

“This is corruption, collusion, conspiracy”

Newark, New Jersey residents denounce Democrats over lead-poisoned water

By our reporters
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Newark, the largest city in New Jersey, is facing a water crisis of historic proportions due to an outdated and poorly maintained water delivery system to both public and private buildings which has been leaching lead into the drinking water.

The problem has matured over at least a decade with a wide-ranging cover-up and corruption in the management of the city’s water authority by city and state Democratic Party politicians.

Blood tests have verified that a significant percentage of children in Newark have been exposed to lead, a strong neurotoxin. Even small amounts in the bloodstream can cause lasting damage, especially in young children, whose brain development can be impaired. Nearly a quarter of children under six in the city have tested positive for potentially harmful levels of lead in their blood, while 47.2 percent of Newark household taps tested exceed the action level for lead set by the Environmental Protection Agency.

Authorities have traced the source of the heavy metal to corrosion in the citywide network of transmission pipes, some of which date back to the 1880s, combined with failures to control the problem through chemical treatments at the Pequannock Water Treatment Plant. Tens of thousands of homes in Newark and neighboring communities receive their water from the Pequannock system.

Democratic Mayor Ras Baraka and New Jersey’s Democratic Governor Phil Murphy have downplayed the extent of the crisis. The city initially refused to release information about the extent of the danger. It was not until last October that the city, amid a lawsuit by the environmental group National Resources Defense Council (NRDC) and the Newark Education

Workers Caucus, began distributing filters to residents.

Last week the city began handing out cases of bottled water after it was revealed that the filters were not removing lead from the water. On Tuesday city officials were forced to temporarily suspend the distribution of bottled water out of fear that cases labeled as “expired” would further increase the high level of social anger.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to residents at a water distribution point, located in a city health center, who expressed outrage over the poisoning of their drinking water.

Lisa, a former healthcare worker, pointed out the lies of Mayor Baraka and Governor Murphy. “The mayor pretty much said it was just in the schools. But it wasn’t just in the schools. That’s how the NRDC got involved. [The water lead level] is now higher than in Flint, Michigan. It’s now at 77 parts per billion. That’s a spike of 60 percent from 2017 to now.”

While such high levels have not yet been reported by the the city this year, the NRDC reports that testing in 2017 found five addresses where lead levels exceeded 50 parts per billion and one address where it was 137 parts per billion, nine times the federal limit.

“It’s a health emergency. This is corruption, collusion, conspiracy. The governor is now in India. And he tells people at a press conference, we should ‘hang in there.’ That’s your plan, governor? We should ‘hang in there’ while babies have elevated blood lead levels?”

“Giving two cases of water out is not a plan to address a systemic problem. This all came from the corrosion from three years ago, that they didn’t do anything [about], and now it’s affected our entire

system. Let me just say this: We are suffering in our country.”

“It’s going to be solved when people start coming into the streets and being outraged,” Lisa concluded.

Douglas, who had also come for bottled water, observed that the politicians served the corporations, not the workers. “The mayor himself is to be blamed. If it is not about downtown Newark, they don’t care about you. Downtown, that’s where the bank headquarters are.”

Joy, a mother with two kids, was astonished to learn that the water she has been cooking with was poisoned.

“I’ve been using this water to cook for my kids for years,” she said. “We’ve been drinking bottled water, but no one told me that I couldn’t cook with it, and now I’m shocked. I’ve been feeding my kids poisoned water all this time! What can we do about this, how can we fight back?”

Joy’s 12-year-old daughter, Joanne, spoke about her concerns over the safety of the water in her school, “They don’t give you bottled water and they say that the fountains are safe to drink, but I don’t drink it. I’m too scared.”

Water bills are devastating workers’ finances for the service of delivering lead-contaminated water even as they must purchase bottled water in order to survive.

Hilda, for example, an elderly resident who lives alone, arrived at the center to pick up bottled water with her son and showed the WSWS her water bills from the last two months. One had a charge of \$161 and the next month was for \$434. She explained that she had her house checked for a water leak and the serviceperson could not find one. Hilda said she was barely able to make ends meet with her meager budget, “I only have my Social Security and my pension.”

Her son noted: “If you don’t pay the bill, they turn off your water. But it’s like, what water? It’s lead. We have to go to Walmart to see if we can get the five-gallon [container] of water for cooking, for making coffee. Look, I spent 20 bucks on water. Is the city going to discount me? Even people that live in apartments who pay their rent have to pay part of their water bill. You may be stuck with a \$120 water bill.

“The school I attended where I grew up was closed. And then we were thinking, ‘Were we drinking lead water that whole time?’” he explained. “Imagine all the babies that have drank that contaminated water.”

Derrick, who is scraping by on disability pay, hauled two cases of water with him on a shopping cart. “We have to walk here to get water. We can’t drink the water from the city pipes. I remember they were informing everyone that the water was OK, but it was not. Before it was in the schools. Now it is in the households. It isn’t like they don’t have the money to straighten this out. They are killing people, children, innocent babies.”

Asked where the blame for the crisis lies, Derrick replied: “It is on both parties. Just because I am a Democrat, I am not putting it on just the Republicans. It makes me not want to vote anymore. I feel like I couldn’t care less. They don’t care about helping us.”

Residents repeatedly noted the parallel to the poisoning of the water system in Flint, Michigan five years ago.

One young mother explained: “The water filter isn’t doing a damn thing! It’s been going on since 2017. That’s how long I’ve had a filter. I have a baby and I’m pregnant. I’m scared for my children. We are going to come back to get more water. It’s not only happening here. It’s been happening in Flint for years.”

“The water needed to be fixed up for years,” said Ethel, who came to the health center with her grandson. “They knew about it. There are babies, new babies, who are being harmed. Baraka was lying. It is the same here as the problem in Michigan.”

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