Jackson, Mississippi's water disaster is a crime of capitalism

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The 150,000 residents of Jackson, Mississippi remain without access to clean drinking water this week following the collapse of the water and sewage system under the pressure of heavy flooding late last month.

While water service has returned to homes and businesses throughout the state's capital, the city remains under a boil-water advisory that was issued in July, with reports that water remains foul and undrinkable. Residents once again queued in long lines at distribution centers throughout the city Tuesday, picking up bottled water to use for cooking and basic hygiene. Approximately 600 National Guard soldiers have been deployed to the city by Republican Governor Tate Reeves to oversee the distribution.

While tens of thousands have been forced to rely on bottled water or use buckets to collect water from wells in the wealthiest country in the world, Jackson sits on and draws its water from the Ross Barnett Reservoir, the largest source of drinking water in the state.

The ongoing crisis in Jackson is part of a series of disasters in the US, from rolling blackouts in California to routine power outages in Metro Detroit and the water poisoning in Flint. Under conditions where climate change is fueling extreme weather events and pandemics, systematic planning is needed to meet the danger. However, this challenge is met with indifference by the capitalist governments.

Tens of billions of dollars have been poured by the Biden administration into the war against Russia in Ukraine in just a matter of months. Trillions of dollars have been spent on wars and funding the military over the last two decades alone. And whenever Wall Street has run into trouble, from the 2008 financial crash to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the government has leapt in to hand over trillions in corporate bailouts and guarantee rising fortunes for the wealthiest.

The current disaster in Jackson has been years in the making. It was preceded by systemic failures as the city's public water infrastructure became the target for corporate looters and was subjected to criminal neglect by the local, state and federal governments.

A $90 million deal was signed by an outgoing mayor with the global conglomerate Siemens in 2012 to upgrade the city's water and sewage infrastructure and implement an automated billing system. The new billing and water meter system failed to send bills to residents, resulting in more than $43 million in unpaid water bills and throwing the city's water fund into crisis. A legal settlement in 2020 saw the city recover the $90 million from the company, but by this point the antiquated water system had degraded further.

In 2016 it was announced that elevated levels of lead had been discovered in the water. The state continues to advise that children under five and pregnant women not drink unfiltered tap water. Lead in water is especially harmful to children as it can cause serious developmental problems.

A ten-year, $109 million deal was signed with another corporate giant, Veolia, in 2017 to operate and manage the city's three wastewater treatment plants. Between December 2018 and May 2019, the company dumped four billion gallons of water into the Pearl River, violating the Clean Water Act and a consent decree the city had signed with the federal government in 2012.

A severe winter storm fueled by climate change in February 2021 brought unusually cold temperatures to the Deep South, freezing water lines and causing water mains to burst, knocking out water service to the entire city and surrounding suburbs. The severe damage from the storm left the city primed for the current

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catastrophe.

While Democratic Mayor Chokwe Antar Lumumba estimates that it would cost approximately $1 billion to fix the city's water system, the Biden administration has only allocated some $500 million over the next five years for water infrastructure issues across the entire state in recent legislation. Federal aid will do little to resolve Jackson's problems, nor will it help across the poorest state in the country. An Environmental Protection Agency assessment in 2015 found that the state required $4.8 billion over 20 years to guarantee safe drinking water, with much of the infrastructure reaching or well beyond its designed life span.

Under these conditions, where dramatic underfunding at every level has brought on this disaster, the big business *Wall Street Journal* and Governor Reeves, with dollar signs in their eyes, have proposed full privatization of the public water system as the solution to the problem, completing the looting operation that began a decade ago.

A statement published by the *Journal*'s editorial board Monday blamed the water crisis on "local government failure" and floated a proposal to place the city under state receivership. It made the comparison to Flint and Detroit in Michigan, where emergency managers were involved in lucrative schemes connected to those cities' water systems, which in the case of Flint helped create the disastrous lead-in-water crisis. Taking his cue from the *Journal*, Reeves told a press conference the same day that "privatization is on the table."

At the local level, the Democrats bear their share of responsibility, having overseen the deindustrialization and systematic impoverishment of predominantly African American urban areas like Jackson over the last four decades. The election of black mayors and city councilors has done nothing to stave off a dramatic decline in living standards for the working class.

The overall social crisis is compounded by the impact of climate change, which is generating increasingly severe weather events throughout the world. Historic flooding in Pakistan has already killed thousands and displaced over 100,000. China is suffering from a massive heat wave. Recent studies by scientists have warned that, even with immediate action, climate change will raise sea levels by nearly a foot, while increasing temperatures will devastate the lives of millions in the Middle East and Africa.

Capitalism has no solution to any of these problems. The subordination of all of social and economic life to private profit and the division of the world economy among rival capitalist nation states block a rational response to crises like that in Jackson, Mississippi while preventing the coordinated global planning necessary to address their underlying causes.

The only solution lies in the expropriation of the corporate oligarchs and the big banks to free up trillions of dollars which must be put into rebuilding and developing the country's infrastructure and combating climate change through emergency measures coordinated on a global scale. This will only be possible through the socialist reorganization of society by the working class to meet human needs and not private profit.

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