

Five years since the poisoning of Flint's water supply: Part one

By James Brewer
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This is the first article in a two-part series drawing a balance sheet of five years of the water crisis in Flint, Michigan.

April 25 marked the fifth anniversary of the Flint, Michigan water crisis. On that day in 2014, the mayor of Flint, Michigan, Dayne Walling, ringed by a coterie of state and local officials, pushed the button that disconnected the city from its reliable source of treated drinking water. For 50 years, the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department (DWSD) had supplied Flint's water directly from its Fort Gratiot Treatment Plant on the shores of Lake Huron through a 65-mile pipeline capable of delivering 400 million gallons each day.

With that fateful act, improperly treated water drawn from the polluted Flint River began to surge through the city's lead-lined pipes. The water was acidic, and because it was not treated to control corrosion of the pipes, in violation of federal safe drinking water requirements, lead and other particulates leached into the tap water of homes and businesses. Residents immediately protested against the murky and smelly water coming from their faucets.

The water was so corrosive that the General Motors engine plant—one of the few remaining GM facilities in the city—quietly switched back to Detroit-supplied water after only five months, having discovered that auto parts surfaces were being eaten away and no longer fit properly. No such concern was shown for the damage being done to the skin, lungs and brains of men, women and children in the largely working class and low-income city. The city's residents were not officially informed of GM's switch back to Detroit water, and state and local officials continued to answer their protests about the tap water with lies, claiming that the water complied with federal standards and was perfectly safe to drink.

Meanwhile, more and more Flint residents were developing rashes, breathing problems and other illnesses.

The poisoning of a population

Flint's population, some 100,000 people, including 9,000 children, was poisoned for 18 months before the official lies were exposed and the city returned to its original water source. During that time, Flint's water infrastructure was progressively eaten away from the inside. The long-term health consequences of the protracted exposure to lead and other toxins are incalculable.

Lead is a highly dangerous neurotoxin that can attack any system in the body when ingested, even in low dosages. Once in the system, it cannot be removed. It can stunt growth and cause neurological damage, leading to emotional and behavioral issues in children, who are the most vulnerable to lead poisoning due to the rapid development of their bodies.

The use of polluted water and the lack of corrosion control were also responsible for one of the largest outbreaks in US history of Legionnaires' Disease, a deadly respiratory illness. In Flint, nearly 100 people were sickened and 13 died from the disease. A recent study suggests that some of the 119 deaths attributed to pneumonia during the time the city relied on Flint River water were likely due to undiagnosed

Legionnaires' Disease.

The lead poisoning caused as many as 276 miscarriages, according to a 2017 study. Lead has been known to be detrimental to pregnancy and has historically been used to abort unwanted pregnancies. The fertility rate in Flint fell by 12 percent, according to the same study.

Adults and children were sickened in countless other ways, suffering from diseases of the digestive, endocrine, renal and immune systems, as well as the heart and lungs.

Flint and GM's war on workers

What made matters worse was the widespread poverty in Flint, the result of the city's abandonment by General Motors. The former center of GM's auto empire, the city has been turned into an industrial wasteland, pockmarked by toxic waste dumps where booming factories once stood.

General Motors was founded in Flint in 1908. The city had already acquired the nickname "Vehicle City" from decades of production of horse-drawn wagons in the latter part of the 19th century. In the year of GM's birth, the first Model T Fords were being produced in Detroit.

The 1936-37 Flint sit-down strike, led by socialist-minded militants, forced the world's biggest industrial company at the time to grant recognition to the United Auto Workers, opening the floodgates for a wave of sit-down strikes and militant class battles that in the space of a year forged the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and established industrial unions in auto, steel, rubber, electrical, communications and other basic industries.

GM's operations grew in Flint after World War II until the 1970s. The giant Buick City factory complex brought the city's population to 200,000 at its peak.

But the breakdown of US global economic dominance, sharply reflected in the decline in market share of the US "Big Three" auto makers and the rise of European and Asian competitors, produced a brutal escalation by the auto giants of their war against the workers. Beginning in the late 1970s, GM, Chrysler and Ford carried out a wave of plant shutdowns and mass layoffs, accompanied by wage cuts and speed-up. In this offensive, the companies had the full support and collaboration of the UAW, which virtually abandoned the strike weapon and helped impose the companies' demands for concessions on the basis of a nationalist and corporatist program of defending "American jobs" by making the US auto corporations more competitive against their overseas rivals.

The number of GM employees in Flint has gone from 80,000 in 1979 to 8,000 today. GM's scorched earth policy left the city financially insolvent. This was seized upon by state and local officials to appoint so-called "emergency managers" to implement the bankers' program of austerity and the looting of public assets.

A man-made public health disaster

The wall of lies that was erected against the demands and protests of Flint residents finally tumbled in late summer 2015, when residents allied

themselves with scientists to prove their case. LeeAnn Walters, a Flint mother of twin boys, would not accept the claim of water officials that the medical diagnosis of lead poisoning in one of her boys was due to lead being introduced into tap water by the pipes in her own house. She knew better, since all the pipes in her home had been replaced when she purchased it.

With the help of Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Region 5 water expert Miguel Del Total, who had been muzzled by his superiors at the EPA, she turned to Professor Marc Edwards, who headed the civil engineering department at Virginia Tech University and had been instrumental in exposing the lead-in-water crisis in Washington DC some 10 years earlier.

