

“After compromising our health, they want to kick us out of our homes”

8,000 Flint residents face foreclosure for failing to pay for poisoned water

By Jerry White
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More than 8,000 residents in Flint have received letters from the city threatening them with home foreclosures if they do not pay outstanding bills for water, which is still tainted with lead and other toxins. Seeking to squeeze \$5.8 million out of city residents, the letters said outstanding bills would have to be paid by May 19 or property tax liens would be issued that could result in residents losing their homes by March 2018.

The action is the latest offense against the largely working-class population in the former manufacturing center for General Motors, 60 miles north of Detroit. Residents in the city of 100,000 have fought a three-year battle against the lead poisoning of their water and the official cover-up of this criminal act by local, state and federal authorities.

The April 2014 switchover of the city’s water supply to the polluted Flint River, overseen by a governor-appointed emergency manager, was aimed at funneling more money to wealthy bondholders and furthering Republican Governor Rick Snyder’s efforts to privatize services, including public water systems. Untreated corrosives in the water leached lead from the city’s antiquated pipes into the water system. This led to the doubling and tripling of lead levels in blood samples taken from the city’s children. High lead levels can cause permanent neurological damage, and the water contamination has also been linked to at least 12 deaths from Legionnaires’ disease.

The letters threatening foreclosure were sent out last month, right after the Michigan state government stopped subsidizing water bills based on the specious

claim that lead levels had been reduced enough to comply with federal regulations. This coincided with the city government’s resumption of mass water shutoffs for unpaid bills.

Anticipating widespread opposition, city officials and police staged a provocation at an April 20 “town hall meeting” led by Democratic Mayor Karen Weaver, which resulted in the arrest and jailing of six Flint residents on charges ranging from misdemeanor disorderly conduct to felony assault of a police officer. Attorneys for the workers have told the *World Socialist Web Site* that no formal charges have been issued, but this could still happen.

While state officials have claimed that all is well, the city was forced to acknowledge last week that “up to 20,000 Flint residences still have lead and galvanized service lines that need to be replaced.” Even more significant, however, is that the city’s highly corroded water mains—to which residential homes are connected—are largely still in place.

“It’s terrible that we have to pay for water that is harming us in our homes,” Florlisa Fowler told the WSWS. Fowler is a life-long Flint resident who has been diagnosed with serious lung issues due to bacteria in the water. “We’re already scared for our health, and now we are going to be scared for our lives because they can take our homes and everything we’ve worked for. What’s going to happen to the children, to the elderly?”

Fowler said that like many residents she stopped using the city’s water but is still being charged for it. “My bill says ‘0’ usage, but I’m charged \$55 for

being hooked up whether I turn the faucet on or not.”

Debunking the claim that the crisis in Flint is over, Fowler said, “Governor Snyder and his PR people want people on the outside to believe that it’s all been fixed and everything’s okay. The federal and state government haven’t changed the infrastructure, just the lead lines into our homes. You could send bottled Fiji water through the crumbling water mains in this city and by the time it reached us it would be dirty with bacteria and metals,” Fowler said.

City officials have claimed the mailing of the letters was routine. “This has been happening for some time, but it has been kept secret,” Fowler said. “Now people are becoming aware. It’s horrendous to attach water bills to property taxes and force people to pay or lose their homes. After two years, a home with delinquent taxes can end up in the land bank and go into foreclosure. It’s known as a ‘land grab’ around here.”

Fowler said that last month’s arrests at the April 20 meeting were “all about intimidation.” She and others who have been active in opposing the poisoning of their families attended the meeting, which was supposed to be a public forum to air grievances and concerns to the mayor. “You go to a so-called town hall meeting and are confronted with tons of police wearing bullet proof vests. Then they arrested six people. The city’s message was: ‘Either you sit there quietly and stay in line—or else.’

“Why hold a public meeting in a church. I grew up in a church and am God-fearing and all the rest, but that is no place to meet and talk about politics—not in a church and a private place. Now Mayor Weaver is holding call-in ‘town hall’ meetings on an AM radio station to stifle our voices again, so they can pick and choose what questions and comments to take. It’s all about controlling the peoples’ voices.”

In a statement Wednesday, Mayor Weaver said that the city’s requests for payment on overdue water and sewage bills are in accordance with local laws, making it clear she would serve as the debt collector for the powerful financial interests that control the city’s municipal bonds. In an effort at damage control, she added, “I understand the concerns that have been raised, and I am working to see if any changes or something can be done to help those affected by this, especially given the extraordinary circumstances we have endured due to the water crisis.”

Fowler, the daughter of a General Motors autoworker, pointed to the corporate and financial interests that were behind this latest indignity. “This is happening to people who are already poor. I just found out that I live in the poorest zip code in the state of Michigan,” she said, referring to a recent survey of 2015 tax filings that showed the average income in Flint’s 48505 zip code was a meager \$20,350. “Now they want to take what little we have away.”

Last week, General Motors announced record first-quarter profits of \$2.6 billion, up 33 percent from last year. “Several of my neighbors are retired from GM. In the 2009 bankruptcy, GM got to pick and choose what properties to keep. They got rid of just about everything in Flint because of the pollution. They threw us away and discarded Flint after using us for generations. My father was a shop worker. There is only one shop left in the city. They got bailed out and got profits, and left us with nothing.

“As far as the politicians, they don’t help us. What Obama did when he came to Flint in 2016 was disgusting. I was in the first row with my children when he told us to drink the water—it was like a punch in the face. He’s doesn’t have to worry about his children having clean water to drink, bathe in or to cook with. He’s vacationing on yachts not worrying about toxic poisons in the water for him and his children.

“All the money Trump is spending on missiles could be used to send the Army Corps of Engineers to Flint and rebuild the infrastructure. We are living proof here in Flint that they don’t have their priorities right.

“It’s corporate interests over the best interests of the people. The corporate machine just keeps grinding. What is the UAW (United Auto Workers union) doing? Nothing. It’s all about the dollar—not the people. Back in the 1930s, people stood up to the corporations. There is too much inequality—it’s the haves and the have-nots. I believe there is going to be a tipping point and people are going to stand up again.”

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