

10 years since the lead poisoning of Flint, Michigan water supply

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Ten years ago, on April 25, 2014, state and local officials assembled at the water plant in Flint, Michigan to celebrate as Mayor Dayne Walling pushed the button that switched the city's water source from treated Lake Huron water to the caustic and untreated water of the Flint River.

The fact that the river water being pumped into the homes of 100,000 residents wasn't properly treated was known only to an elite inner circle of officials. But shortly after the switch, the residents of Flint began protesting against the move. It was common knowledge that the river was rife with industrial waste.

The bad taste, disturbing odor and abnormal color of residents' tap water were the first indicators that something was wrong. Scientific studies proved, more than a year later, that Flint had dangerously high levels of lead in its water. One indicator was the fact that the number of children with alarmingly high levels of lead in their blood had doubled.

The official response was to conceal and flat-out lie. The protests were answered with the claim that all health protocols were being followed and the water was safe to drink. It was a full 18 months before the city reverted back to its original water source.

During that time, fertility fell by 12 percent and there were hundreds of miscarriages. Some 9,000 young children were poisoned with lead, causing incalculable long-term health consequences.

Flint became the center of one of the country's largest outbreaks of Legionnaires Disease. Officially, nearly 100 cases were recorded, resulting in 13 deaths. Over the same period, there were 119 deaths attributed to pneumonia that were likely caused by undiagnosed cases of Legionnaires.

Ten years later, the Flint water crisis provides further proof of the impossibility within the framework of capitalism and its two-party political system to promote public health or hold accountable the banks and corporations, and their political stooges in both parties, that knowingly spread disease and death in the interests of private profit.

This stark reality applies to the most basic elements of modern society—from clean water and air to the protection of the public from pandemics, such as the ongoing mass killer, COVID-19. Due to the public health policy on COVID of both presidents Trump and Biden—which was and continues to be “Let it rip”—well over 1 million have died of the disease in the US alone. The criminal response of the government, driven by the profit interests of corporate oligarchs and monopolies, allows the virus to thrive as new variants continue to emerge.

Today, according to the National Resources Defense Council, high levels of lead have been found in Baltimore, Detroit, Milwaukee, Newark, New York, Pittsburgh and Washington D.C. Just last month, the *Journal of the American Medical Association* reported that almost 70 percent of children under six in Chicago are exposed to lead in their home tap water.

No accountability, no justice

The question, “How could this have happened?” remains to a significant extent unanswered to this day. The decisions leading to the catastrophic degradation of the city's drinking water were the outcome of a conspiracy of officials, many of whom are known—most prominently then-Governor Rick Snyder, a Republican, and then-state Treasurer Andy Dillon, a Democrat—and many who have yet to be identified.

There is no mystery here, as no serious investigation of the lead poisoning of the largely working class city has been conducted, and none of the perpetrators has been prosecuted.

Investigations launched at both the state and federal levels were cover-ups. In 2016, the Republican attorney general of Michigan, Bill Schuette, proclaimed that “the families of Flint will not be forgotten.” He continued, “We will provide the justice they deserve. And in Michigan, the system is not rigged.”

Then, during the 2018-2019 transition to a Democratic state government, the attorney general's office offered seven key defendants plea bargain deals that made them legally untouchable and prevented pursuit of the chain of command because of double jeopardy protections.

The mantra of the incoming Democratic prosecution team was “justice delayed is not always justice denied.” Repeating ad nauseum that the Democratic administration of Governor Gretchen Whitmer would follow the evidence wherever it led, in November, 2023 it ignominiously announced the ending of all efforts to prosecute the officials who aided and abetted the poisoning of Flint's water.

A derisory settlement of \$626 million for the people of Flint was awarded by a US district court in November 2021, after months of deliberations. To this day, not a single dollar has been disbursed to residents, while some \$64 million has already been paid to various legal firms out of their approximately \$200 million legal bill. Meanwhile, many impacted residents have died or left the state, having received nothing.

Just last month, the City of Flint was held in contempt by a federal district judge for repeatedly violating a settlement agreement to replace all lead service lines in the city.

Flint residents are plaintiffs in a longstanding suit against the federal government over the failure of the Environmental Protection Agency to act quickly during the water crisis. In a letter sent to President Biden this week, residents said:

Your administration publicly expressed dismay and shock about what was going on in our city, and yet, to this date, the federal government is the only entity that refuses to take any responsibility for its failures.

The White House stonewalled the residents with platitudes, while making no commitment to provide additional funds.

The decade that has passed since the onset of the water crisis in Flint

provides an opportunity to view the disaster from a broader historical perspective. In early 2016, Flint swarmed with pro-Democratic Party hucksters who peddled the myth that it was solely the Republicans, particularly Governor Snyder, who were responsible. Filmmaker Michael Moore, liberal television commentator Rachel Maddow and Rainbow Coalition leader Jesse Jackson held separate events on behalf of the Democratic Party.

The Democrats, hoping to exploit the crisis in Flint to boost their campaigns in a presidential election year, chose the city as the site of the March 6, 2016 Democratic primary debate between Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders. Neither candidate would commit to serious measures to improve the safety of water. Clinton continued to advance the lie that racism was the cause of the water crisis.

When President Barack Obama finally visited the city in May of that year, he made a point of publicly drinking from a glass of city tap water, effectively telling the residents to “Shut up and drink the water.”

