

Governor Whitmer calls for whitewash investigation into central Michigan dam failures

By JT Asher
28 May 2020

Residents from Michigan's Midland County and surrounding areas are still reeling from the impact of flooding a week ago. The man-made catastrophe was produced when Edenville and Sanford dams, two aging and neglected hydroelectric dams, failed, sending billions of gallons of water downstream, destroying homes and other property and forcing the evacuation of more than 10,000 people, many of whom are still displaced amid the coronavirus pandemic. The health-threatening conditions are compounded by the criminal poisoning of the regional environment over decades by Dow Chemical, the billion-dollar global company headquartered in Midland.

On Thursday, Governor Gretchen Whitmer called for Michigan's Department of Environment, Great Lakes and Energy (EGLE) to investigate the cause of the dam failures last week, declaring, "We must ensure accountability and prevent a disaster like this from happening again."

The call for such an investigation is an effort by Whitmer to save face while covering up the deliberate negligence of Boyce Hydro LLC, the owner of the private dams, as well as all the state and federal government agencies that issued numerous safety violations over decades.

Boyce was previously warned that if repairs were not made, catastrophic flooding would ensue. In 2018, Boyce Hydro's license was revoked by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC), but no action was taken to repair the dams by any government authority on any level, thus risking the lives and well-being of the population.

Moreover, calls for "accountability" brings to mind the poisoning of Flint's water supply, another man-made crisis that devastated an entire Michigan city and for which no one has been held accountable.

Last month marked the sixth anniversary of the Flint catastrophe, which resulted in 199 deaths first attributed to pneumonia—but which were likely due to Legionnaire's Disease—as many as 276 miscarriages from lead poisoning, and ongoing health issues for all ages, as well as

developmental issues in children.

After six years, no one responsible for the disaster has been convicted or jailed. There have been countless hearings and investigations by the state and federal governments, volumes of testimony and documents pointing to the responsibility of then-Governor Rick Snyder, a Republican, and numerous other officials. For her part, in June 2019, Whitmer's administration dropped all the pending criminal charges, including involuntary manslaughter, against eight officials implicated in the water poisoning of the Flint population, thus wiping the slate clean. Snyder has never been charged.

Governor Whitmer requested that President Donald Trump declare a State of Emergency for Midland, Iosco, Gladwin, and Saginaw Counties to make federal aid available to residents devastated by the flood. While her request was granted, the support available to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) for areas it declared to be under a State of Emergency is extremely limited. For extended FEMA or National Guard assistance to be granted, a State of Disaster must be proved through residents collecting evidence, which is sent to the city and the state as well as FEMA. Residents are being asked to fill out a survey form from the Midland County Central Dispatch Authority detailing what damages they have suffered and providing photos.

Preparing her arguments to justify that no substantial amount of state resources will be made available to the population to provide housing and repair the infrastructure, Whitmer said in her press conference that the state budget has been hit significantly because of the COVID-19 Epidemic. Dow Chemical's \$4.5 billion 2018 profits would go a long way to covering the costs to make the residents and community whole.

The impact on residents was highlighted by Sabrina Lopez, administrator of the Midland Michigan Issues and Events Facebook page, who recently spoke to the *World*

Socialist Web Site. Through the Facebook page, news updates and helps coordinate donations, cleanups and other types of aid to the community. Sabrina narrowly avoided massive flood damage to her family's home.

"I'm just dealing with survivor's guilt," Lopez told the WSWS. "Many people have lost everything: refrigerators to store food, kitchens to cook it and cars to transport it. All they can do is rely on others to help them. No clean, dry clothes to change into, no bathroom to take a shower. Their beds are gone to even sleep in. It's heartbreaking. We have lots of local businesses providing meals where they can. This community is basically just coming together to help each other. I've seen people putting items that they saved for garage sales out on their lawns telling people to just take what they need.

"They need to get the money for this community, period," Sabrina remarked, explaining the dire situation throughout the region. "People are in desperate need. There are dead fish covering the ground. The lakes are gone, it's supposed to rain this week and it's extremely hot and humid out. The air smells like dead fish and sewage. This community needs fans and dehumidifiers. Cleaning supplies, washers and dryers, babysitters...and cars! Their cars have been ruined. They need all of the help they can get, no matter the cost!

"I can only imagine how awful this must be for them. Not only younger kids, but the older ones that didn't get to experience all of the things they normally would and now losing everything they have. They will definitely need our support for a long time.

"There are a lot of shops and restaurants that have been swept away, so they are in an even worse position now. With all of the awful things going on in this world today and the heartbreak and tragedy...there are good people out there willing to help those in need without asking for anything in return. People helping people is the bright spot in all of this darkness."

Residents are having to rely mainly on community organizations while a broad government response is delayed. The hashtags #MidlandStrong and #SanfordStrong are prominent on social media, with workers using them to coordinate volunteer efforts and drop-off/pick-up locations for much needed supplies.

The Midland Center for the Arts, covered in mud and debris, put out a statement requesting volunteers with "collections or curatorial" training to assist in leading small groups to perform safe extraction measures for the thousands of "papers, artifacts, and photographs that celebrate our rich history in Midland County." Resources normally available to them have been cut because of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Dan, another resident who lives downstream from

Midland gives the Thomas Township area, told the WSWS, "This is the worst flood in this part of the state's history. My property was under two feet of water. The house was built on a slight hill, but the garage and outbuildings on this property sustained heavy damage."

Many of his family's possessions have been lost to the flood. His wife, an essential worker, could not reach her job across the river and was forced to use her vacation time during the crisis. Referring to his extended family in Saginaw township, Dan explained, "Their home is considered a total loss due to multiple cracks and damage to the foundation. This crisis extends far beyond Midland and Gladwin counties."

When the flooding first occurred, Dan and his family evacuated an hour away to Mount Pleasant because closer hotels were not available. There is a local high school serving as a shelter, but anyone who can make other arrangements is doing so, due to concerns of COVID-19 transmission.

Dan has experience in studying dams and engineering, and when asked about the dam failures and safety violations, he said, "Knowing that a heavy rain event was coming, the lake levels could've been lowered and drawn down quicker than what they were to accommodate the heavy rains. We still would've seen a significant flood event, but the impacts could've been potentially lessened. Wixom Lake is man-made, just like Secord, Smallwood, and Sanford. Secord and Smallwood are at risk of failure and are being drained for emergency inspections."

Another resident and small business owner, Jeremiah, described how the damage to his parent's basement destroyed many childhood memories. Having to shutter four of his six events-based businesses permanently due to the COVID pandemic, Jeremiah said his household's finances have been greatly impacted. He shared that he was "just thankful we still have four walls to our house. Many people don't have flood insurance. We're just trying to function."

"I really feel for the kids, you know. In 10 years, 50, 100, they are still going to pay for all of the mistakes we've made." When asked about why the neglect of repairs was allowed to continue, Jeremiah said that "they kept saying, 'Oh, it didn't flood last year; won't flood this year,' right? And now all this happened."

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>