

Political crisis over Flint poisoning intensifies as Congress holds hearing

By Nick Barrickman
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On Wednesday, the US House Committee on Oversight and Reform held a public hearing addressing the political crisis stemming from the widespread lead contamination in the city of Flint, Michigan. The committee brought before it scientists involved in the exposure of the crisis and residents who had been affected by the contamination, as well as officials representing state and federal regulators that had sought to suppress evidence of the health disaster.

The hearing was the first being held at the federal level on the expanding crisis in the city of Flint. In the audience were dozens of Flint, Detroit and Washington, DC residents who attended to express their opposition to the actions of local, state and federal authorities. “Are we living in 2016 or is it the 1930s and 1940s?” an attendee from Washington, DC told the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Congressional officials, clearly overwhelmed by the expression of popular anger nationally, sought to contain the enormous social opposition by falsely presenting themselves as outraged bystanders to the corruption and criminality at every level of government.

Not in attendance at the hearing were Republican Michigan Governor Rick Snyder, whom the committee had declined to question, and former Flint and Detroit Public Schools Emergency Manager Darnell Earley, a Democratic appointee of Snyder who had overseen Flint’s mounting water crisis from 2006 to 2013. Earley was denounced continuously by House officials. Committee Chair Jason Chaffetz (R-Utah) declared that on Tuesday he issued a subpoena to have Earley appear before the panel, and that he was now ordering US Marshals to “hunt [Earley] down” in order to serve him with the summons.

While the hearing went on in Washington, DC, Flint

Mayor Karen Weaver called for the removal of lead piping from more than 13,500 of the city’s water lines, saying the city was “morally obligated” to act. When asked by reporters where the funding for such an endeavor would come from, Weaver failed to provide an answer, stating, “[W]e must remove and replace lead pipes immediately and we want to start with the high risk homes of kids under six and pregnant women.”

Widespread lead contamination in Flint first came to light last year, within one year after the city detached itself from the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD) in 2014, drawing contaminated water from the nearby Flint River, which corroded the city’s pipes and caused lead to leach into the water supply, exposing tens of thousands to the neurotoxin. Rather than taking measures to reduce the danger posed to residents of the city, public officials at the local, state and federal levels suppressed evidence of the toxicity of Flint’s water by downplaying the significance of tests done on water from the region and intimidating whistleblowers in environmental agencies.

Invited to speak at the hearing Wednesday was city resident LeeAnn Walters, who referred to her home as “ground zero” in the crisis. Since the city began drawing water from the Flint River, Walters’ children are underweight and have developed speech impediments as well as liver problems.

Walters pointed to the national implications of the crisis, citing a report that stated only 10 states throughout the US were in accordance with the requirements of the Lead and Copper Rule, a key component of the Safe Drinking Water Act. Walters also cited a number of states that possessed water testing protocols identical to those of Michigan.

Walters referred to Environmental Protection Agency

(EPA) Region 5 regulator Miguel Del Toral, who was not permitted to testify at the hearing. Del Toral conducted tests of Walters' water and sought to raise warnings to both the EPA and the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ). According to a memo introduced at the hearing, numerous tests conducted by Del Toral found lead particles in Walters' water far exceeding the EPA limit of 15 parts per billion (ppb), with one test finding a level as high as 397 ppb.

"The lead results were especially alarming given that the samples were collected using... sampling procedures... which minimize the capture of lead," the memo states. Walters said that the level of toxicity in her tap water was near the official threshold for hazardous waste. "Despite this, we were still told the water was safe," she said.

When Del Toral sought to pass this information to higher-ups in July 2015, he was stonewalled. Del Toral gave Walters a copy of the report, the latter passing the information on to the ACLU. At this point, Del Toral was "silenced by an ethics officer" and prevented from communicating with any Flint residents. Walters recalled in her testimony that MDEQ official Liane Shekter-Smith "bragged" to her about the fact that Del Toral had been "handled."

In testimony introduced to the panel, Virginia Tech civil engineering Professor Marc Edwards stated, "How is it possible that the system designed to protect America's children from the best known neurotoxin [lead] in their drinking water, has betrayed us? The answer? Institutional Scientific Misconduct perpetrated by the US Centers for Disease Control [CDC], US Environmental Protection Agency [EPA], primacy agencies and water utilities." Continuing, Edwards stated, "[T]he very agencies paid to protect us not only failed to do so, but also revealed their callous indifference to the plight of our most vulnerable."

Edwards' testimony cites five falsified studies on the safety of drinking water produced by the two agencies dating from 2004 until the present. A 2010 report by the CDC is referred to as "an Orwellian rewrite of history... that claimed the conclusion of their 2004 report, [sic] was the exact opposite of what they actually wrote."

At the local level, MDEQ officials regularly lied to cover up the lack of anti-corrosion treatment

administered to the city's water as it switched from the DWSD to the Flint River. "They had no plan to protect people," said Edwards. Following this, Flint registered four National Primary Drinking Water Regulation violations in 2014 alone. Attempts to seek help at the local level were stonewalled, as MDEQ officials sought to blame the lead contamination on individual Flint residents.

Numerous House Democrats sought to present the causes of the lead poisoning in racial terms. "The common denominator is that the people affected by these policies are low income, and predominantly... people of color," said Stacey Plaskett, Democratic Representative of the Virgin Islands. Plaskett referred to the anti-democratic emergency manager law passed by Snyder in 2012 as allowing the state of Michigan to impose "overseers" upon cities like Flint. The assertion that lead poisoning is primarily a racial issue, which was made as Plaskett sat face-to-face with Walters, who is Caucasian, was particularly absurd.

Assiduously avoided was any mention of the connection between the crisis in Flint and the bankruptcy in Detroit, of which the effort to privatize the latter's utilities was a primary motivation for removing Flint from the DWSD. Instead, Democratic and Republican officials took turns shifting blame along partisan lines while making demagogic and empty gestures of contrition to the residents of Flint. "This is not supposed to happen, this is America!" exclaimed Chaffetz. The mutual finger-pointing and hand-wringing of the rival factions in Congress only serves to highlight the fact that the crisis in Flint is a political crime of which both big business parties, from Democratic President Barack Obama down to Republican Governor Rick Snyder and local officials, are complicit.

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