When a vast social crime is committed, many ostensibly concerned and learned individuals emerge seeking to cover up the fundamental social, economic and class issues and, in one way or another, shield the perpetrators and the capitalist system they represent.

In March, 2017, the Michigan Civil Rights Commission (MCRC) issued its report, concluding that the crime against the Flint population was caused by “systemic racism.” Given the fact that the lead-poisoned water flowed through the taps of all Flint residents, making no distinction on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, religion or sexual identity, and that nearly half of the city’s population is non-African American, the assertion that the root cause of the disaster was racism is absurd on its face.

It had nothing to do with science or the pursuit of truth, and everything to do with the Democratic Party’s adoption of racial and identity politics as a means of diverting attention from the staggering growth of socioeconomic inequality in capitalist America—including among blacks and other minorities—and the deployment of the age-old tactic of “divide and rule” against the working class.

Some six years before the shift in Flint’s water supply, the 2008-2009 economic collapse had changed the entire economic landscape. The crash resulted from wild speculation on the financial markets linked to subprime mortgages. The incoming Obama administration pledged to the financial establishment that it would do whatever it took to stave off a chain reaction of bank failures and protect the investments of billionaire speculators.

During the transition to Obama’s administration, incoming White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel famously declared:

You never want a serious crisis to go to waste. And what I mean by that is an opportunity to do things that you think you could not do before.

The so-called recovery piloted by the Democratic Obama government represented the beginning of the greatest transfer of wealth to the ruling class in history.

No matter what reckless investments the profit-mad speculators made, there was never any question that the politicians of both parties would make sure they were protected. Who would pay for the multi-trillion-dollar Wall Street bailout? The working class, of course!

Obama’s new Presidential Task Force on Auto used federal bankruptcy laws, and the willing collusion of the United Auto Workers bureaucracy, to cut the pay of new-hires in half, introduce a multi-tier workforce with starting pay at poverty levels, end cost-of-living pay escalators, gut retiree health benefits and pensions, shut down dozens of plants and slash tens of thousands of jobs.

The “recovery” of the auto industry worked so well that bankruptcy laws were used to force municipal bankruptcies. Detroit would become the model. So-called “emergency managers” were imposed to override popular elections and impose a direct dictatorship of the banks.

Detroit’s city charter had long prohibited profiteering from the sale of water. But as the payments on Detroit’s debt increased due to financial speculation, water rates went up. This had a sharp and detrimental impact on the finances of Flint, the biggest consumer of water sold by the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD).

In the five-year period from the 2008 crash to just before the switch of Flint’s water, DWSD prices had nearly doubled. Flint water rates had become the highest in the country, while the population was among the poorest.

The new pipeline scheme

Jeff Wright, a Democrat, was the drain commissioner of Genesee County, which includes Flint. He founded the Karegnondi Water Authority (KWA) in 2010, which he described as “the only reasonable solution” to “monopoly, price-gouging and corruption” on the part of the Detroit water system.

The centerpiece of the KWA was a 65-mile pipeline to be built just six miles north of the DWSD pipeline. This new pipeline would deliver raw, untreated water from Lake Huron to Genesee and surrounding counties. It would not provide water safe for drinking. The pipeline was not designed to carry treated water. Flint would have to perform costly upgrades to its outdated water plant to enable it to treat the water.

The only justification for building another pipeline was mercenary. The existing pipeline had more than enough capacity to deliver treated drinking water to Flint and the surrounding area for decades to come.

There was—and is—no scientific or technological reason why clean, safe drinking water could not be provided to everyone affordably. Yet not a single politician, Democratic or Republican, who approved the City of Flint taking on additional debt to finance another pipeline, entertained the notion that the financial vultures who profited off of Detroit’s debt should take a loss to keep the water flowing safely and cheaply.

The elevation of private interests over public health and safety

Modern municipal water systems are based on historical gains in the science of public health. Humanity has understood the dangers of lead toxicity for millennia. Yet, the vast majority of homes still employ lead pipes to bring in water.

The lead industry is responsible for this. By the beginning of the 20th century, most municipalities used lead to pipe in their water. As public awareness of the danger of lead increased and many cities banned the use of lead pipes, the Lead Industries Association (LIA), founded in 1928, fought back through an intense campaign of lobbying.

Until 1986, when lead pipes were officially outlawed, the LIA was successful, with the help of capitalist politicians, in making sure lead was the material of choice for water pipes.

Today, remediation of the millions of homes serviced by lead pipes ranks on the list of urgent projects in public infrastructure, along with gas and electric lines, eroding bridges, crumbling roadways and aging public transport.

There is an ever-widening gap between the funding required to address

urgent public needs and what the capitalist politicians in Washington will allow. The priorities of both parties are for funding weapons of police repression, and, most significantly, the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, where over a trillion dollars have already been spent. President Joe Biden committed a mere \$45 billion to infrastructure, which has already been cut to \$15 billion.

After 10 years of the water crisis in Flint, it is high time that the real lessons be drawn. The capitalist class has two parties at its beck and call. Moreover, the ruling class has never forgotten or forgiven that Flint was the home of the historic sit-down strike of 1936-37, which revealed the immense social and potential political power of the American working class.

To fight for any of its interests today, the working class must consciously mobilize that power as an independent industrial and political force, breaking from the two parties of capitalist war and reaction, uniting with its class counterparts around the world, and consciously fighting to put an end to capitalism and reorganize society on socialist foundations.



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