Residents of Jackson, Mississippi still without water a month after outage

Cordell Gascoigne
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The water supply in Jackson, Mississippi remains largely unusable by residents a month after a historic winter storm swept through the Southern United States. The storm left millions in the South without heat or water as temperatures fell well below freezing for days on end, resulting in more than 70 deaths in Texas alone.

Services across the South remain fragile or in a damaged state. Despite the restoration of water service, Jackson officials have maintained a boil-water advisory long after the extreme weather has dissipated, affecting more than 70 percent of residents.

The boil-water notice has remained, preventing thousands of residents from using water for drinking, cooking, washing and bathing. Leaks and breaks in watermains caused by the freezing weather depleted the city's water supply, cutting service for many weeks. Surface water samples are being sent to the Mississippi State Health Department (MSHD) this week to determine whether the boil-water advisory may be lifted.

No fewer than 120 samples from various locations throughout the city will need to pass the sampling tests for two consecutive days for the boil-water notice to be lifted. However, the city lifted a precautionary boil-water notice for the 16,000 connections served by the Jackson Maddox Well System last week on Wednesday.

At the peak of the crisis, approximately 160,000 residents in Jackson and neighboring cities like Clinton, Pearl and Byram were estimated to have lost water service. This was due to water pressure plummeting from its proper working level of 80 to 90 pounds per square inch (psi) to 37 psi. According to city officials, the water pressure has returned to normal. As the city has yet to prove that most of its water is safe for consumption residents remain reliant upon charity and donations from neighboring cities and states.

The antiquated water system in Mississippi's capital city, which has components over a century old, was found in 2016 to have elevated levels of lead, prompting comparisons to the water crisis in Flint, Michigan. Century-old pipes have been left vulnerable to extreme cold snaps, despite decades of warnings by engineers and climate scientists.

The lack of weatherization, winterization and modernization of such essential utilities negatively impacted 4.5 million Texans during the deep-freeze, which essentially crippled Texas's electric grid and water systems, leaving said millions bereft of heat or drinkable water. Like many cities in Texas, pipes in Jackson city were bursting, leaving behind millions in damages.

Mississippi is the most impoverished state in the country with a poverty rate of 19.7 percent, according to an annual report by the *U S News & World Report*. The state also ranks among the most publicly underfunded in regard to hospital, schools and various public services. The state's median income is $23,121, well below the national median income of $33,706. Moreover, out of the 50 states, Mississippi ranks 50th in health care, 48th in economy, 46th in education, 45th in infrastructure and 44th in fiscal stability.

Jackson's Democratic mayor, Chokwe Antar Lumumba, estimated that modernization of the city's water infrastructure would cost around $2 billion. Last week, he asked Republican Governor Tate Reeves for just $47 million for repairs to the city's derelict water system.

Reeves, declaring a state of emergency, called in the National Guard last month to aid in the distribution of water, proposing the possibility of the state assuming control over the city's water supply. Reeves' chief of staff, Brad White, said the governor's office was helping the city to secure low-interest state loans to pay for modernization of its water system. White also made mention of Lumumba's meeting with members of the Republican-dominated state legislature, including Lieutenant Governor Delbert Hosemann, who presides

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over the Senate, in an effort to secure more state funding for the city.

In an interview last week, Lumumba stated that he hopes to push both state and city officials in the direction of “a long-term solution.” He said, “There’s a saying that you should allow no crisis to go to waste.” He continued, “It’s crises like these that really allow us to take stock of conditions of where we are as a city, where we are as a state and hopefully it allows us to build the resolve to address it.”

However, with no significant action after then-Mayor Tony Yarber issued a state of emergency related to the city’s water and road infrastructure problems in 2015, residents can expect much of the same this time around. Bogus fixes, such as the fraudulently installed Siemens water meters, which cost taxpayers tens of millions of dollars and contributed to a water service shutoff crisis, are certainly in the offing.

In an interview with the *New York Times*, Carolyn Willis, an elderly Jackson resident, reflecting on the crisis, said, “You can’t bathe. You can’t wash.” This has increased the danger posed by the COVID-19 pandemic with sanitation, including frequent hand washing, being of the utmost importance. Mississippi has recorded 301,000 cases of coronavirus and 6,901 deaths. Jackson accounts for 19,287 cases and 397 deaths.

The conditions Jackson’s residents have been subjected to are a reflection of the malign neglect of state and federal governments. The trillions of dollars which are needed to fix the United States’ crumbling infrastructure must be expropriated from the banks and corporations and placed under the democratic control of the working class. Only with the banks and utilities placed under the common ownership and operation of workers themselves can a rational plan be worked out to prevent future catastrophes and make those who have suffered from the latest disaster whole.

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