

Jackson, Mississippi mayor warns public water system could break under pressure as service slowly resumes

Cordell Gascoigne
2 September 2022

The 160,000 residents of Jackson, Mississippi suffered their fifth day Friday without safe drinking water coupled with inadequate water pressure.

Since Monday, after flood waters knocked out the water treatment plant, crews have worked day and night in an effort to normalize water pressure and resolve pH imbalances so that tens of thousands of residents may soon be able to consume a necessity.

For the foreseeable future, Jackson residents are being told to not consume the water, with the city remaining under a boil-water notice, forcing thousands to wait in line in 90-degree Fahrenheit heat for bottled water at distribution points operated by the National Guard.

Multiple neighborhoods and businesses, including Ashland Estates, Bank Plus, Brenhaven, Chesapeake, Commonwealth, Kroger Shopping Center, Lakeshore Apartments, Riverchase, Timberlake Campground, and Windward Bluff, which get their water from the Pearl River Valley Water Supply District, remain under the boil-water notice announced Monday.

Public schools have temporarily converted to remote learning after they had reopened amidst the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Democratic mayor Chokwe Antar Lumumba has warned that as the water pressure begins to normalize, a plethora of new issues may arise with the city's fragile water distribution network.

"I do want to forewarn you that another issue we may experience, as they're able to increase the pressure at the plants to levels that it has not seen in many years, the challenge then becomes whether we have pipes that rupture across the city," Lumumba said Friday, adding, "We know that we have brittle pipes, we have aged

pipes—just as our water treatment facilities are aged—that's a challenge that we're going to have to be on the ground and dealing with as time persists."

After President Joe Biden approved a request from Republican Governor Tate Reeves for an emergency declaration Tuesday night, Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Administrator Deanne Criswell visited Friday to assess the situation.

Criswell told CBS News, "Our focus right now for FEMA is handling the immediate needs that Jackson, Mississippi has." She continued: "And right now, that's making sure that they have safe water to drink, and that we are bringing in the resources that can do some temporary repairs to restore the water pressure to the city."

Former New Orleans mayor and senior advisor to the president, Mitch Landrieu, who is responsible for overseeing the implementation of the \$2 trillion Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act Biden signed late last year, joined US Representative Bennie Thompson at Grove Park on Friday to "help" with the recovery effort.

Thompson, whose district includes Jackson, assured residents the federal government is using every available asset from FEMA to the EPA and the US Army Corps of Engineers to assist in the city's recovery. "In time, we will mitigate this situation, and in the long term, hopefully we will resolve it so it will never happen again," Thompson said.

The water crisis in Jackson has been decades in the making, and the population has faced repeated water outages and poor water quality as the system has crumbled, most recently collapsing in February 2021 under the pressure of extreme cold weather.

Neither Republican nor Democratic administrations, or legislators from the city, state or federal level have sought to take the necessary action to modernize the state capital's water infrastructure at scale.

Instead, the water system was looted of tens of millions of dollars after the city signed a rotten deal in 2012 with global conglomerate Siemens to install new water meters, implement a new billing system, and carry out infrastructure repairs. While nearly \$90 million was recovered from Siemens in a 2020 legal settlement, those funds have already been spent, including on legal fees, without any improvement in water service.

Criswell, speaking to CBS News, posed the question, "How are we [going to] make sure that this doesn't happen again?"

She answered her question by promoting the Biden administration: "I can't speak to the specifics on why it [Jackson's water pipes, and its waterworks and sewage system as a whole] hasn't been fixed in the past, but what I can say is that under President Biden's direction, we are bringing in all of the right federal resources to better understand what it is we need to do going forward."

She added, "And that's what I'm [going to] start doing during my visit tomorrow, is better understanding what those needs are, to help this community get on that road to recovery."

"We've offered every single thing available to Mississippi. The governor has to act," Biden said, passing on any responsibility for seeing through any improvements. "There's money to deal with this problem. We've given them EPA [Environmental Protection Agency]. We've given them everything there is to offer."

According to Lumumba, Jackson would need \$200 million to fix the city's water system, but he admitted Tuesday that the cost could run to "quite possibly the billions of dollars." As tens of billions of dollars are being squandered by the US government to fuel the proxy war with Russia in Ukraine, the entire state of Mississippi is receiving a paltry \$75 million to address water problems as part of Biden's infrastructure bill.

Jackson is one of the poorest major cities in America, with nearly 25 percent of residents living below the meager federal poverty line. According to city officials, 90 percent of its roads are in poor condition. The

crumbling of the city's infrastructure has gone hand in hand with the fall in living standards. Between 2009 and 2019, median wages in the city declined by 7.6 percent, according to the Brookings Institution's Metro Monitor.

While aid is slow in coming, the crisis in Jackson, Mississippi is being seized upon by both capitalist parties in an attempt to secure votes in the mid-term election this November.

In particular, there have been attempts by the proponents of racist identity politics in the bourgeois press to paint the crisis afflicting Jackson residents as a result of "systemic racism," as the city is 82 percent black and 16 percent white. However, painting this immense social crime in purely racial terms purposefully obscures the fundamental economic causes behind the deterioration of the city's water system and the infrastructure crisis confronting workers throughout the United States.

For example, in June, for the fourth time in its history, Hays County, Texas experienced its water source, Jacob's Well, drying up—in the midst of an unprecedented heat wave brought on by climate change. Hays County's racial makeup is 78.92 percent white, 3.68 percent black, and more than 13 percent unidentified, with a Hispanic and Latino population of 29.57 percent.

Houston-based Electro Purification had planned to pump 5.3 million gallons of water per day from the Trinity Aquifer, but to the misfortune of the Hays County residents, the area was not regulated by any groundwater conservation district, i.e., the water was considered the company's private property and it could pump as much, or as little, as it pleased, even if it were sapping water from wells.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact