

Flint: How much of the social crime does the film present?

Lifetime movie on the water disaster will air October 28

By Joanne Laurier
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On October 21 hundreds of Flint, Michigan residents attended the premiere of the Lifetime television network movie *Flint*, screened at the Whiting, a performing arts venue in the city 65 miles north of Detroit.

The fictional work, directed by veteran Australian filmmaker Bruce Beresford (*Breaker Morant*, *Tender Mercies*, *Driving Miss Daisy*), was inspired by the ongoing Flint water crisis and bases itself more immediately on a February 2016 *Time* magazine report, “The Poisoning of an American City.” It will be aired October 28 on the Lifetime cable channel.

The movie dramatizes the experiences of several of the women involved in the fight against the criminal poisoning of the city’s water supply. In attendance at the premiere were families who have experienced severe health issues and whose children have been afflicted by diseases, including lead poisoning, with innumerable and still unknown consequences. Legionnaires disease, which sickened close to 100 people, has killed at least 12 in Flint.

The continuing Flint crisis is a national scandal and disgrace, resulting from the combined effects of decades of deindustrialization, decaying infrastructure, budget cuts, corporate polluting and the complicity of governments at every level. “The residents of Flint are the victims of a social crime motivated by the mad pursuit of profit by wealthy investors and their politically-connected cronies,” as the WSWs explained earlier this year.

It is entirely appropriate that such a “social crime” be treated dramatically and brought to the attention of the widest possible audience. However, there is still the matter of *Flint*’s character and quality, what it chooses to examine and what it chooses to omit, how much of the social truth it reveals and how critical an attitude it adopts toward the existing political and economic set-up.

Given the nature of corporate-controlled American television one had every right to be skeptical.

In terms of the events themselves, the Flint water crisis began in 2014 when the state-appointed emergency manager (in place because of the beleaguered city’s debt crisis) severed the city’s water system from Detroit, its water source for the previous 50 years. Flint began drawing water from the polluted Flint River associated with a privatization scheme called the Karegnondi Water Authority (KWA), whose pipeline was not yet ready, and promoted as a cost-saving measure.

In gross violation of federal law, no corrosion control measures were implemented in the switch. Large financial interests were behind the KWA. In April 2014, the same month the city changed to the Flint

River, KWA sold \$220 million in bonds to more than 30 investors, including JPMorgan Chase, Wells Fargo and firms that played key roles in the 2013 bankruptcy of Detroit.

The lack of corrosion control in Flint’s outmoded and inadequate water treatment plant allowed lead to leach from pipes into the water supply. The water being delivered from the Flint River was fetid, foul-smelling and poisoned, and residents were being made ill. Nonetheless, both Democratic and Republican officials and their agencies, such as the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), conspired to cover up and deny the water crisis.

So contaminated was the water that in October 2014, auto giant General Motors, whose long-term dumping practices were largely responsible for the pollution of the Flint River, stopped using it due to corroding engine parts.

Although Flint’s water system was switched back to Detroit in October 2015, its residents, overwhelmingly working class, continue to suffer the effects of the profit-driven crisis: ill health, devastating medical costs, inflated water bills and the collapse of their home values.

The characters in Beresford’s television film include composite figures and actual leaders of the protest. The drama revolves around four women, LeeAnne Walters (Betsy Brandt), Melissa Mays (Marin Ireland), Iza Banks (Queen Latifah) and Nayyirah Shariff (Jill Scott). The movie depicts the Flint community’s growing awareness that the water supply is contaminated, and its protest and mobilization in response.

Melissa tells her children at one point that “water doesn’t go bad.” But when she suffers a seizure, she organizes her family to protest at Flint’s water treatment plant. Her children are also adversely affected by the water.

In a key scene, Iza expresses shock that her water bill has jumped from \$90 to \$210, a more than 200 percent increase for water that’s actively harming her family and everyone else. (The audience at the Whiting in Flint responded strongly to this!) Iza’s daughter, Adina (Lyndie Greenwood), loses a baby to a miscarriage as a result of the toxic water.

Popular anger grows and city hall meetings become explosive. The complacent and indifferent emergency manager, who claims that switching the water back to Detroit is financially prohibitive, is shouted down. “If we were a rich community we would not have a problem,” is the general consensus of a population who call themselves the “Flintstones.”

Bottled water becomes scarce and expensive. Having had to

previously boil their water due to an E. Coli contamination, the residents are now told that boiling dangerously concentrates lead. LeeAnne states that bottled water and taking showers at the homes of out-of-town friends is the “new normal.” Iza points out that there was a time when women were given lead pills for birth control!

Pediatrician and public health advocate Mona Hanna-Attisha (Sonia Dhillon Tully) is appalled. “You’re telling me that they put lead in the water” of a population 40 percent of whom live below the poverty line, she exclaims.

