

USA, pollution & inequalities - A Michigan City Poisoned: Governor's Apology Can't Get the Lead Out

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On the day when president Obama visited the Detroit International Auto Show, almost 90 of the 100 Detroit Public Schools were closed as teachers en masse called in sick. In fact, they're sick of schools overrun with rodents and mold, leaking roofs, and classrooms of 45-50 students without heat or textbooks. Hundreds took the day to protest and picket outside the Cobo Center site of the auto show.

An hour's drive north up I-75, in the poisoned city of Flint, the National Guard, emergency workers and volunteers delivered thousands of cases of bottled water and filters to households as Michigan governor Rick Snyder tried to deflect growing calls for his resignation or arrest.

Just weeks ago, Flint's lead-poisoned water was a local story as the state's coverup of the disaster crumbled. Today it's a national and international headline, and most people know the basics: how the state's appointed "Emergency Manager" for Flint ordered the switchover from Detroit's clean and safe water system to Flint River water. How anti-corrosive chemicals weren't added to the heavily polluted and toxic river water, causing it to leach lead from aging pipes directly to the taps and into the bodies of the city's men, women, and children. How the state's Department of Environmental Quality falsified its own test results and lied to the people, telling them that the rust-colored, foul-smelling-and-tasting water coming out of their faucets was perfectly normal and safe.

Snyder has conceded that the Flint water disaster is his "Katrina," but the comparison is unfair. George W. Bush spectacularly bungled that emergency, but after all he didn't cause Katrina, which was a massive hurricane compounded by decades of coastal erosion and negligent maintenance of the New Orleans levee system. Governor Snyder directly caused the poisoning of Flint, through the arrogant and cynical exercise of power by an emergency manager who knew nothing and cared less about the most basic issues of running a water system. (Astonishingly, the very same emergency manager Darnell Earley who presided over the Flint catastrophe is now the emergency manager of Detroit Public Schools.)

Michigan voters knew that dictatorship couldn't be trusted. When the rightwing state legislature first passed the law enabling emergency managers to be appointed over "financially distressed" cities, the voters overturned it with a ballot referendum. Then Snyder's allies reintroduced it, along with a \$5 million appropriation that made it constitutionally immune to ballot challenge. With one exception, the municipalities placed under emergency management—and in the case of Detroit, forced into federal bankruptcy—have been majority African American, including the 52% Black post-industrial city of Flint.

It's a case of what can be called "cynical racism." It's obviously not that Snyder thinks that Black people are genetically inferior. That's old-fashioned. Rather, it's a political calculation that their needs and concerns can be ignored in order to cut a few financial corners.

"You were failed by federal, state and local authorities," Snyder intoned in his "apology" to Flint's residents. Hold it there, Richard. Whether or not local politicians approved the switch was irrelevant, because you had stripped their power. And the federal involvement was basically one EPA bureaucrat who backed the state agencies' criminal coverup of the lead poisoning of the water.

That coverup lasted almost a year from 2014 till Fall 2015, when the combined efforts of one heroic homeowner who refused to shut up, one pediatrician who was told her findings of lead levels in children made her an "unfortunate researcher," a Virginia Tech research team, and the investigative reporting of the Michigan ACLU blew it into the open. The Flint water supply was switched back to the Detroit system, but the irreparable damage to the pipes by the untreated Flint River water means it remains unsafe for drinking, bathing or any other human purpose. Replacing the gutted infrastructure alone might carry a \$1.5 billion price tag, according to Flint's new elected mayor Karen Weaver.

In the name of saving a few bucks, Snyder has effectively bankrupted the state and inflicted incalculable harm on the population, especially the children, of a major city. Whether the concurrent outbreak of Legionnaire's Disease, including ten fatalities, is also linked to the water crisis is suspected but still under investigation.

So will Snyder be forced to resign? Not a chance really, considering his accomplishments. Under his ruinous rule, Michigan has become a "right-to-work" state, welfare has been shredded, Detroit's city workers have had their pensions cut and health care gutted, and the post-bankruptcy city laid open for real estate speculators, house flippers, and billionaire developers to buy up huge tracts of land for a song. And Snyder has just signed a new law—complete with another referendum-proofing "appropriation"—that eliminates the option of straight-party-ticket voting in elections, which will have the benefit of increasing lines and wait times at overcrowded urban polling stations where Black Michiganians mainly vote. No wonder the elites love him!

Politically he's too damaged to run for a third term, but no matter because state term limits rule that out anyway. So the Big Richard can go into retirement and back into business, leaving behind the broken and poisoned city of Flint.

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P.S.

* Solidarity. January 21, 2016:
<http://www.solidarity-us.org/site/node/4569>

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