

Who's who in the Flint water crisis: Part one

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The Flint water crisis, in which an entire city of 100,000 inhabitants has been poisoned with dangerous amounts of lead and other deadly contaminants, is an indisputable crime of capitalism. The city, the site of the 1936-37 General Motors sit-down strikes, and once an international symbol of working class militancy and strength, has become a living embodiment of the ruling class's reckless disregard for the lives of workers in its toxic quest for financial gain. The poisoning of the city's population has created a tremendous public health catastrophe, the effects of which will be felt for generations to come.

Though officials at all levels of government have sought to whitewash their role in the affair, an examination of the major players in the crisis reveals a far-reaching conspiracy to force through a switch from a reliable water supply, with no regard for public health or safety, in the service of powerful financial interests. Once the devastating effects of the switch came to light, these same figures then engaged in a filthy cover-up, and sought to publicly smear those who fought to expose the truth.

The preparation for cutoff of the city's decades-long source of reliable drinking water and switching to the polluted Flint River required collusion of officials at multiple levels of government, including both Democrats and Republicans.

Genesee County Drain Commissioner Jeff Wright

The seeds for the Flint water disaster were embodied in the drive by Genesee County Drain Commissioner Jeff Wright to push for the creation of the Karegnondi Water Authority (KWA) and the KWA pipeline project.

Wright, a fixture of city politics for over 30 years, has a long and sordid history in the local Democratic political machine. After two failed attempts at becoming County Drain Commissioner, he succeeded in 2000. Certain improprieties in Wright's campaign were exposed, claiming endorsements in its advertising without permission. In 2005 he was accused of taking part in a money laundering scheme with Burton developer Blake Rizzo, who was at the time under investigation for insurance fraud and bribery. Though no charges were ever filed, Federal agents confiscated Wright's campaign finance documents from the Genesee county clerk's office. Two years later, Wright agreed to serve as an FBI informant against Sam Riddle, a Detroit political consultant whom Wright had hired to help marshal support for the KWA project. It was noted at the time that officials in Wright's situation rarely agree to serve as informants unless the FBI "has something" on them.

Wright campaigned heavily for the KWA, which would be tasked with building a water pipeline from Lake Huron to Genesee County, parallel to, and just six miles North, of the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department's (DWSD) pipeline that Flint had been using for half a century. Powerful financial interests hoped to profit handsomely from the cheap, untreated water that would flow through the new pipeline, which would be well-suited to industrial and fracking operations. Wright, who was also the CEO of the KWA, publicly insisted that the pipeline project would save the cash-strapped city of Flint millions of dollars over its lifetime.

The KWA had no intention, however, of addressing the needed upgrades to the archaic City of Flint water treatment plant, which was in no condition to handle a massively increased volume of untreated water, as it had been virtually mothballed for decades. As for Wright, the pipeline project would ensure that he, as the Genesee county drain commissioner, would wield enormous power over contracts worth hundreds of millions of dollars.

With some city officials skeptical of the project and questions lingering about how Flint would meet its water needs during the construction of the pipeline, Wright issued an ultimatum to the Flint City Council on March 18th, 2013, stating, "We're going to build the pipeline ... whether Flint's a partner or not."

Wright's strident declaration, like many of his claims relating to Flint's interest in signing with the KWA project, were largely bluster. One week later, the City Council voted 7-1 to disconnect from the DWSD's water system and switch to the KWA, committing to some 30 percent of its construction costs.

As Genesee County Drain Commissioner, Wright had authority over areas outside Flint and for those areas, he opted to remain in the Detroit system until the completion of the KWA pipeline rather than use Flint River water. In order to do this, because the county purchased its Detroit water indirectly, as a customer of Flint, Wright oversaw the purchase of a nine-mile-long section of existing water pipeline from Flint in 2014 for \$3.9 million.

Michigan Governor Rick Snyder

Michigan Republican Governor Rick Snyder continues to claim publicly that he had no knowledge of the developing disaster with Flint's water after the switch to the Flint River, and that he was the victim of misinformation from those under him. He also claims, despite all the evidence to the contrary, that the decision to change Flint's water source from the treated DWSD water they had been using for years to the polluted Flint River was a decision made by the city itself.

Snyder, a multi-millionaire who built his fortune as a venture capitalist and a technology executive, has presided over a deeply reactionary administration that has been at the forefront of the assault on workers' rights since his inauguration in 2011. His administration has presided over sweeping cuts in social benefits, health care, and education across the state. In regards to the latter, the effects of the cuts can be seen in the moldy, dilapidated, mushroom-infested cesspits that have become common in Detroit Public Schools.

While attempting to exercise "plausible deniability" throughout the Flint water crisis, Snyder's political agenda led directly to the disaster. As governor of Michigan, his primary undertaking has been to implement drastic cuts in social and public services and to change the laws to allow the state to override any legal obstacles to plundering public-sector workers' pensions and municipally-owned public assets. Snyder was personally at the head of engineering the forced bankruptcy of Detroit, using the system of unelected "emergency managers" he put in place.