Edwards assembled a team of trained student volunteers who traveled over 500 miles to Flint to organize an independent sampling of the city's water, obtaining the participation of some 300 intensely concerned residents. The results revealed "a serious lead-in-water problem," with 90 percent of the homes tested showing almost double the "action level" mandated by EPA regulations.

Flint pediatrician Mona Hanna-Attisha responded to the crisis by carrying out a study of Flint children's blood-lead levels (BLLs), to determine the harm that had been done. Dr. Hanna-Attisha's study showed that the number of Flint children with elevated BLLs had doubled during the period that Flint River water was used.

The exposure of the Flint water crisis shocked the world. Flint became a symbol of the indifference and rapacity of the government and big business toward the working class.

Who is to blame?

The Flint River was the city's water source for 18 months, until October 8, 2015. Residents had been protesting and fighting over the water for virtually that entire time period. The questions that millions asked about the Flint catastrophe included:

- How was it possible that such a reckless and irresponsible decision could be made, depriving 100,000 citizens of their safe source of water?
- How was it that the agencies tasked with overseeing and monitoring water safety not only failed to do their job, but deliberately falsified testing and lied to the public about the state of the water?

In 2016 and 2017, Michigan Attorney General Bill Schuette filed criminal indictments against 15 state and local officials. At a Flint press conference in April, 2016, Schuette declared that the prosecutions had the sole purpose of obtaining justice for the people of Flint. However, hearings proceeded at a snail's pace, making it clear that the prosecutions were an electoral stunt designed to boost Schuette's 2018 run for governor, which proved unsuccessful.

As it presently stands, seven of those indicted have plea-bargained to misdemeanor charges. The cases of eight defendants are in abeyance due to the shift in control of the state house from the Republican administration of Rick Snyder to the Democratic administration of Gretchen Whitmer.

The *World Socialist Web Site* produced a series of articles in May, 2016 titled "Who's who in the Flint water crisis," which presented sketches of 13 of the major known players. Below are some of those examined:

Genesee County Drain Commissioner Jeff Wright

A Democrat, Wright established the Karegnondi Water Authority (KWA) in 2009 to realize his long-planned project of building a new pipeline from Lake Huron. The decision by the state in 2013 to allow Flint, a city under the quasi-dictatorial control of state-appointed emergency managers, to commit to 33 percent of the KWA's \$285 million construction cost for a new untreated water pipeline was economically irrational and driven by fraud and greed. Wright's scheme relied on Flint using its long-dormant water treatment plant to treat the raw water that would be delivered through the pipeline. It never included

any proposal to make the necessary overhaul to the plant—with a price tag likely above \$100 million.

Today, despite the disastrous consequences of the KWA scheme for the people of Flint, Wright has his pipeline, which supplies untreated water for agricultural and industrial purposes in rural regions in Genesee, Lapeer and Sanilac Counties. The wealthy bondholders who backed him are raking in money as a result of a thirty-year deal signed two years ago by Flint's Democratic mayor, Karen Weaver, with the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department's successor organization, guaranteeing a \$7 million annual payment to the KWA bondholders.

Wright has not been charged with any crime.

Former Governor Rick Snyder

The governor who presided over the poisoning of Flint is a multi-millionaire Republican and former venture capitalist. His administration redrafted the state's emergency manager law to establish de facto dictatorial rule over economically depressed municipalities in order to "monetize" (plunder) their assets and slash the jobs, wages, pensions and social services of their working-class residents. He claims to this day that he was unaware of problems with Flint's water until 18 months after the switch.

Snyder has not been charged with any crime.

Former Flint Emergency Manager Ed Kurtz

Appointed by Snyder in 2012, he served until August 2013. He signed the contract committing Flint to the KWA deal and sanctioned the use of the Flint River as the water source pending completion of the KWA pipeline.

He has not been charged with any crime.

Former State Treasurer Andy Dillon

Dillon was the Democratic speaker of the Michigan House of Representatives before being appointed state treasurer by Snyder. A former business manager and venture capitalist, he assisted in drafting Public Act 4, the redraft of the emergency manager law that provided the legal cover for wealthy financial interests to plunder municipal assets. He authorized signing Flint onto the KWA pipeline project, even though the financial feasibility report he himself contracted deemed it inadvisable and the Detroit water system had made a new offer that would have saved \$800 million, making it 20 percent less expensive than the KWA proposal.

He has not been charged with any crime.

Former Flint Mayor Dayne Walling

Another Democrat, Walling was an ardent promoter of the KWA and served as its first president. He pushed the button to begin drawing water from the Flint River.

He has not been charged with any crime.

Environmental Protection Agency Region 5 Administrator Susan Hedman

Appointed by Obama in 2010 to head the Midwest division of the EPA, which includes Michigan, Hedman was responsible for muzzling field expert Del Total and suppressing his concerns that the Snyder administration in Lansing was lying to the EPA and the public about the water samples and the lack of corrosion control.

She has not been charged with any crime.

Former UAW Region 1-C Director Norwood Jewell

Jewell, who between 2010 and 2014 was UAW Region 1-C director, covering Flint, pled guilty last month to taking tens of thousands of dollars in bribes from Fiat Chrysler to push through the sellout 2015 contract after he became vice president of the union in charge of its Chrysler department. In Flint, he became known as a major political player and gave the UAW's endorsement and financial backing for Democrat Dayne Walling, a promoter of the KWA scheme, to become mayor. In March of 2013, Jewell pitched the KWA to the Flint City Council as a "dollars and cents" issue, arguing that the city should no

longer allow itself to be held hostage by Detroit.

To be continued.

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