

As officials end subsidies and resume water cutoffs

Michigan blames Flint water crisis on racism: Part one

By James Brewer
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This is the first part of a two-part article. The second part will be posted March 4.

The final report on the Flint water crisis released by the Michigan Civil Rights Commission (MCRC) seeks to conceal the real class interests that underlay this crime against the people of Flint. The timing of the report, February 7, is significant. It was released the same week that state and local officials announced that water bill subsidies would be ended by the end of the month, forcing residents to pay in full for water they still cannot drink, and that water service cutoffs would be resumed for those in arrears.

The content of the report represents a continuation of the half-truths and lies Flint residents have been fed since the lead-poisoned water began to be pumped into their homes. The contention of the 138-page report is that the water disaster in Flint was the result of “systemic racism,” yet no evidence is presented to substantiate this assertion.

However, the report serves a definite political purpose. As Flint residents both white and black are forced to pay their full bills for toxic water or face the loss of any water service, the official declaration that the Flint crisis is all about racism facilitates efforts to divide the working class and impede a united fightback.

The commission and its report

The panel of eight commissioners is an establishment group of ethnically diverse, politically-connected business professionals who were hand-picked by Governor Rick Snyder. Co-Chair Laura Reyes Kopack served as vice president of the Michigan Republican Party in 1991.

The commission’s document was over a year in the making. Three public hearings were held in Flint during 2016 as part of its preparation. Despite the claim that racism was at the root of the Flint water catastrophe, no evidence that the poisoning of the city’s water affected blacks more than whites was presented. The population of Flint is mixed. Approximately 57 percent are black and 37 percent are white, while 6 percent are of other ethnicities.

No evidence was produced that those who were responsible for switching the city to Flint River water without proper treatment or facilities in place had racial motivations. In fact, many of the key actors in the switch were black. Prominent at the ceremony on April 25, 2014 when the button was pushed to make the switch was Emergency Manager Darnell Earley and Flint Public Works Director Howard Croft, both of whom are African-American.

Yet the commission goes to great lengths to argue for its racist narrative. In its executive summary, after a few bullet points that sparsely outline what can be described as the official chronology, the commission dispenses with any need of a concrete examination of the facts behind the water crisis, stating:

“The Commission recognizes that there have been numerous articles, hearings, studies, reports and investigations into Flint’s water crisis... In each of these investigations, the focus has been on who should bear the blame, especially relating to decisions made and actions taken in the last two to three years. There are also numerous private law suits seeking to find liability and hold parties responsible.

“The Michigan Civil Rights Commission... believes that to properly and completely assess the causes of the Flint water crisis, we must look back much further. We believe the underlying issue is historical and systemic, and dates back nearly a century, and has at its foundation race and segregation of the Flint community. These historical policies, practices, laws and norms fostered and perpetuated separation of race, wealth and opportunity.” (Page 2.)

In other words, we will not dwell on the facts. The reason for this omission is not, however, innocent. The reason is that the facts do not substantiate the report’s basic premise and conclusion.

In its section on “Terms and Concepts,” an assertion similar to the one Hillary Clinton repeatedly and cynically made during her failed campaign for president appears: “... it is difficult to find anybody outside government who does not believe that at least some decisions would have been made differently if the community affected looked more like Birmingham and less like Flint.” (Page 12.)

This framing of the question conflates race and class. Birmingham, Michigan is one of the wealthiest communities in the US, and is over 90 percent white. This is a deliberate sleight of hand to obscure the class character of the events and give credence to the concepts of structural and spatial “racialization” that are heavily cited in the text.

It would be more to the point to ask whether different decisions would have been taken if the community affected looked more like prosperous, largely black upper-middle class communities such as Palmer Woods in Detroit and less like Flint.

The MCRC document poses a question: “... if we believe that race was not even considered by decision makers, how can we also believe that it played a role in the decisions they made? Research into how the human brain works suggests that race played a role in the Flint Water Crisis precisely because it was never considered. That it is so deeply entrenched in the very fiber of society that we have normalized what occurs in communities that are ‘primarily of color’ and poor.” (Page 14.)

