

# Tap water remains undrinkable in Jackson, Mississippi

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The 150,000 residents of Jackson, Mississippi once again have water running to their homes and businesses after the city's public water and sewage system collapsed amid flooding at the end of August. However, the water remains undrinkable and the city remains under a boil-water notice, which has been in place since July, before the current crisis hit.

Despite officials reporting water pressure having normalized, many residents of Jackson have reported very low water pressure and discolored water coming from their taps. On Friday, Molly Minta, reporter for *Mississippi Today*, recorded herself turning on the faucet at her home in the Belhaven neighborhood of Jackson, only to reveal an ongoing social crime: coffee-brown water. The video was posted on Twitter and has been widely circulated, garnering more than 12.5 million views.

Notwithstanding the the lack of clean drinking water, as of Friday, Jackson's public schools resumed in-person learning, doubly endangering students in the midst of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

Last week, Mississippi Republican Governor Tate Reeves said, "This water system broke over several years and it would be inaccurate to claim it is totally solved in the matter of less than a week," continuing, "There may be more bad days in the future. We have, however, reached a place where people in Jackson can trust that water will come out of the faucet, toilets can be flushed and fires can be put out."

On Tuesday, Democratic Mayor Chokwe Antar Lumumba said there was "some optimism" about samples being taken of the city's water.

For the water to be declared safe and the water boil advisory to be dropped, two days of successful testing is required for health officials in Jackson to issue a declaration clearing the water for consumption. But

emergency repairs are temporary, given the system's aged infrastructure that could malfunction at any point, as it did during the colossal winter freeze of 2021, and again this year.

As Jackson residents grow frustrated with the repeated failure of basic infrastructure, in conjunction with soaring interest rates, rising prices of consumer goods and stagnant wages, and the abandonment of public health efforts to combat COVID-19, both Republicans and Democrats are considering the privatization of Jackson's water system.

"Privatization is on the table," Governor Reeves said last week. Mayor Lumumba, along with floating the possibility of increasing sales tax on the city's residents to pay for repairs, has also considered the hiring of private contractors to operate and maintain the water system. Contractors from corporate giant Veolia have already been brought in as of 2017 to run three wastewater treatment plants in the city at the cost of \$10.9 million per year.

The very consideration of privatization is an attack on the working class and the right to the basic necessities for life. In 2012, a \$90 million deal was signed by then-Democratic Mayor Harvey Johnson with global conglomerate Siemens in an effort to upgrade the city's water and sewage systems, followed by the implementation of an automated billing system which failed, resulting in \$43 million in unpaid water bills.

With millions of dollars in unpaid bills and fees, the city's water funds were drained. A legal settlement in 2020 recovered the \$90 million from Siemens, but this money was quickly spent without any improvement in the water system. Lumumba has declared that it would take more than \$1 billion to appropriately address the city's dilapidated water infrastructure.

Last week, Environmental Protection Agency

Administrator Michael Regan, nominated by President Joe Biden, said that Jackson may be eligible for tens of millions in US government loans. However, Regan went on to say, “we need to see a plan that demonstrates how those resources will be spent and what they will be spent on,” effacing any sense of urgency, and effectively abandoning residents to their fate. Meanwhile, both the Democratic and Republican parties have approved and delivered \$60 billion in munitions and weaponry, which have been approved for delivery to Ukraine in a matter of a few months, in order to force Russia into submission.

On August 29, Mayor Lumumba vowed to appoint a “a full-scale committee of individuals that are working toward the execution and production of [a] plan.” In an interview with the *Guardian*, former mayor Harvey Johnson, apologizing for his Democratic successor’s failure to act, said a properly funded plan could take decades to execute. “I think if you’re talking about the water system, obviously you need a plan that depicts what is required to make improvements to the system. And typically, that’s over a 20-year period.” He continued, “I think that’s sort of being lost in the whole discussion: none of this takes place over a short period of time.”

The workers at the Jackson’s water and sewage treatment facilities must form rank-and-file committees, independent of the capitalist parties, to oversee the implementation of a plan that ensures that every resident has access to clean water without delay and free of charge. The Democrats have had decades to exact change in the city’s infrastructure and yet done nothing. Both Republicans and Democrats fight to maintain the subordination of socioeconomic life to private profit at the cost of the health and safety of the working class.



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