

“At what point are we safe to drink it, if ever?”: Residents of Jackson, Mississippi, speak about ongoing water crisis

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The city of Jackson, Mississippi, the state’s capital, did not have running water for a week last month, rendering the city of more than 160,000 people without the ability to properly hydrate, bathe or flush toilets. This was the result of decades of neglect to the city’s water infrastructure, which reached a breaking point on August 29, when torrential rains—fueled by climate change—swelled the Pearl River, causing it to crest and flood the water treatment plants.

In response, Mississippi Republican Governor Tate Reeves issued a state of emergency, calling on the National Guard to assist in water distribution. Residents by the thousands lined up with buckets or to grab bottles of water in an attempt to get clean water for consumption and general hygiene. However, more were turned away than those who received assistance.

Following quick-fix repairs to restore water pressure and safe pH balance, residents remained under a boil-water advisory, initially announced back in June, until September 15.

Residents have reported a distrust of the safety of the water coming from their faucets, and even more so after a chlorine leak was detected at one of the water treatment facilities, including waterline breaks across the city. There are also concerns of elevated levels of lead in the water, with initial discoveries made in 2016.

Four Jackson residents have filed a class action lawsuit against the city, its Democratic Mayor Chokwe Antar Lumumba and a former mayor over the complete collapse in the ability of the government to provide clean water.

On October 1, *World Socialist Web Site* reporters interviewed Michele and Barry at a water pickup site in a parking lot of a local church.

Michele explained, “We’ve been dealing with the water crisis now for two to three months. We’ve been boiling

the water. It was a struggle at first to keep it up because you did not know what to ingest, and until the government finally came together—or I would say maybe was forced—to help Jackson residents, the water came along, and it made everything so much better, and it gave you the perspective that people cared.”

She gave some insight into the reality of the situation, revealing that many residents still do not have access to clean and safe drinking water, exposing the premature lifting of the boil-water notice. “It is hard without water. I complained about boiling the water at first, but then in hindsight, I was saying I would rather have water to boil than no water at all because there were some residents that had no water. In my area, we had water. Occasionally it would be a little cloudy, whereas I would hear other people on the other side of town say their water was brown, so I was thankful.”

In early 2020, the city’s water system failed an Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) inspection which found the city’s water had the potential to contain harmful bacteria or parasites.

“Once the National Guard left, there was still some concern. I still don’t feel that the water is safe to drink. I’m not drinking it.” Michele continued, “I’m continuing to do what we’re doing—going to get the water.”

Michele questioned whether she should begin to stockpile bottled water for her household “because we know what’s going to happen every year,” referring to expected breaks in water mains and the freezing of pipes during the winter season. “We’re going to need water, and at that point we might not have running water, so why not get it, stock it, and like I said, I’m not drinking it. So, at what point are we safe to drink it, if ever?”

In parts of the city, elevated levels of lead in drinking water, after the boil-water advisory was lifted, are being

reported, resulting in many refusing outright to drink the water. “I have met people in the store that tell me they cannot use the water because they’ve been breaking out, and they literally show me,” Michele noted. “They have sensitive skin, and I guess whatever the irritant is in the water, they cannot use it, so they say they buy the purifying machines or something and put it in for the showers, or there’s somewhere in south Jackson that has filtered water—they said they go there, and that’s how they bathe. This is unheard of.”

Michele, growing tired of conditions which have deteriorated under Democratic and Republican administrations, said, “Things are going to happen, but you got to have something in place that’s going to be able to rectify the problem, and when that is done, politically, regardless of your party affiliation, you got to come together for the betterment of humanity. That’s the way I see it. It’s going to happen, the water system can fail anywhere and everywhere, but you got to have a backup plan, because water is vital.”

Another Jackson resident, Barry, expressed virtually the same concerns as Michele. “People have been affected in so many ways,” he explained. “You’ve probably read that we’ve had over 300 boil-water notices [over the past two years], and now we’re in the midst of another one. They lifted it a couple weeks ago.”

Highlighting the problem of neglected infrastructure, Barry explained that the city has “pipes underground ... that are 100 years old,” mentioning that should another winter storm occur, as it had last year, the pipes would freeze and burst. There is also the danger that a sudden increase in water pressure could break fragile pipes. “It’s not just a one-year thing, or two-year thing, I think it’s been more a 20-year thing,” he said.

Considering that in just a few months the Biden administration has shipped tens of billions of dollars in munitions, tanks and missiles to Ukraine for US imperialism’s war against Russia, Barry drew the necessary conclusions. “To me, I think it’s just total neglect on the American people. When you have billions and billions of dollars going overseas or going to other countries for infrastructure. ... You get money going to Ukraine, you get money going to other countries; we build their countries, and yet ours is crumbling. That’s been noticed.

“And now you see the effects of the infrastructure problems here in America—from bridges, to water systems, the schools are crumbling. I think about the Jackson public schools, some of those buildings have had

no upgrade since I’ve been in school—it’s no remodeling, no upgrades. So how does a kid that goes to the school even use the bathroom? ... I remember, I don’t know if it’s still happening now, but some kids would have to wait until they go home to use the bathroom—it’s just that bad.”

Barry went on to describe the severity of the crisis. “[P]eople need basic needs. We’re not talking about anything that’s upscale; we’re talking about basic needs—water, shelter, health. We’re not asking. ... Some people look at this as a handout. This is not a handout, we’re in a crisis.”

While hundreds of billions of dollars have been spent on war and trillions have been given to the banks and big businesses through the bailouts, the United States government has all but abandoned the city and residents of Jackson to the predation of corporate vultures seeking to extract profits.

A decision made in September 2018 by credit ratings agency Moody’s Investor Service inflated Jackson’s borrowing costs for improvements to infrastructure, most notably for its water and sewer system. Moody’s moved forward, downgrading the city’s bond rating to junk status, declaring, “The downgrade reflects the city’s support of and exposure to the stressed City of Jackson Water and Sewer Enterprise” and the “low wealth and income indicators of residents.”

Moody’s, known for price-gouging and leaving cities across the US strapped for much-needed funding, increased the price of borrowing for Jackson, costing the city between \$2 and \$4 million per year in additional debt service costs in tandem with the state and the federal government refusing to appropriately address and resolve the crisis.



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