

Ann Arbor forum discusses who was responsible for the Flint water crisis

By James Brookfield
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About 30 people gathered August 5 at the main branch of the Ann Arbor district library for a discussion of “What the Eyes Don’t See” by Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha. The event was held by WDET, the public radio station based in Detroit and moderated by Stephen Henderson (host of the program “Detroit Today”) and featured public radio reporter Lindsey Smith, best known for her 2015 radio documentary, “Not Safe to Drink” on the subject of the Flint water crisis. Smith’s reporting is cited favorably in Hanna-Attisha’s account of the crisis.

The modest size of the gathering does not reflect the degree of popular concern and anger over the poisoning of the city of Flint that followed the decision, in April 2014, to switch from water provided by the Detroit system to withdrawing it from the long-polluted Flint River. Today, more than five years after the disaster triggered by the switch to the Flint River as the source of the city’s drinking water, the replacement of lead service lines is incomplete, filters are no longer provided to residents, nothing has been done to remediate damage to residents’ homes and appliances, and no relief is being offered for the loss in home values. As for the health of the children who were impacted, and residents more broadly, an effort is being made to downplay the significance of the poisoning that was demonstrated in the work of Dr. Hanna-Attisha.

Such is the background to last week’s discussion.

The political function of the meeting, however, was to mislead the public, particularly the working class, about the nature, causes, and political ramifications of the Flint water crisis.

Rather than being presented as a disaster of the capitalist profit system (as it is), brought into being by the actions of major corporations, like General Motors, and their hired hands in the Republican and Democratic parties, the crisis, so the organizers would have the audience believe, was the result of only one party (the Republicans) and the agencies (Michigan Department of Environmental Quality, above all) that Republicans administered.

The solution to the Flint Water Crisis and other disasters

yet waiting to happen, it was clearly implied, lies in the election of more Democrats, particularly handing the Democratic Party control of the Michigan state legislature to work hand-in-hand with newly installed Democratic governor Gretchen Whitmer.

The actual experience of the Flint Water Crisis, however, demonstrates yet again, if further proof were needed, that the Democrats no less than the Republicans will faithfully carry out the demands of the capitalist class for austerity, for cuts to social programs that protect public health, and for the continued enforcement of massive social inequality. The attempt to cover over this basic fact gave the evening’s discussion an unreal character, a charade which could never have survived a large meeting of angry Flint residents.

The evening began with Henderson asking Smith about her reporting on the Flint water crisis. The reporter explained that she began writing on the subject in January 2015, about nine months after the switch from the safe drinking water supplied from Detroit to the polluted water from the Flint River.

She had first conceived of the crisis as largely a manifestation of the anti-democratic emergency manager laws in Michigan, having previously reported on Benton Harbor, which had an emergency manager from 2010 to 2014. She commented on being struck by the “disconnect” between the scale of the disaster, which compounded the poverty of Flint residents, and the focus on “one small element”: the provision of water filters to residents.

Smith discussed in some detail the case of LeeAnne Walters, whose determined efforts to fight after her family was impacted by the switch prompted EPA engineer Miguel Del Torral to visit her house, sample the water (whose lead level was found to be so high in one sampling as to classify it as hazardous waste!), and try to bring attention to the problem within the EPA, only to have the agency (his employer) reprimand him for this work.

Del Torral, blocked by the EPA from warning the public about the danger of the water, turned over a memo he had written to Walters, who in turn provided it to investigative

reporter Curt Guyette, working for the American Civil Liberties Union, who then made public the news about elevated lead levels in Flint water. It would be well worth recalling that the EPA is a federal agency whose leadership was selected by the Obama administration, then in office, though this was not a point made by the reporter.

These elements of Smith's presentation were nonetheless valuable. The conclusions she appears to have drawn at this stage, however, are limited. The reporter maintained that the crisis was really about the failure of the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) and federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to do their jobs. Had they performed competently, the crisis never would have occurred, Smith argued from the platform. While this is true, it is a very partial account of responsibility for the disaster, which involved state and federal officials, Republican and Democrat alike, and the unrelenting drive over preceding decades to de-industrialize the region in order to lower the living standards of the working class.

To Smith's credit, she did not seem to accept the suggestion from Henderson that racism was the primary motivating factor. In a question to Smith, Henderson implied that the disaster would not have happened in a majority-white city. Smith replied that there is a real chance that a debacle like Flint could happen elsewhere in Michigan, particularly where emergency managers are installed. And poisoned water would be only one possible impact, she argued, citing the hiring of unqualified teachers by the Muskegon Heights school system when it was under emergency financial management (2012-16). The issue of "environmental racism," however, would emerge again during the question period, as will be addressed below.

Smith was followed on the platform by Jeff Irwin, a Democratic Party state senator (18th district, representing Ann Arbor, Ypsilanti and surrounding areas). Irwin, elected in 2018, sought to present the crisis as the result solely of the decisions taken by former Michigan governor Rick Snyder and his cohorts in the Republican Party. He maintained a deafening silence on the complicity of the Democrats in signing off on the switch to the Flint River (including then mayor Dayne Walling and state treasurer Andy Dillon). He pointed to the emergency manager law as the key enabling element of the crisis. Had it not existed, the disaster would not have happened. The repeal of this law, along with "polluter pays" legislation were the solutions he presented.

During the question period, several in the audience, including a professor from Wayne State University in Detroit, argued that the key issue in Flint was and remains "environmental racism." This has been the claim made by growing sections of the Democratic Party and its periphery

for several years. Ignored in this argument are the facts that Flint's population is nearly forty percent white and that poisoned water affects regions across the country with varied ethnic/racial population profiles. The racial argument is chiefly employed to prevent the emergence of a movement directed against environmental degradation and attacks on living standards by workers of all ethnic backgrounds. Such a unified struggle, which did take place in Flint, is regarded by the proponents of "theory" of "environmental racism" as the chief danger in these events.

This writer pointed out that while obviously a man-made disaster, specific individuals were responsible for the decision to change the source of Flint's drinking water, a step that was taken without regard to public health, and which was endorsed at the time by political leaders in the Democratic as well as Republican parties. This comment provoked the greatest amount of tub-thumping on the part of Irwin as he avoided the culpability of Democratic officials.

Changing the direction of the conversation at this point, Henderson spoke up to say that it was "almost inevitable" that some would go to jail, but Snyder would not be among them. In a strange further remark, he cautioned that it was not to be desired that officials with difficult jobs would always be looking over their shoulders, afraid that some slip-up would land them behind bars. Those who say that people should go to jail for the Flint Water Crisis ought to "slow their roll," he warned.

In her reply at this point, Smith pointed to the intimidation of the press conducted by the Snyder administration. They had told her that her documentary "Not Safe to Drink," should not be aired.

A final comment from the audience pointed to the statute of limitations for charges related to the Flint Water Crisis. In less than seven months, this window will be closed. Already there are indications that the state will drop all prosecution of officials for wrongdoing connected to the poisoned water.

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