

Democratic mayor holds sham community forum on Flint water crisis

By Will Morrow
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Karen Weaver, the Democratic mayor of Flint, Michigan, held a fraudulent community “forum” on the evening of February 1 at Mott Community College to provide residents with an “update” on the almost four-year-long crisis of lead poisoning in the city’s water supplies.

The meeting was a stage-managed publicity stunt for Weaver and AECOM, the multinational engineering corporation that is overseeing the replacement of water pipes in the city. Residents hoping to have their questions answered about their water were informed there would be no opportunity for them to speak or raise questions. Armed police officers were stationed at the inner and outer entrances to the meeting hall as a signal to those present that protests would not be tolerated.

No doubt the majority of those in attendance recalled that a similar forum organized by Weaver in April of last year resulted in the arrest of six residents. Many had likely also seen the viral Facebook video of Kentucky resident and former retired coalminer Gary Michael Hunt being choked and arrested by a law enforcement officer during a similar community meeting on January 10. Hunt had protested against the failure of authorities to take any action to ensure the supply of clean water for the town’s residents.

Approximately 100 people out of a total population of 100,000 in Flint attended the meeting. A significant portion, however, were private employees of AECOM, and political operatives of the city council, planted throughout the audience to applaud at the appropriate moments. Given the magnitude of the catastrophe that the Flint population has suffered due to the criminal decision by local and state officials to switch the city’s water supply to the polluted Flint River in April 2014, the low turnout was itself an indication of the lack of

confidence on the part of Flint residents in state and local authorities.

Weaver opened the meeting by contemptuously declaring that she hoped residents would “take note that we are making progress.” She continued, “While we may not be where we want to be, we’ve come a long way in the last two years.”

The reality is that three years after the poisoning of Flint’s water came into the public spotlight, only 6,200 of the city’s estimated 30,000 lead water pipes have been replaced.

The decision to switch the city’s water supply was the product of a conspiracy involving leading Democratic and Republican politicians in the state including the city’s emergency financial manager, Darnell Earley, Republican Governor Rick Snyder, former Democratic State Treasurer Andy Dillon and Flint’s Democratic mayor. Authorities were aware as early as April, 2015 that the water was not being treated to prevent corrosion, meaning that lead leached from the lead pipes, contaminating the city’s water.

Officials at the state and local level of both parties, as well as the Obama administration’s Environmental Protection Agency, worked systematically to cover up the complaints and protests by workers and scientific researchers about instances of hair loss and rashes from drinking the water.

It was only due to the determined efforts of residents that this social crime was revealed. An untold number of people, including small children, have been irreparably damaged with lead poisoning, which can cause permanent brain damage. Obama himself famously came to Flint and instructed the local residents to drink the water, declaring that the “kids will be just fine.”

To add insult to injury, city residents are being forced

to battle efforts by the Snyder administration to use reports of improvements of water quality in certain areas to justify ending the distribution of bottled water to households in the city. Weaver cynically told the forum, “If I had it my way—and I don’t—we’d keep the [water] pods open until we had all the lead service lines replaced.”

Weaver spoke barely two months after surviving a recall vote triggered when almost 9,000 residents signed a petition calling for her removal. Weaver was elected in November 2015 on the basis of a pledge to rapidly resolve the water crisis, but she has led a stepped-up assault on the working class population of Flint, including threatening to shut off water of residents who have not yet paid bills for water that was poisoned.

The remainder of the forum was billed as an opportunity to “introduce” AECOM, one of the largest engineering corporations in the world, with a market capitalization of \$5.58 billion. Last December, AECOM won the \$5 million contract to oversee the tendering process to determine which private corporation will carry out the replacement of lead water pipes in the city. In one of the most insulting moments of the meeting, residents were asked to applaud the AECOM representatives who had been asked to stand up.

What followed was a series of smug remarks by project managers, executives and public relations spokesmen. After residents had been prevented from asking any questions about the current state of the water and the government’s response, Joseph Moss Jr., the senior vice president of AECOM, concluded with the pledge that the company would return on May 31 to provide residents a “status update.”

Workers could be seen shaking their heads throughout the meeting. Several made comments to those sitting nearby, such as, “he didn’t say a thing,” and “trust us!”

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to workers outside the meeting and distributed leaflets advertising an upcoming Socialist Equality Party public meeting, which will include participation of workers in Flint, Kentucky and Puerto Rico, where more than 450,000 residents are still without running water, five months after hurricane Irma, and then Maria. The meeting will provide a forum to discuss a socialist strategy to

mobilize the working class to ensure the right to clean and safe water along with other basic social rights.

A worker who attended the forum drew the parallel between the situation confronting Flint workers and those faced by residents in Kentucky. “They’ve got a problem with water there too,” she told the WSWS. “Now they have to beg for water. It’s this horrible life where you have to beg for water. They [the government] know they need clean water.”

The worker denounced the proceedings of the sham forum. “They hold these little meetings,” she said. “It’s like, no, stop trying to have these meetings to push the fact that the water is good when it is not. The pipes aren’t even fixed and they’re talking about how good the water is. How does that even begin to make sense?”

“Not even half the water pipes are fixed or replaced. Now they’ve even cut down the amount they were originally going to fix. That’s what this really is all about, how they can cut corners and make it appear in a good light.”

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