment in East Palestine. “All they care about is profits,” she concluded.

Responding to an MSNBC reporter’s question last week about the appropriateness of Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg’s complacency regarding the East Palestine disaster, Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders quipped, “Was he driving the train?”

Instead of placing the blame for the derailment and subsequent contamination of the environment on the train’s crew, as Sanders did, the GM worker recognized the impossible position railroad workers have been put in by an industry that has slashed positions, increased hours for those who still have jobs, and made a practice of running trains that are longer and heavier than is safe (the train that derailed in East Palestine was approximately two miles long). “It’s life or death for railroad workers now,” the worker said.

The worker said she can absolutely relate to the exploitation of railroad workers by the railroads. But she also spoke of the role of the unions in enforcing that exploitation: “The rail workers’ unions didn’t support them when they wanted to go on strike. It’s just like at the plant. The UAW [United Auto Workers] tries to cover up injuries. They work in favor of management. They lie to us, tell us what we want to hear and disappear. They lie to our faces.”

“As long as the line is moving, they don’t care,” she said. “They sped up the line recently. It was our Christmas present. There have been a lot of accidents since then.” Like the railroaders, the worker said, workers at GM Flint have been put in an impossible situation. “We’re supposed to do our jobs according to the instructions in the book. But the line moves so fast that, if you do follow the book, the light goes off and you stop the line. You can get in trouble for not following the book, and you can get in trouble if you do follow the book.”

“It’s us workers who have to stand up and take over,”

she said. “If the workers don’t take a stand, conditions will keep getting worse.” Asked what taking a stand would look like, the worker said, “You have to interrupt profits.”

Mary Miller, a retired GM worker from Flint also spoke to the WSWs. “Biden went to Kiev, Ukraine but not to East Palestine, Ohio. It lets you know who they are for, and it’s not the working class.

“The authorities are doing the same thing to the residents of East Palestine, Ohio, as they did to us, to the population of Flint. Let’s be clear—this is not about a few seconds of exposure. This is about impacting people over a lifetime. When you live through something like this, you don’t forget it. When I see what is happening to the people of East Palestine, it re-traumatizes me. You relive it all again. What area will be next?”

“The situation in Flint did not happen overnight. The Flint River became contaminated by General Motors after years of pouring chemicals from the plant drains into the river. Growing up, it was a running joke that you didn’t use anything from the Flint River. You didn’t even fish there.

“Several members of my family lived on one block in a Flint neighborhood on St. John Street. General Motors stole our neighborhood way back when they built Buick City, which is now closed. They bought everything up and threw us out. They took our livelihoods, our families, our schools, and then our health.

“When the politicians switched to the Flint River in 2014, we couldn’t believe it. It wasn’t their families being poisoned. Instead, in Flint and East Palestine, it’s the workers who are made to suffer.”

“Even when the officials were aware, they did not do anything. We the residents suffer. It’s heartbreaking. There needs to be an overhaul of everything. The same people are allowing the same thing to happen over and over. It’s proof that we don’t matter to them. You can’t trust the government, but you can’t fix the water by yourself.”

“I think we workers are the only ones who can make it right. I have found the *World Socialist Web Site* to be an awakening for me because it explains what is behind everything—capitalism.”



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