

“You can’t trust the government”: Flint, Michigan residents speak out on Newark water crisis

By Sheila Brehm
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The emerging lead-in-water crisis in Newark, New Jersey has many similarities to the Flint, Michigan water poisoning which began five years ago.

Above all, Flint is known world-wide as the city where government officials criminally conspired to allow residents to drink lead-poisoned water for 18 months before even acknowledging the problem. Similarly, Newark city officials knew that high levels of lead had been detected in drinking fountains at public school buildings as early as 2010, and discovered elevated lead levels after citywide testing of home taps began in 2017.

Lead is a highly dangerous neurotoxin that can attack any system in the body when ingested, even in low dosages. Lead at any level is not safe. Once in the system, it cannot be removed. It can stunt growth and cause neurological damage, especially in children, who are the most vulnerable.

In 2014, state and local government officials disconnected Flint from its reliable source of treated drinking water for 50 years, the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department using treated water from Lake Huron, and pushed the button that switched to improperly treated water from the Flint River.

Five years after the crisis erupted, residents of the working-class city north of Detroit are still fighting for clean water. The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke this week to three long-time Flint residents about the failure of government officials to provide clean, safe water and the lessons of their fight for the residents of Newark.

Mary Miller, a retired auto worker, recounted the following. “The situation in Flint did not happen overnight. The Flint River became contaminated by General Motors after years of pouring chemicals from

the plant drains into the river. Growing up, it was a running joke that you didn’t use anything from the Flint River. You didn’t even fish there. It was known to everyone. Several members of my family lived on one block in a Flint neighborhood on St. John Street. General Motors stole our neighborhood way back when they built Buick City, which is now closed. They bought everything up and threw us out. They took our livelihoods, our families, our schools, and then our health.

“When the politicians switched to the Flint River in 2014, we couldn’t believe it. It wasn’t their families being poisoned. Instead, in Flint and Newark, it’s the workers who are made to suffer.”

Referring to the fact that Newark officials knew the drinking fountains in the public schools had high levels of lead as far back as 2010, Mary noted, “Even when the officials were aware, they did not do anything. We the residents suffer. It’s heartbreaking. There needs to be an overhaul of everything. The same people are allowing the same thing to happen over and over. It’s proof that we don’t matter to them. We pay high rates for bad water and taxes, and we don’t have clean water. You can’t trust the government but you can’t fix the water by yourself.”

As a retired autoworker, Mary recounted how both GM and the UAW knew about the corrosion of engine parts at the Flint GM plant in the fall of 2014 caused by lead in the water, but they were silent and issued no warning to the residents. “What is with the unity of the UAW and GM? How can the union be for the workers, when they are imposing what the company wants on workers? Workers today can’t buy the cars they produce; there are so many multi-tiers. The union runs

on the basis of extortion and stealing money. We don't have a voice with them. We're shop rats to them even though we, the workers put everything together. I think we're the only ones who can make it right. I have found the *World Socialist Web Site* to be an awakening for me because it explains what is behind everything—capitalism.”

Dorothy Batchelder, a retired semi-truck driver, has two young nephews who were diagnosed with elevated blood lead levels in 2015. She told the WSWS, “When I heard about poisoned water in Newark and the attempt by the politicians to cover it up, all I can think is, they're all guilty. They should all be in jail.

“We have been through this for five years in Flint. We have experienced getting all kinds of attention from the media, the politicians and celebrities. What's the outcome? They're all opportunists. The highpoint was Obama's trip to Flint in 2016 when he took a sip of water, and told us 'everything will be okay.' It's a dog and pony show. It's supposed to fool most of the people, but it has failed. We have to keep fighting. I have attended the Michigan Civil Rights Commission meetings, protests, hearings and nothing has been solved.

“To the people of Newark, I say—bring your fight to the working class, not the politicians. We have to stand up for ourselves.”

Another Flint resident who has been an active participant in fighting for clean water, Florlisa Fowler, also drew parallels to the situation in Newark. “The water crisis in Newark shows that the bigger problem is the entire infrastructure, it's not just Flint. Behind the lead poisoning, it is not only neurotoxins going into the bodies of people, but layers of bad bacteria from poor infrastructure that are harming us.

“When I heard about the expired bottled water being distributed in Newark, it reminded me of what happened in Flint. Before a state of emergency was finally established and the National Guard began distributing water, FEMA, through the Red Cross, brought us giant pallets of bottled water. We quickly learned they were going to throw them out, because they were old and expired! Their rationale to us was that because Flint was not declared a natural disaster, that it was man-made, they didn't have the authority to give us good bottled water. It was so condescending!

“The water crisis is so widespread. You might as well

say, 'It's coming to a town near you.' You cannot trust the government. No one wants to be held accountable. To think that the former mayor of Newark Cory Booker is running for president is infuriating! Whenever you hear, 'don't worry, drink the water, everything is fine'...that's a trigger sign. That's what Obama said to us. My family received a personal invitation from the White House to Obama's meeting in Flint in 2016. It was an insult to hear him tell us to drink the water. Basically, the Democrats and the Republicans have left us out to dry. They're two heads from the same body.

“They took away our water, schools and health. What else can they destroy before we rise up? The most dangerous thing in the world are people who have nothing to lose. A breaking point is coming. Look at Hong Kong, Puerto Rico and France. It's just a matter of time before it's everywhere. And there are more of us than them. It seems like the workers of the world are uniting against the rich. The rich pull the race card to divide us. They try to say the Flint water crisis is a racial issue, but poisoned water knows no color. If you are poor, you are affected. It's about economics.”

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