

Boil advisory issued in Detroit following water system malfunction

By Kathleen Martin
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On Tuesday, February 28, the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD) issued a boil water advisory for Hamtramck, a working-class enclave of Detroit. The order was issued late in the evening, after what is being described as an “equipment malfunction” reportedly caused a temporary drop in water pressure which could lead to bacterial contamination.

The notice for Hamtramck, home of the now closed American Axle auto parts plant, was expanded on Wednesday, March 1 to include another enclave, Highland Park, and a large section of Detroit proper, including the downtown area. This meant that thousands of city residents and workers had been drinking water which could possibly make them ill throughout the morning and part of the day Wednesday without any warning from city officials.

“The Great Lakes Water Authority’s (GLWA) Water Works Park Water Treatment Facility experienced an equipment malfunction Tuesday evening, February 28, 2017, that caused low water pressure in the facility’s service area,” the notice stated.

“The Authority has addressed that malfunction and expects that normal pressure levels should be achieved within 24 hours. As a precautionary measure, GLWA recommended that the area south of McNichols to the riverfront and Linwood east to Conner in the city of Detroit, along with the cities of Hamtramck and Highland Park, be placed under a boil water advisory.”

A memo was sent to all of the employees of the Detroit Medical Center located north of downtown Wednesday morning warning them not to use tap water for any reason. “All staff, visitors and patients are advised to refrain from consumption of tap water (drinking, brushing teeth, etc.) or water from the drinking fountains. Additionally, refrain from using tap water for bathing.” Bottled water was provided to

patients and sterile water was brought in for use in procedures.

The Detroit water supply has been an issue of controversy in recent years following the 2013 municipal bankruptcy, in which DWSD was placed under the authority of the GLWA which is also in control of the Flint water supply that was tainted by lead in 2014.

Stephen Paraski, a laid off master plumber with 23 years of experience at DWSD and vocal opponent of the privatization of DWSD by the GLWA, spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* about the advisory and raised concerns about the official story. “The actual Water Works Park services a much larger area than what is indicated on that map released in the advisory,” he said. “Their service area reaches as far as Grosse Pointe Woods and Harper Woods.

“They’re saying it was a malfunction at the treatment plant. From my experience, from what I know, the only thing that could have happened to cause a bacterial contamination was human error. They released a batch of water that was not clean, was not safe. But that’s not surprising because [DWSD] fired all the chemists,” he said.

“If they’re saying that it’s bacteria, the only other way for that to happen would be if there was a huge main break. And if that were the case, there would be a huge excavation on Jefferson. A 72-inch main, at 70 psi [pressure per square inch]—that would wash everything into the sewer. Pressure would have had to drop, but we would have evidence of that because there would be a giant excavation,” Paraski said, which was not the case.

“At the southeast end of the Northeast treatment plant, you have a sewage tank and a pumping station. At Northeast, you could have a situation where

something happened to cause a bacterial infection from the sewage. But at Waterworks Park, there is no such sewer-pumping facility,” Paraski said, referring to the probability of bacterial contamination from raw sewage.

“Prior to the bankruptcy [of Detroit], you used to have to have a minimum of a four-year college degree to even be an associate chemist” at the water treatment facility, in charge of maintaining consumable water for the city. “Now they put candidates through a two-week training program and then call them chemists and pay them \$14 an hour to save money.”

While the advisory stated that residents would be notified when water was deemed consumable, likely Friday morning, Paraski indicated that it could be several more days until the water is safe.

“I’ve been telling friends and family not to drink the water until at least Monday. So what they did after the fact was probably over-chlorinated the next batch of water, which is the right thing to do, but if you drink that batch you’ll get an overdose of chlorine,” Paraski said.

“When Flint happened, I said, ‘Southeast Michigan is one switch away from the same problem,’” he noted.

“During the 1990s and early 2000s, we never would leave a customer without water. But now, people are left without water for days, weeks, months on end. It’s due to the cutbacks in personnel at DWSD. Frankly, when I left in 2015, nobody there knew how to do their job,” he said, referring to the lack of training and experience of the new low-paid workforce brought on by GLWA to cut costs and boost profits.

“It’s a shame that the local media isn’t all over this story, but they’re in a love affair with [Detroit mayor Mike] Duggan,” Paraski concluded.

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