

Low-level officials face indictment in Flint lead poisoning crisis

By Shannon Jones
21 April 2016

The State of Michigan has indicted three low-level state and local officials on charges stemming from the lead poisoning crisis in the city of Flint. Michigan Attorney General William Schuette announced the charges Wednesday afternoon at a downtown Flint press conference.

The announcement reeks of damage control in the face of national and international outrage over the lead poisoning of residents in this city of 100,000, 70 miles north of Detroit. In 2014 the State of Michigan authorized Flint, then under a state-appointed emergency manager, to switch its water supply from the Detroit water system to the polluted Flint River. The city sent the corrosive Flint River water through the system without proper corrosion control, leaching lead and copper from the city's antiquated piping into homes, schools and workplaces.

The indictments received prominent treatment in both the regional and national press. Republican Governor Rick Snyder continues to face pressure from some Democrats to resign over the crisis in an attempt to defuse public anger and deflect attention from their own complicity in the poisoning of Flint.

Local residents, who were barred from the press conference, held a picket outside the venue. Several held signs calling for the prosecution of Snyder. For his part the governor, in response to the indictments, blamed "bureaucrats," continuing to deny any direct responsibility.

Two officials with the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) are named in the indictment. Stephen Busch, who was a district supervisor in the MDEQ Office of Drinking Water and Municipal Assistance, and Michael Prysby, a former MDEQ district engineer.

Also named is Michael Glasgow, laboratory and

water quality supervisor for the City of Flint. On April 17, 2014, just eight days before the switch to Flint River water, Glasgow sent an email to MDEQ official Adam Rosenthal warning that the city's water plant was not ready to begin treatment of Flint River water.

In his email Glasgow wrote, "I was reluctant before, but after looking at the monitoring schedule and our current staffing, I do not anticipate giving the OK to begin sending out water anytime soon." He continued, "If water is distributed from this plant in the next couple of weeks, it will be against my direction."

Glasgow said he never got a response, and his warning was apparently ignored by state officials.

In a CNN interview in March Glasgow said that Busch and Prysby told him to alter reports on lead in Flint water in 2015, removing the highest lead results. He said he did not have the power to overrule their decision.

Busch and Prysby are charged with misleading federal regulatory officials in the US Environmental Protection Agency, in particular EPA Region 5 official Miguel Del Toral, about the safety of Flint water. In addition they are charged with authorizing a permit to the Flint Water Treatment Plant knowing the facility "was deficient in its ability to provide clean and safe drinking water."

Further, the men are charged with "tampering with evidence" and "manipulating monitoring reports" in relation to the testing of lead levels in Flint water and failing to utilize corrosion control treatment at the Flint Water Treatment plant after the switch to Flint River Water.

Four of the charges are felonies carrying maximum prison sentences of four to five years. They have both pled not guilty.

Glasgow faces a four-year felony charge of

tampering with evidence related to the filing of altered reports on lead levels in the Flint Water System. He is also charged with a misdemeanor count of “failing to perform the duties of an F-1 Certified Operator employed by the Flint Water Treatment Plant,” presumably related to the lack of corrosion control additives.

In his remarks to the press Attorney General Schuette emphasized that his goal in filing charges was to restore public trust in government officials. He indicated that those charged will be removed from their current posts and that further indictments were likely to follow. Schuette suggested that his office would be open to plea deals with those indicted in exchange for cooperation in the investigation.

Responding to a question in relation to the charges against Glasgow a state official said that following instructions was not a defense for his actions, citing the Nuremberg war crimes trials of Nazi war criminals as precedent.

The most obvious question raised by the indictments is, what forces were behind the instructions to Busch and Prysby to falsify test results? The idea that the men indicted were alone responsible for the Flint tragedy is absurd. Evidence points to the involvement of officials at the highest levels of the state government and federal Environmental Protection Agency, who clearly knew of the dangers facing Flint residents, but covered them up.

The decimation of the US infrastructure has been presided over by Democratic and Republican administrations for decades, leaving former industrial centers like Flint in shambles and exposing residents to a wide range of environmental dangers. To this day serious reconstruction work on Flint’s piping system has not begun.

The anger of Flint residents was evident just outside the press conference. Gladys Williamson, one of those picketing, spoke with the WSWS. “I’m disappointed. Schuette shook my hand and looked me in the eye and said this is just a start.

“I told him these are crumbs! They are going after the people who covered it up, but what about the people who carried it out? They work harder to cover up the water crisis than what it took to create it! All the politicians are grandstanding. When three buses of Flint residents arrived in Washington, DC for the hearings in February, [Congressman Dale] Kildee was

in the room with us just long enough to get his photo op.

“What about Snyder, [Emergency Manager] Darnell Earley, [former Flint Mayor] Dayne Walling?”

Another Flint resident, Nakiya Wakes, said, “I’m really angry. I feel it was just the smaller people that got charged and took the rap. What about Snyder? He should be charged along with all the other elected officials. On February 11, 2016 I would have had two babies if I hadn’t miscarried drinking the contaminated water.

“I recently had my water tested by Water Defense. The water in my home showed 1,100/ppb. The MDEQ has been coming every two weeks to test my water and their tests showed 3/ppb.

“And what is even worse, the Water Defense testing shows a number of other contaminants in my water including elevated levels of copper, iron, manganese, nickel, phosphorus, thallium and zinc.”

Auston Healy, a 26-year-old worker from Flint told the WSWS, “It’s a bum deal. What happened to Snyder? I’m also concerned about this--what if someone wants to sue and the State of Michigan says that person no longer works for us?”

“Whether the charges stick or not, I’ll believe it when I see it. I would like to see no let up in this, but who knows. The main thing is they are trying to keep this quiet, especially on the federal level because the lead problem is everywhere. It came out in Flint, it was a very deliberate process because there is so much poverty here.”

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>