This, of course, is a circular argument, using pseudo-science to justify a pre-conceived conclusion. It implies that one does not have to produce any factual evidence to substantiate your conclusion, since racism is hard-wired in the human brain and determines what [white] people do without their even knowing it.

One does not have to argue that racism played no role in the events in Flint to insist that it was not and is not the basic issue—that the poisoning

of an entire urban population, largely poor and racially mixed, was above all an outcome of the ever more glaring and pervasive class divisions in America and the particularly criminal and money-mad inclinations of the financial oligarchy that dominates US society.

The vacuous character of the report is expressed in the following passage: “We avoid the use of the word “racist” in this report. This should not be interpreted as a finding that it doesn’t apply. Rather, we believe that there is a lack [of] consensus on a common definition of the term. If racist is only used to describe a person who overtly discriminates based upon a belief in white supremacy, then we have not found evidence it applies here. However, if racist is defined to include anyone who does anything that could be considered racism, then the word could rightfully appear throughout this report. As we have said and will repeat, racism does not require malicious intent.” (Page 21.)

In other words, the commission reserves the right to declare actions “racist” that are not actually carried out by racists. According to the above definition of racist—“anyone who does anything that *could be considered racism*”—every man, woman and child on the face of the earth is a racist. Aside from its misanthropic content, this definition renders the term itself useless and meaningless from an objective standpoint.

What actually happened in Flint?

The removal of the city of Flint from its 50-year source of treated Lake Huron water provided by the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD) to draw water instead from the polluted Flint River was a product of deep-going economic processes that go unmentioned by the MRCR.

Flint was the birthplace of General Motors in 1908 and a major center of automobile production until the late 1980s. Huge factories employing tens of thousands shaped the life of the city. In the northeast of the city was a 235-acre complex called Buick City. Some 80,000 GM employees worked in Flint at its height, with good-paying jobs and benefits. Almost 300,000 people lived in Flint.

The deliberate corporate policy of deindustrialization hit Flint hard. Hundreds of thousands of jobs were wiped out, not just in Flint but across the country.

The American phenomenon called the “Rust Belt” included Michigan. In Flint, GM withdrew, leaving behind concrete slabs and toxic waste dumps. From once having one of highest standards of living in the country, the city became one of the nation’s poorest. The United Auto Workers union completed its transformation from a bureaucratically controlled defensive organization of the working class to a corporatist arm of the corporations and the state, working with GM to close plants, destroy jobs, slash wages and benefits and intensify the exploitation of the workforce.

The growth of poverty brought the associated evils of petty crime, drugs, disease. The population dwindled to 100,000. GM now employs only a few thousand in Flint.

The MCRC fails to mention the 2008-2009 collapse of the banking system resulting from the bursting of the housing market bubble. Widespread predatory lending based on the false promise of ever-increasing home values lured working families into gambling their futures on the market value of their homes. Millions lost their homes across the country, while the banks that had caused the crisis were bailed out by the federal government to the tune of trillions of dollars.

Bankers and speculators had to find new ways of generating profits under conditions of a drastically declining economy.

Bankruptcy became a vehicle of choice to enable capitalism to extract a higher rate of profit from the working class. Under the direction of Obama’s Auto Task Force, GM and Chrysler filed for bankruptcy, closing factories and laying off workers. More significantly, with the agreement of the UAW, contracts were pushed through that cut the wages

of all new-hires in half and slashed the benefits of the workforce.

The success of these attacks spurred the drive against public-sector workers. Michigan Governor Snyder transformed the existing emergency manager laws—even after they were overturned in a popular voter referendum—to enable the plundering of Detroit, particularly the massive DWSD water system that supplied Flint’s water. Under Detroit Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr, laws were passed allowing speculators to override previous legal protections and open up public assets to plunder by private interests.

During the Detroit bankruptcy eligibility trial in October, 2013, New York investment banker Kenneth Buckfire spoke for the financial speculators eyeing the water department, saying, “The only way is to sell it or privatize it. Several private equity firms have expressed interest, but only if they can charge higher rates.”