Eventually, EPA official Miguel Del Toral (Juan Carlos Velis) sounds the alarm and Dr. Marc Edwards (Rob Morrow), from Virginia Tech, an expert on water treatment and corrosion who previously investigated elevated lead levels in the Washington D.C. water supply, is brought in to test Flint’s water. Journalist Curt Guyette (Harry Judge), an investigative reporter for the ACLU in Michigan, explains that Flint’s water is the “canary in the coal mine.”

Flint residents are disgusted when they learn that Detroit authorities offered their city a 40 percent discount as an incentive to switch its water supply back, putting the lie to the claim that using the Flint River and the KWA pipeline would save money.

Flint’s last scene depicts the “victory” of getting the state government to relent and switch Flint back to Detroit’s water supply. Further, there will be bottled water distribution. According to the movie’s postscript, the only official who faces criminal charges is Michigan Department of Environmental Quality District Supervisor Stephen Busch. (Now, more than a dozen relatively low-level officials face charges.) The title also explains that some 18 million Americans live in 5,300 communities where the water systems are in violation of the law.

While there are some touching and disturbing moments in *Flint*, the film as a whole is a pale reflection of the crisis and a whitewashing of the political establishment. No Democratic or Republican politicians are named, none of the Wall Streets thief/investors are indicted. And the profit system as a whole goes unscathed.

Interestingly, for reasons that are not entirely clear but can be guessed at, while President Barack Obama appears in a video clip in the television film’s *official trailer* as a defender of the Flint population, the clip of Obama is absent from the final film. It is certainly shameful that the filmmakers could not find the political fortitude to include Michigan Republican Governor Rick Snyder, one of the chief criminals in this affair, as a character in their work.

When the full extent of the Flint health atrocity became known to a wider public in the fall and winter of 2015, there was genuine outrage. One minor but notable example were pop singer Cher’s tweets in early 2016 terming Snyder a “murderer” and urging that he be jailed or even face a “firing squad.” This gave vent to the general feeling that innocent residents had been preyed upon and victimized by uncaring corporations and government officials. Cher was the instigator of the project that became the Lifetime movie.

It is significant that one of the more poignant sequences in the film lies outside its main body. In a brief documentary-footage epilogue, the real Melissa Mays and another victim, Nakiya Wakes, briefly refer to the ongoing nature of the problem.

Last month, Wakes, who miscarried twins in 2015, was interviewed by the WSWS. She explained that her water was still lead-poisoned: “For more than three years we are still using bottled water. We use it to cook, bathe and drink. I think I will be on bottled water for the rest of my stay in Flint. I will not drink this water again, ever. Even when they change these pipes which won’t be until 2020, I will not feel

safe. They lied to us too long and I do not trust the government, not Governor Snyder, no one...

“It’s all about the dollar, it’s all about the money. We are on the biggest fresh water lake but we still cannot get fresh, clean water coming through our pipes. They call this ‘Pure Michigan,’ but we have been pure poisoned. Everybody involved, I think, should be incarcerated. Everybody should be held accountable for their action. I have lost two babies. The doctors can’t tell us if these young girls drinking [the water] have had their reproduction system messed up. Will they ever be able to have babies?”

Very little of this outrage and insight finds expression in Beresford’s film. It is deliberately narrow both in its timeframe—the period during which the Flint River was the city’s primary drinking water source (April 2014–October 2015)—and its social focus. *Flint* essentially adheres to the establishment’s admonition in the wake of every catastrophe that takes place in America that no one should “play the blame game,” i.e., that the responsible parties must not be named or prosecuted.

Those include both Republican and Democratic politicians, among them Snyder and Obama, who acted with callousness during a brief visit to Flint in May 2016, essentially dismissing the health hazards. The Lifetime movie’s politics are no great surprise. Producers Neil Meron and Craig Zadan are staunch Democratic Party supporters and endorsed Hillary Clinton in 2016. The ultra-conventional media personality Katie Couric is another executive producer. She winds up the movie with a fund appeal for the United Way, as though charity were the way out of the deadly crisis.

Flint is made loosely along the lines of the typical Lifetime television movie. It is a rather bland and tepid picture of “female empowerment” and ultimate “triumph.” From the film: “If this country doesn’t listen to a couple of white ladies, we’re screwed.” While a number of the lead performers obviously threw themselves into the project (including Ireland and Brandt, who comes from nearby Bay City, Michigan), *Flint* as a whole proceeds routinely and without inspiration.

On the other hand, people in Flint are clearly looking for something more potent. Distributors of the WSWS Flint newsletter received an especially warm response with their call for a socialist solution to the Flint water crisis.

Given the fact that *Flint* poses no threat, the Democratic Party of course is trying to cash in on it. Screenings have been held in New York and on Capitol Hill in Washington. The latter was attended by Flint’s Democratic congressman Dan Kildee and Democratic senator from Michigan, Debbie Stabenow. Melissa Mays was present, providing the politicians with a photo opportunity. Following the screening, Mays observed to the media that “today is day 1,278 since we’ve had clean water.” The politicians carefully ignored that comment.

The angry, incisive drama about the Flint water crisis has yet to be made.

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