

The Flint Water Crisis and the Criminality of American Capitalism

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In the midst of growing anger over the poisoning of residents of Flint, Michigan and the exposure of criminal actions by state and local authorities, Governor Rick Snyder gave a State of the State address Tuesday night in which he insisted that neither he nor any other top official should be held accountable.

The governor's tone betrayed something of a siege mentality, as more than a thousand protesters marched outside the state capitol building in Lansing, many calling for his resignation and indictment.

After hailing record profits for the Michigan-based Big Three auto companies and touting the supposed "turnaround" of Detroit in a year the city emerged from bankruptcy, Snyder came to the subject of the Flint water crisis. The millionaire former corporate executive gave an empty apology to the people of Flint and asserted that it was "now time to tell the truth about what we have done," promising to release his emails concerning Flint the next day.

After the obligatory "the buck stops here" declaration, he evaded any responsibility for decisions that have permanently disabled thousands of Flint residents, including infants and children, and will likely result in an unknown number of early deaths.

His effort at cover-up and damage control involved striking a pose of contrition ("The government has failed you") and acknowledging that various officials had made "mistakes"—meaningless statements that were meant to evade any real accountability.

Snyder pled ignorance concerning the 17 months between April 2014, when his handpicked Flint emergency manager switched the city's water supply to the highly polluted Flint River to cut costs, and September 2015, when he claims he first learned of the crisis. In the future, he admonished, such things "had to come to his desk immediately, with no excuses."

He omitted the fact that immediately after the water was switched, Flint residents complained of its foul smell, color and taste and the spread of rashes and sickness. Even after a "boil only" warning had been issued by city officials, tests by the state's Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) showed lead levels to be acceptable under the federal Environmental Protection Agency guidelines, Snyder maintained.

In May 2015, the governor continued, Dr. Mona Hannah-Attisha of Hurley Medical Center found alarming levels of lead in blood samples of city children, but "DEQ failed to reach the same conclusions."

Again, Snyder neglected to note that his office targeted Dr. Hannah-Attisha with a slander campaign, saying she was “splicing and dicing” data and needlessly causing hysteria. With consummate cynicism, the governor asked the doctor to rise to the applause of state legislators.

While Snyder claimed that he was first briefed in September 2015, his chief of staff wrote a July 2015 email to the Department of Health and Human Services expressing concern over the stonewalling of Flint residents. “I really don’t think people are getting the benefit of the doubt,” he wrote. “Now they are concerned and rightfully so about the lead level studies they are receiving from the (DEQ) samples... These folks are scared and worried about the health impacts and they are basically getting blown off by us...”

In a transparent effort to protect himself from future prosecution, the Republican governor warned Democrats that they too were complicit. He noted that President Obama’s Environmental Protection Agency had also ignored resident complaints and remained silent even after tests showed dangerous levels of lead, and the Democratic-controlled Flint City Council had approved the change in the city’s water source.

There is certainly a case for putting local, state and federal Democrats in the dock along with Snyder. This includes former Flint Emergency Manager Darnell Earley, currently the emergency manager of the Detroit Public Schools.

The poisoning of Flint is linked to the 2013-14 Detroit bankruptcy, which was carried out with the backing of the Obama administration. The pensions and health benefits of city workers were slashed and public assets were sold off or privatized, including the treasures of the Detroit Institute of Arts and the city’s century-old public water system. This led to sharp increases in water prices in Detroit, Flint and other cities, and mass water shutoffs of working-class customers.

The modus operandi of the conspiracy of politicians and corporate holders of city bonds to plunder the incomes of city workers and seize public assets in Detroit has become a model for similar attacks across Michigan, in other US states and now in Puerto Rico. Municipalities and school districts have been starved of resources by federal, state and local authorities, forced to take on immense levels of debt, and then put under financial dictators who do the bidding of the banks.

Working-class youth are jailed for minor offenses, but those responsible for decisions that deprive families of water and electrical power and lead to fatal house fires and other tragedies essentially get away with murder.

Flint is a symbol of the criminal character of American capitalism. In 1960, the “Vehicle City” had one of the highest per capita incomes in America, the result of the sit-down strikes and mass struggles of autoworkers that forced the then-largest corporation in the world, General Motors, to recognize the United Auto Workers union. Over the last 35 years, the corporation, facing increasing international competition, has waged a relentless war against the workers, with the indispensable and unstinting assistance of the UAW.

GM has reduced employment in the city from 80,000 to 5,500. It has shut down and flattened the sit-down plants “Chevy in the Hole” and Buick City, which alone once employed 28,000 workers. Exacting huge tax cuts and polluting the Flint River with impunity, GM has left its birthplace in ruins.

During the 2009 restructuring of GM, the Obama administration worked with the UAW to shut more plants and halve the wages of all new-hires, while granting legal immunity to GM in any future lawsuits over pollution or defective vehicles. The company has taken in billions in profits and spent them, not on the people of Flint, but on stock buybacks and dividend payments to its biggest shareholders, which includes the UAW.

President Obama is coming to Detroit today, where he will speak at a UAW-GM facility and hail the “return” of the auto industry and the “rebirth” of Detroit. Meanwhile, young autoworkers cannot afford to buy the cars they build and Detroit teachers have organized sick-outs, independently of the unions, to protest rat-infested schools with no heat, overcrowded classrooms, and cuts in wages and benefits.

As for Flint, the president who has allocated trillions to bail out the Wall Street criminals and fund illegal wars has approved a derisory \$5 million in federal aid for the city’s people. The government of “the most powerful country in the world” is no less indifferent to working people in Flint than its predecessor was to Hurricane Katrina-ravaged New Orleans.

These disasters arise from the failure and bankruptcy of the capitalist system, an outmoded and reactionary economic order that subordinates the most elemental needs of society to the enrichment of the corporate and financial aristocracy.

In the 21st Century, no one should go without water, or, for that matter, a well-paying job, health care, education and affordable housing. The fight for these elemental rights places the working class on a collision course with American capitalism and all of its political representatives.

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