

Detroit to Flint Water March Ends

By [Abayomi Azikiwe](#)

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Michigan residents still subjected to health hazards and termination of service

On July 10 the state water march ended in Flint. This demonstration which lasted for one week was organized under the theme "CLEAN, AFFORDABLE WATER FOR ALL: Detroit to Flint Water Justice Journey."

Several organizations sponsored the walk including the People's Water Board, the Michigan Coalition for Human Rights, Michigan Welfare Rights Organization (MWRO) in Detroit, and other groups throughout the state. Other activists from Highland Park, Pontiac and Flint joined in the march and the periodic rallies held in all four cities.

Marian Kramer, co-chair of the MWRO, who lives in Highland Park, noted that the struggle for water in this small municipality surrounded by Detroit has been a protracted battle. Kramer reported how Highland Park residents did not receive bills for their water services for three years due to the lay-offs of meter readers.

The system in Highland Park now is connected with Detroit. The current City of Detroit administration is claiming huge debts owed to it by neighboring Highland Park. Massive shut-offs could be imminent.



In Flint where the water situation is perhaps the worse in the state people marched and gathered at City Hall. The march started in Detroit on July 3 when activists came together to launch the initiative.

Under emergency management and bankruptcy, the banks and corporate interests sought to shield the real forces which are responsible for the current crisis in access and safety. In Detroit \$537 million was taken out of the system in order to terminate interest-rate swaps issued by some of the leading financial institutions including Chase, Bank of America, Loop Financial and Morgan Stanley.

From Emergency Management and Bankruptcy to Social Ruin

Although both Flint and Detroit have been taken out from under emergency management, the State of Michigan is still overseeing the finances of both municipalities. Water shut-offs in each of these cities continue but in Flint residents are faced with an extreme deterioration of the quality of their service.

Outside City Hall in Flint residents discussed the health problems they are facing due to contaminated water. The Flint water system was connected to Detroit's massive infrastructure until under emergency management it was broken off in 2014 under the guise of a "cost-cutting measure."

Water flowing into residential homes is coming directly from the Flint River and testing by outside experts indicate that the use of high levels of chlorine and ferric chloride could be causing corrosion in the lead and iron piping system. At least half of the homes in Flint were constructed over 50 years ago where then use of lead was common.

New regulations based on the United States Safe Drinking Water Act of 1986 are not being enforced in the city. The State of Michigan Environmental Quality Department has been criticized for not exercising its authority in response to complaints coming from residents of Flint.

Today families in Flint are suffering from copper and lead poisoning as well as skin rashes and hair loss among other health issues. Water from the local system has been described as not only undrinkable but unfit for washing and cooking.

Melissa Mays of Flint, who chaired the rally at City Hall on July 10, said that she and her children have been suffering from copper poisoning which was diagnosed in March. The family is now in a detoxification process under medical supervision.

An investigative report published by the Michigan American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) suggests that the testing methods of the local water department is designed to conceal the level of lead residents are being exposed to on a daily basis. Before samples for testing are taken by local authorities residents are told to run water for a period in an effort to flush out the build-up of toxics near the faucets.

The ACLU report says that "Flint's water contained corrosion-control chemicals until April 2014, when Flint's ties to the Detroit water system were severed....Discontinuing the use of the anti-corrosion chemicals allowed the toxic scale built up on the insides of pipes over the past decades to be released into water flowing into people's homes, explained Miguel Del Toral, a regulations manager for the Ground Water and Drinking Water Branch of the Environmental Protection Agency's Region 5."

LeeAnne Walters, a homemaker and mother of four children whose father is in the Navy, requested two city tests of her water. It revealed dangerously high levels of lead charting 104 parts per billion (ppb) and 397 ppb, respectively.

Nonetheless, in a separate independent test, the levels of lead were shown to be astronomically higher than the city's results. A professor at Virginia Tech University (VT) Marc Edwards said that he was astonished when the results came in from their test.

VT researchers found lead levels in Walters' water had reached 13,200 ppb—more than twice the amount at which the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) declares water as hazardous waste. "When I saw those numbers I was shocked," Edwards said. This VT scholar is a former MacArthur Fellow who is recognized as an expert on corrosion in drinking-water systems.



Another Flint resident who rallied outside City Hall brought with her a container with water which was run out of her tap. The water was brown in its coloration.

This same woman also held a fist-full of her hair which she said fell off after washing with this contaminated water. The woman was extremely angry and blamed the local and state authorities for their failure to protect the people of Flint.

Disinvestment by Capitalism at Root of the Crisis

Flint has been hit over the decades by plant closings and financial ruin caused by the banks and corporations. The birthplace of the UAW is now a source of underdevelopment and political oppression.

Much like Detroit, the city's landscape is covered with abandoned factories and commercial structures. The foreclosure rates were extremely high at the height of the Great Recession several years ago.

Local officials are crippled by the constraints placed on politicians under state supervision.

Michigan has a right-wing multi-millionaire governor. Rick Snyder had presidential aspirations but recently failed miserably when he placed a statewide referendum on the ballot to raise sales taxes aimed ostensibly to repair the roads in Michigan, perhaps the worse in the country.

Immediately after the referendum went down in an 80 percent no vote, Snyder announced that he was not going to pursue the nation's highest office. Even a corporate media television outlet revealed during the failed campaign that most of the money during the first year would go towards paying off bond debt on previous road construction financing schemes that never worked.

The water march gained a significant amount of media coverage. Participants submitted a petition to the State Capitol in Lansing demanding clean and affordable water for the people of Michigan.

However, with the capitalist interests of the banks and corporations being dominant, including the firm formerly known as Veolia, which has a contract with the Flint water department, every effort is being made by the ruling class to privatize the system so that large profits can be made from the people of Flint and other municipalities throughout the state. It will require vigilance on the part of the people of Michigan to fight the corporate and financial interests seeking to deny them safe water, guaranteeing access free from the threat of termination and excessive fees.

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