

Flint, Michigan mother arrested, fined \$350 for the “crime” of stealing vitamins

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If you know of similar incidents that you think workers around the world should know about, please contact the WSWWS here.

In February, a Flint, Michigan, mother who relies on federal food stamp assistance was arrested and fined \$350 for the “crime” of stealing a \$15 bottle of store-brand multi-vitamins from a Meijer supermarket. The judge had initially wanted to fine Samantha (we have changed her name to protect her privacy) \$700 for the vitamins but cut the fine in half because she had no prior offenses.

Flint has become known throughout the world as the city whose population was poisoned by lead-tainted drinking water in 2014. Nine years on, not one single official on a local, state or federal level has been arrested or convicted for this social crime which caused at least 100 deaths, miscarriages, emotional and mental developmental problems in children and countless lifelong illnesses.

Indictments and charges against former governor Rick Snyder over his role in the mass poisoning and cover up were dropped by state prosecutors last year. Had charges been pursued, he would only have faced two charges for willful neglect of duty, misdemeanors with potential sentences of one year each and/or a \$1,000 fine. Despite being charged Snyder was never arrested.

On the other hand, Samantha was forced to pay \$350 for taking a bottle of vitamins. She was detained before she left the store by Genesee County Metro Police, who have a mini-station in the Meijer parking lot and essentially provide the store with a security force at the public’s expense.

The Meijer corporation is a giant grocery chain that has 259 stores throughout the Midwest, employs 70,000 workers and pays subsistence wages to maximize profits. Meijer had a peak revenue of \$19.6 billion in 2021. The ratio of revenue per employee is \$279,857. Yet the median pay of a Meijer cashier in Michigan is just over

\$21,000 a year, below the \$23,030 federal poverty level for a family of three. In sharp contrast, Meijer’s CEO Rick Keyes’ net worth in 2022 was estimated to have been around \$20 million with a \$1 million salary.

Samantha left her job at JC Penney in 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic in an effort to protect herself, her husband and her child, who was one year old at the time. Now, like millions, she attempts to provide for her family with the small amounts of cash she can earn from what are euphemistically called “side hustles.”

The young mother is one of tens of millions of Americans who rely on the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) for food, but SNAP is a program in the crosshairs of a government bent on cutting social spending. On March 1, 30 million Americans saw their COVID-relief SNAP assistance cut. This is under conditions where Washington has spent over \$100 billion on its proxy war against Russia in Ukraine and Biden has proposed a \$1 trillion budget to prepare for world war.

This attack on the working class comes at a time when inflation, and price gouging by grocery corporations like Meijer, has greatly increased the cost of providing one’s family with the essentials. The price of eggs is now between \$4 and \$6 per dozen. Butter prices rose by 31.4 percent from December 2021 to December 2022, according to Market Watch, and non-poultry meats are expected to rise in cost in 2023 by 12.8 percent, according to the USDA.

The current rate of inflation is 6.4 percent, and inflation reached as high as 9.1 percent in June of 2022. Meanwhile, workers’ wages stagnate.

By the middle of the 20th century, the working class in Flint had the highest standard of living in the United States followed closely by Detroit workers due to the determined labor struggles carried out by autoworkers, such as the 44-day Flint sit-down strike of 1936-1937.

Workers seized control of the plant, faced off against the police, company spies, National Guard troops and defied Democratic Governor Frank Murphy. The rise of the auto industry in the US was a central feature of the rise of American capitalism in the first half of the 20th century, culminating in its domination of the world economy after World War II.

General Motors was established in Flint in 1908, and the city's population exploded, from 13,000 in 1900 to peak at around 200,000 in the 1960s. In late 1970, the average pay of a GM production worker was \$4.52 per hour. Adjusted for inflation, that would have the equivalent buying power of \$35.77 per hour in 2023. According to a 2015 article in *The Atlantic*, as late as 1980 Flint had the highest median income in the country for workers under 35, at \$50,208, which adjusted for inflation had the buying power of more than \$190,000 in 2023. Today, the starting wage for an hourly GM production temp worker in Flint is \$16.38.

It was in the 1980s that US workers began to come under intensified assault with the development of globalized production. General Motors slashed jobs and closed down factories in Flint and throughout the country. The shuttering of the immense Buick City plant in June of 1999 devastated Flint. The response of the United Auto Workers (UAW) bureaucracy to internationalized production was not to unite with autoworkers throughout the world, but to depict them as the enemy.

The UAW, acting on behalf of their corporate masters, promoted the fiction that massive concessions would save jobs—cuts in wages, abandonment of COLA (raises based on the increased cost of living), the loss of hundreds of thousands of jobs and the list goes on. The union bureaucracy transformed itself into a direct instrument of GM and repudiated any notion of the class struggle. The UAW argued that the enemy was the workers in Mexico, Canada and Japan, not the capitalist owners of General Motors.

As a result of this nationalism and treachery, Flint today is an impoverished shell of its former self, its population reduced to approximately 90,000, only 10,000 more than the number of GM workers in Flint in 1978. Today GM employs about 6,000 in the city. According to the US Census Bureau, in 2021 Flint had a median household income of \$32,358. The poverty rate in the city is a staggering 35.5 percent.

These are the cold realities of capitalism, whose brutality has not been so freely imposed upon workers in the US perhaps since the mid-nineteenth century.

Samantha's situation brings to mind a familiar story from that period, the novel *Les Miserables*, published in 1862, by the French author Victor Hugo.

In *Les Miserables*—and in the wildly popular musical based on the novel—the reader follows the fate of Jean Valjean, an honest man who steals a loaf of bread to feed his sister's hungry family. Jean is arrested and sentenced to 19 years of hard labor for his "crime."

History wrote a postscript to *Les Miserables*, however. Only nine years after the novel's publication, in 1871, the workers of Paris rebelled against the capitalist system itself, taking up arms and fighting valiantly to establish in the Paris Commune a society controlled by the workers and dedicated to working for human need, not private profit.

Today, a growing movement of workers in the US and around the world is emerging as part of an international process, including mass strikes and protests by millions of Greek, French and Sri Lankan workers over the last several days, and the continuing strikes by UK and German workers against demands that they pay for the economic crisis and cost of the US/NATO war against Russia.

In the US, Will Lehman's campaign for UAW president struck a chord with thousands of autoworkers who supported the socialist candidate and his call for the creation of rank-and-file committees to transfer power to the shop floor workers and to abolish the bureaucracy. Newly formed rank-and-file committees at Caterpillar, GM Flint Truck Assembly and Dana auto parts signify the growing conscious response of workers of the need to break the shackles of the union bureaucracy with a fighting spirit and a clearer recognition that the main criminal is the capitalist profit system and its political servants.



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