That bankruptcy, which gutted city workers' pensions and benefits and privatized assets such as the Detroit Institute of Arts, has served as a

model for similar attacks across the country. The DWSD's loss of the Flint water contract—its largest suburban customer, accounting for 20 percent of its revenues—played into the hands of Snyder's co-conspirators in seeking to “monetize” and eventually privatize one of the country's largest water systems.

As the disastrous effects of switching the city's water supply became apparent, Snyder's administration engaged in a deliberate and calculated attempt to block and discredit scientific reports that revealed the horrific effect the water was having on the population. Snyder's office claimed that Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha, a pediatrician whose research revealed that blood lead levels in Flint children had spiked dramatically since the switch, had “spliced and diced” her data for “emotional” reasons, and it accused Dr. Marc Edwards, the Virginia Tech professor whose work exposed the hazardous lead levels in Flint drinking water, of “pulling a rabbit out of his hat.”

It was only after public outrage mounted over the crisis that Snyder was forced to respond, making the absurd claim that he only learned of the lead contamination in October 2015. This in spite of email records showing individuals high up in his administration engaged in tense discussions about the water quality for many months beforehand. Even then, his administration did not declare a state of emergency in the city until January 2016.

Since then, Snyder has put on a show of false contrition in a transparent attempt to obfuscate his criminal role in the affair. His mealy-mouthed apologies and carefully repeated assertions that “I let you down,” and “I kick myself every day,” are part of a deliberate effort to present his role in the crisis as a series of “mistakes” rather than calculated criminal activity.

Flint Emergency Manager Ed Kurtz

In August 2012, Snyder appointed Ed Kurtz as Flint's emergency financial manager. Kurtz, a former president of the private Baker College System, had previously served as the city's emergency manager a decade earlier, when he had been appointed to the position by then-Republican Governor John Engler. His tenure during this first “emergency” was defined by a slash-and-burn approach to gutting wages and benefits, which led to the elimination of health, dental and vision benefits for the majority of city officials, an 11 percent increase in water and sewer bills, a sharp reduction in retirement benefits for city employees, and a 4 percent municipal pay cut (the latter implemented with the assistance of the city's largest union).

No doubt Snyder's office saw in Kurtz a man well suited to the task of seizing control of the city's main asset—its water system—for the sake of financial interests.

Kurtz signed off on the City Council's decision to sever ties with the DWSD and begin purchasing water from the KWA in March 2013, ultimately choosing to purchase \$1 million more in water than the city regularly used. In response, the DWSD gave a one-year termination notice to the city in April, leaving the city with a significant gap between the end of its connection to Detroit water and the completion of the KWA pipeline.

In June 2013, Kurtz contracted the engineering firm Lockwood, Andrews & Newnam, Inc. to begin figuring out how to draw Flint River water as a primary drinking water source. This in spite of the fact that, according to a 2014 deposition by Kurtz's chief financial officer Jerry Ambrose, the emergency management team had rejected a plan to use Flint River water as a primary source in 2012, citing concerns by the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ).

Whatever reservations Kurtz's team may have initially had, he ultimately signed off on the plan to draw water from the Flint River, and he sent the plan to the State Treasurer for final approval.

Michigan State Treasurer Andy Dillon

With the mayor, the City Council, and the emergency manager on board with the KWA scheme, final approval rested with the Michigan state treasurer, Democrat Andy Dillon.

Dillon is a former business lawyer and venture capitalist who served as vice president at General Electric Capital and president of the Detroit Steel Co. Elected to the Michigan House of Representatives in 2004, Dillon quickly rose through the political ranks, becoming Speaker of the House in 2007. His tenure was defined by a number of bipartisan initiatives that expanded the reactionary attack on workers' benefits, while improving the financial position of major corporations. His signature achievement, the so-called 21st Century Jobs Fund, was a \$2 billion giveaway to tech firms and pharmaceutical corporations, and he attempted to cut public employee health care benefits statewide by consolidating them all into a single contract. Throughout his political career he has collaborated with Republicans to destroy workers' living standards in the interests of capital.

After a failed gubernatorial bid in 2010, Dillon accepted a position as state treasurer in the Snyder administration, making him the second most powerful political figure in the state. He played a leading role in the looting of Detroit's public assets during the 2013 bankruptcy, collaborating closely with Snyder and Detroit Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr to force through the restructuring and slash public employee wages and benefits.

Dillon was Kurtz' supervisor during the latter's tenure as Flint emergency manager, and his approval was required on all contracts that exceeded \$50,000. On April 15, 2013, Dillon signed off on the KWA project, giving final approval to the city's plan to cut ties with the DWSD. He has since claimed that he was unaware of the plans to draw water from the Flint River, stating, “I assumed they would work something out with Detroit,” to stay on the DWSD's system until the completion of the pipeline project. The DWSD publicly announced the one-year termination notice a mere two days after Dillon signed off on the KWA project.

In an internal email, Snyder's then-Chief of Staff Dennis Muchmore admitted that Dillon's actions made the state culpable in the affair, writing, “Dillon did make the ultimate decision so we're not able to avoid the subject.” The email was written on September 25, 2015, nearly a month before Snyder claims he became aware of the water contamination issues.

To be continued

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