

Residents in working-class districts of Johannesburg protest after two-week loss of water supply

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Johannesburg, South Africa's most populous city and economic hub, has been rocked by protests in its working-class districts of Westbury and Coronationville after residents were left without water for more than two weeks.

The city has a population of 5.5 million, while the wider urban agglomeration exceeds 14.8 million, making it a global megacity and the richest in Africa by GDP and private wealth. It is the capital of Gauteng, the country's wealthiest province, home to the Johannesburg Stock Exchange and the Constitutional Court and stands at the centre of the international gold and mineral trade.

Yet, in this city of vast wealth residents of Westbury and Coronationville have been forced to block off streets with bricks, stones and burning tyres to demand water.

Post-apocalyptic conditions have rapidly emerged. An elderly woman clutching medical papers made a heartbreaking plea to SNL24 reporters, stating, "These are my results from the doctor. I have cancer and I'm due for an operation. I've been turned away from the hospital three times because of water shortages."

Diana Louw, a community activist, explained, "Children cannot stay at school because there is no water."

The Rahima Moosa Mother and Child Hospital in Westbury has a borehole on site, but staff report that it is insufficient to meet daily needs. One nurse told *TimesLIVE*, "Water is an issue, and it affects the hospital. We cannot operate as we should. Procedures are delayed because there is no running water."

The African National Congress (ANC)-run city unleashed police, who attacked residents with stun grenades, tear gas, and rubber bullets, indiscriminately targeting children and the elderly. Journalists covering the demonstration were also fired upon. "They shot an 81-year-old with rubber bullets," relayed one resident to News24. A 15-year-old boy was also hospitalised after being shot in the head.

When asked by *Independent Online* if the force was necessary, Gauteng police spokesperson Lieutenant Colonel

Mavela Masondo said, "The people we used rubber bullets against were throwing stones at police. We had no choice but to use minimum force—that is, rubber bullets and stun grenades".

Masondo confirmed, "We will be remaining in this area. We've deployed our members from public order policing, so we'll be here until everything is back to normal".

His remarks epitomise the ruling ANC's knee-jerk police-state response to any expression of social opposition. Whether it is working-class communities demanding water, workers on strike, migrants, the unemployed, or miners in illegal pits, the state uses police violence to defend the interests of big business.

At last week's press conference, Johannesburg's mayor, Dada Morero, pledged R800mn (\$46 million) to improve Johannesburg Water's Commando systems, including reservoirs, bulk lines and pump stations, supplying areas including those currently being blockaded, Westbury and Coronationville.

Morero stated that water would be fully restored in seven days, and in the meantime two stopgaps would be deployed. Johannesburg Water would switch off water in other areas at night, so that water levels can rise in those areas with no water at the moment. Secondly, Morero stated, "We are going to provide 15 water tanks immediately".

When the floor was opened to questions one resident reprimanded Morero's deployment of the police: "You cannot shoot our people like this! You can't do that!". Another resident asked the mayor: "Why are they [the police] shooting our young children?"

Others directly confronted Morero, asking, "Are you part of the Water Mafia?" referring to criminal networks tied to "tenderpreneurs" who collude with politicians to sabotage infrastructure and profit from private water deliveries. Eventually Morero fled, escorted by police.

Residents have vowed to continue protesting the municipality until water supply is fully reinstated.

Westbury and Coronationville were classified as “coloured” (mixed-race) neighbourhoods under Apartheid, the white-minority capitalist regime that from 1948 to 1994 legally enforced racial segregation across every aspect of society.

The black majority was stripped of political rights, herded into segregated districts and barren “homelands,” and systematically denied access to quality education, health care, housing, and essential infrastructure such as water and electricity. These conditions were deliberately created to divide the working class along racial and tribal lines, while guaranteeing South African and international capital a vast pool of cheap labour for the mines, factories, and farms that generated enormous profits.

Three decades after the ANC came to power promising redress, this legacy of neglect continues. Residents endure years of intermittent water supply and repeated protests, while successive administrations under the ANC, the pro-business Democratic Alliance (DA), and the Islamist-leaning Al Jama-ah, have all failed to resolve the crisis.

The right-wing DA, which includes remnants of Apartheid-era parties such as the National Party, presents itself as more competent than the ANC. Yet under its rule Cape Town nearly became the first major city to run dry in the 2018 “Day Zero” crisis, when a three-year drought and rapid population growth drove dams to critical lows. Despite longstanding warnings, neither the DA-run local authority nor the ANC-led national government took serious measures to prepare, instead placing the burden on ordinary residents through rationing and punitive tariffs.

The Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), an ANC splinter, has sought to posture as an alternative. Earlier this year it staged a march on Johannesburg Water, declaring that “The Year of the Picket Lines means that the EFF will be at the forefront of addressing such injustices.” Yet the party has been completely silent over the current crisis. Julius Malema, the EFF’s leader, underscored the party’s real orientation when he told *Business Day* that the EFF is prepared to “work together” with the ANC.

The water crisis in Westbury and Coronationville is another example of the bankruptcy of the ANC, amid South Africa’s mounting infrastructure crisis. Cities like Pretoria and smaller towns like Ditsobola have been experiencing similar water shortages, and even contaminated water which has led to deaths. As well as Cape Town in 2018, Gqeberha came close to running out of water when its dam reached a critically low level in 2022.

Johannesburg’s water system has been breaking down for years. In October 2022, under both ANC and DA mayors, Johannesburg Water announced that entire sections of the city, including Westbury and Coronationville, would face

low pressure or no supply at all as it attempted to “balance the load” of usage.

The city has grown from 1.9 million in 1990 to over 5.5 million in 2025, yet the ANC has failed to maintain or expand infrastructure. Half of the reservoirs leak, and while 12,000 km of piping urgently needs replacement, the city budgets for only 14 km a year. WaterCAN, a civil society initiative monitoring water quality and infrastructure, warns that many reservoirs can only be filled to 40 percent, forcing authorities to ration supply.

Infrastructure failures are not confined to water. They extend to the near collapse of Eskom and Transnet, the two state-owned giants at the heart of South Africa’s economy. Eskom, which generates and distributes around 90 percent of the country’s electricity, has been crippled by years of underinvestment, corruption, and looting, leaving the country plagued by rolling blackouts. Transnet, responsible for the railways, ports, and pipelines, has been gutted, paralysing the movement of goods and strangling industry.

After more than three decades in power, the ANC has demonstrated that it is incapable of addressing even the most basic needs of the working class. Its record is one of crumbling infrastructure, mass unemployment, staggering inequality, and endless repression of social opposition. The experience underscores the incapacity of the national bourgeoisie to resolve the crisis of South African capitalism.

Technology, science, and resources exist to provide clean water, reliable electricity, and modern infrastructure for all. But under capitalism they are monopolised by a handful of corporations and subordinated to the profit system, not the needs of society. In South Africa, this has meant decades of austerity, privatisation, and looting, overseen by the ANC and its political accomplices.

Ensuring universal access to life’s most fundamental necessity—water—requires breaking the grip of the capitalist class. It demands the mobilisation of the working class, in South Africa and internationally, to place the vast resources of modern society under democratic control. Only by expropriating the banks, corporations, and utilities and reorganising them on a socialist basis can the scientific and technological advances humanity already possesses be used to guarantee clean water, electricity, housing, and health care as fundamental social rights.



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