As a result of the corruption of Detroit officials, particularly under Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick, and increases in interest charges by the bondholders, water rates charged by the DWSD increased continually. In addition, between 2011 and 2012, Flint authorities tacked on their own increases, resulting in a 110 percent increase in residents’ water bills.

In Southeast Michigan, a “water war” had been brewing for years. The DWSD rate increases served as fuel for the campaign of Genesee County Drain Commissioner Jeff Wright to build a separate untreated water pipeline from Lake Huron just six miles to the north of the DWSD pipeline that delivered treated water to Flint.

Wright has been plotting this project—called the Karegnondi Water Authority (KWA)—since 2007. Though it is ostensibly a municipal water system, the \$300 million KWA construction project has already generated profits for private entities, specifically engineering firm L. D’Agostini & Sons with a \$24.6 million contract; American Cast Iron Pipe Company, contracted to produce 67 miles of pipe for \$84.1 million; Zito Construction Company, with a \$7 million contract to lay the pipeline; E&L Construction Group, \$11.78 million to build an intermediate pumping station; and of course the bondholders, who financed the operation and stand to make a healthy profit.

The attraction of the pipeline plan for state authorities was not, as is commonly asserted, that it would save the city of Flint money on its long-term water rates. Governor Snyder’s state treasurer, Andy Dillon, a Democrat, overrode the recommendations of a cost-basis study he contracted advising the state not to proceed with the project, and gave the project the go-ahead. The real attraction was the water—a commodity needed by everyone, rich or poor—as an investment opportunity.

Wright sold the plan, first to the state of Michigan, then to the city of Flint. While under state Emergency Manager Gerald Ambrose, a meeting of the Flint City Council was pressured into voting for the plan, even though the body officially had no authority to do so under Michigan’s emergency management law. Snyder and the state government wanted the local vote to absolve it of any responsibility if anything went wrong.

In its rapacious desire to move forward with the KWA, the state authorized the disconnection from DWSD water while the KWA pipeline construction had barely begun, choosing in the interim, since no plan was ever budgeted, to use the “free water” of the Flint River as the city’s water source.

In addition, despite warnings from the manager of the Flint water treatment plant that neither the personnel nor equipment were in place to properly treat the water, the response of state water quality authorities was that corrosion control treatment, the norm to prevent the erosion of pipes and leaching of metals, especially lead, into the water, would not be needed.

Very shortly after the switch, the criminal recklessness of this plan became clear to Flint residents, who were getting brown and smelly water from their taps.

The KWA pipeline was designed to deliver untreated water only to

Flint, just as it would to prospective commercial clients such as DTE Energy, which wanted water only for cooling its power plant and, as many speculate, hydrofracturing operations, which use mass volumes of raw water.

In all of Wright's calculations showing Flint saving money on water rates, there were no figures showing either the cost of connecting to the pipeline, or, more significantly, the investment that would be required to upgrade Flint's water treatment plant to process the KWA water. It is now estimated that it will take more than \$100 million and at least a year to get the plant in shape.

In the meantime, the people of Flint are still unable to drink the water from their taps, and it is still unknown how long it will be before the switch to KWA water will be completed.

In May of 2016, then-US President Barack Obama, the apotheosis of racial politics, appeared in Flint and expressed crudely and brutally the attitude of the ruling class to the city's residents, black no less than white, telling the people to drink the water and downplaying the horrific effects of lead poisoning.

Because it doesn't fit with its racist narrative, the MCRC report conceals the fact that the spontaneous reaction of Flint workers from the beginning of the water crisis was a series of protests that brought together blacks and whites. There was among the workers virtually no element of racial animosity. It was left to the media, the Democratic Party and certain left-liberal and pseudo-left organizations to attempt to inject that into the resistance. Even today, this effort has largely failed, which helps explain why the commission, fearing new eruptions of social protest, felt the need to double down on its racist narrative.

To be continued

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