

Seven weeks after flooding

Jackson, Mississippi residents confronted with massive water bills

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18 October 2022

Residents of Jackson, Mississippi are facing an on-going water crisis following massive flooding in late August that resulted in the collapse the city's underfunded and antiquated water and sewerage systems.

More than a quarter of those who live in Jackson, the state capital, subsist below the official poverty level. In the aftermath of the flood, they have to deal with cloudy and brown water, including chlorine leaks and traces of lead, as well as brittle piping. And on top of these barbaric and unhealthful conditions, they face massive water bills.

Residents are experiencing déjà vu from 2012, when Democratic Mayor Harvey Johnson signed a \$90 million deal with Siemens to modernize the city's water and sewerage infrastructure, implement automated billing, and improve the accuracy of the city's water meters from 86-94 percent to 98.5 percent.

The new automated billing system failed to send bills to residents, resulting in more than \$43 million in unpaid water bills. This sparked a 2020 lawsuit seeking to recover the \$90 million paid to the company, with the city spending millions on court and attorney fees.

By this point Jackson's water system had degraded further, prompting the current mayor, Chokwe Antar Lumumba, also a Democrat, to say it would take more than \$1 billion to address the city's crumbling water and sewerage systems.

On Monday, October 10, hundreds of people rallied outside the governor's mansion in Jackson to protest the malign neglect of the city's water infrastructure. The rally, organized by the Poor People's Campaign and the Mississippi Rapid Response Coalition, called for "unity" between the city and the state and advanced

the slogan: "Free the land, clean the water, keep it public." Notwithstanding the dead-end reformist and pro-Democratic Party politics of these organizations, the demonstration in a limited way reflected the anger and demand for change among Jackson residents.

On the same day, a public meeting was held at which residents expressed their discontent with the policies of both the Republican-controlled state government and the Democratic-controlled city administration. The meeting was taped and uploaded onto the NBC News YouTube channel.

Participants denounced excessively high bills for water they were unable to drink or safely use. One resident exclaimed, "A \$1,310 water bill for a widowed woman that's 82 years old and gets one check a month. Come on here!"

Jackson resident Virginia Evans, in an interview with NBC News, said she has been struggling to pay off her water debt for six years. Evans said she owes nearly \$6,000.

"They [the Water Sewer Business Administration] were unable to give me any information," she said. "There's nothing they could do to help me." Evans said she uses only boiled water, despite the boil-water advisory having been lifted, for dishwashing and laundry. Other speakers held up water bills, with one showing a balance of \$5,154.94 and another owing arrears of more than \$17,000.

In an interview with CNN, Jackson resident Annie Brown said she received a \$700 water bill in September. "My story is that you're trying to pay for somebody else's mistake," she said. "I don't know what's going on in this city."

Resident Laura Crowley said her September water

bill was \$93, up \$56 from the prior month. “It’s not fair because of the simple fact that we didn’t have [clean] water for a long time and we couldn’t use our water, but then our water bill is steady going up,” Crowley said.

She added, “They don’t care about us. They don’t care about the poor. They don’t care about the people that’s trying to work and take care of their bills.”

In Lexington, North Carolina, residents are facing a similar issue. On September 26, the city of Lexington announced plans to overhaul its water and sewer systems over the next decade, with a budget allocation of \$204 million. The repair and replacement costs will be passed on to customers to “offset” the city’s investment, with massive increases for residents.

Reverberations from the Siemens debacle are still being felt in Jackson. The mayor recently issued a statement about mounting complaints, saying: “Inconsistent billing is due [to] water meter and billing software problems. Each issue is being handled on a case-by-case basis.”

This comes a month after Mayor Lumumba mentioned a possible one percent increase in the sales tax to pay for repairs. Such a regressive tax would fall most heavily on the city’s working class and poor residents.

According to World Population Review, “[T]he average household income in Jackson is \$55,850 with a poverty rate of 24.46 percent,” or approximately 40,000 out of 160,000 residents. The city’s poverty rate is five percent higher than that for Mississippi, the poorest state in the US, and nearly 13 percent higher than the nation’s.

From 1989 to present, the city of Jackson has been run by the Democratic Party, a party supposedly for working people and, particularly, blacks and other minorities. Over this entire period of more than three decades, Jackson residents have faced declining real wages, longer work hours, harsher working conditions and soaring costs for health care and other necessities. This is now compounded by the ongoing suffering caused by the pandemic and near-double-digit price increases for food, gas and rent.

Despite President Biden’s campaign talk about “following the science” on the COVID-19 pandemic, he has adopted wholesale the “let-it-rip” and “forever COVID” policies of Trump, ending funding for anti-

pandemic services and forcing workers back onto unsafe job sites, as well as students and teachers back into unsafe schools.

Meanwhile, both big business parties in the US and capitalist governments all over the world ignore the ever worsening impact of climate change, which is driving the increasing frequency and severity of hurricanes, floods and other natural disasters.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* stated in relation to the Jackson flood disaster:

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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