

# Jackson Water Crisis Reflective of National Pattern in Urban Racism

Mississippi remains the most underdeveloped area of the United States and African Americans are being oppressed and super-exploited

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*Water systems throughout the United States are in serious disrepair and decline while corporate interests continue to dominate the political priorities of municipal and state governments.*

Jackson, Mississippi, the capital and the largest municipality in the state which is 83% African American, has been under siege for many years as the water system continues to deteriorate endangering public health and the economic future of the entire region.

Extreme weather events throughout the southern U.S. have adversely impacted many communities as the administration of President Joe Biden has failed to address the infrastructural upgrades needed to both prevent the disastrous impacts and to also rebuild after the damage is done. An infrastructure bill passed by the Congress and signed by the president earlier this year seemed to be designed to provide cash infusions into the private construction industry along with local and state treasuries.

Nonetheless, there needs to be a comprehensive plan to rebuild essential infrastructure in the urban and rural areas of the U.S. as a matter of urgency. The impact of climate change is compounded by the debilitating political divisions within local and national governmental administrative and legislative structures. These circumstances portend much for the capacity of the country to solve its burgeoning problems.

The capital of the state of Mississippi has an estimated population of more than 150,000 people representing a decline over the last several decades. The phenomenon of “white flight” to the suburbs has taken place in various regions of the U.S.

Large amounts of rainfall during August which resulted in flooding from the Pearl River worsened the already existing problems at the water treatment facility. Pressure was

lowered to the extent that the composition of the water for public consumption was altered. There was a boil water alert for several weeks while the National Guard was deployed to hand out bottles to the population.



Jackson water treatment plant installs new pump (Source: Abayomi Azikiwe)

Residents in Jackson and its environs served by the treatment plant do not trust the safety of the water for drinking, washing and cooking. Any medium and long-term solutions to the water crisis in Jackson will require billions of dollars in investments to construct a new system and hire technical personnel.

Mayor Chokwe A. Lumumba has said that the problems are decades in the making. The state government in Mississippi is almost exclusively white and does not express much sympathy to the residents of Jackson.

After assessing the situation involving strained relations between the state government and Jackson, Lumumba held separate meetings with Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris to discuss the situation in the city. The mayor says that he was assured by the White House that recently allocated infrastructure funding would be sent to assist in the repair of the water treatment system.

Lumumba [noted](#) in a recent statement to the press that:

"Both (Biden and Harris) assured me that the eyes of Washington are watching the city of Jackson. They wanted us to know that we should expect the full arm of support from the federal government in every way that they possibly can. And they assured me their support was going to be demonstrated through long-range and long-term efforts through the EPA. I was delighted to hear that call, it was very encouraging."

Several civil rights and environmental groups in Mississippi are considering alternative strategies designed to place the federal government as the direct supervisor over the water systems in Jackson and throughout the state. Funding from the infrastructure legislation will undoubtedly be allocated to the state government. Many in Jackson and other majority

African American communities feel they have been systematically disenfranchised in regard to the allocation of state and federal funds.

[According to an official](#) of the state chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Abre Conner, who is director of environmental and climate justice:

“The state is in a place, it’s got a lot of power to either make things easier for Black communities or to make things harder, and what we feel like has happened in Mississippi is that the state has used its power to make things harder for Black folks. This is why there needs to be more effort in order to have funding flow straight into Jackson and for the state to not have complete control over the decisions about federal funding.”

An article in Politico reports that \$75 million in funding from the infrastructure bill will be sent to the state of Mississippi. This will be added to another \$450 million from previous COVID-19 relief funding from the federal government. However, under the current political situation many African Americans have expressed distrust of the intentions of the Republican-controlled state government.

## Class Action Lawsuit Targets City Officials

On September 20, media reports indicated that four residents on behalf of the people of Jackson have filed a class action lawsuit against the current and former city administrations along with the water treatment facility. The legal action appears to disregard the role of the state government in Mississippi in creating the existing crisis.

The private engineering firm Siemens Corporation, which signed a \$90 million contract with the City of Jackson to improve its water system and Trilogy Engineering Services LLC, who in 2016 was hired to study the city’s O.B. Curtis treatment facility, are also targets of the litigation.



Jackson water treatment plant (Source: Abayomi Azikiwe)

The lawsuit claims that the City of Jackson has the responsibility of providing clean and consistent water resources to its residents. The plaintiffs cite damages related to public health, child welfare and economic distress.

[An ABC News](#) dispatch on the recent legal developments says:

“Mississippi ended its boil water notice for all of Jackson’s residents on Sept. 15, nearly two weeks after water pressure returned to the state capital’s residents after days of a water shortage crisis that impacted thousands of Jacksonians. The complaint names the City of Jackson; Mayor Chokwe A. Lumumba; former mayor Tony Yarber; former public works directors Kishia Powell, Robert Miller and Jerriot Smash; Siemens Corporation, Siemens Industry and Trilogy Engineering Services as defendants. Spokespersons for Lumumba, Powell, Miller, and Siemens declined to comment when reached by ABC News. Yarber, Smash, and Trilogy Engineering did not immediately respond to ABC News’ requests for comment.”

A scandal involving Southern Mississippi University (SMU) alumni and professional football player Brett Favre indicates the level of corruption related to federal funding in the state. Favre, in cooperation with well-connected state officials redirected millions in what was described as “welfare money” to build a volleyball stadium at his alma mater as well as direct cash payments to the sports personality of more than \$1 million to make speeches which were never delivered. Although this incident occurred under a previous state administration, many believe that such schemes are commonplace in the state.

The only real solution to the crisis is what local social justice organizations are advocating and that is for a federal government intervention to ensure the rehabilitation of the water system in Jackson. State officials have demonstrated for decades an indifference and hostility towards majority African American municipalities.

## National Water Crisis Worsening in the U.S.

What has taken place in Jackson during the last several years is representative of a national problem related to providing clean and affordable water resources for the people. There was much attention focused on the massive water shutoffs in Detroit during the contrived illegal bankruptcy of 2013-2014. During the summer of 2014, the Republican right-wing governor’s appointed emergency manager ordered the termination of water services to tens of thousands of residents in the 80% African American populated municipality over alleged arrears in bill payments.

Flint, Michigan, which had received its water supply from the Detroit Water & Sewage Department (DWSD) for decades, was suddenly disconnected in 2014 under the same emergency management regime. The city’s water supply was then taken from the abandoned industrially contaminated Flint River. What resulted was the poisoning of an entire majority African American municipality where thousands were sickened resulting in numerous deaths.

Several years ago, the Berkey water filter company pointed out that it will require substantial investments by the U.S. to address the national crisis. Already two years behind, [Berkey emphasized](#):

“The American Society of Civil Engineers or the ASCE stated that the government needs



to invest around \$3.6 trillion in the infrastructure alone by 2020. With such an investment, it can increase the support system of America at the standard levels. This investment can also repair the nation's stormwater and wastewater systems over the next 20 years. In some parts of America, unmanaged stormwater systems affect the streams and the rivers and cause health problems. Furthermore, the majority of the drinking infrastructure is aging and is almost falling apart. According to studies, there are about 240,000 water main breaks annually in America. For every pipe that needs to be replaced, the cost in the coming years to come can reach up to \$1 trillion, according to the American Water Works Association (AWWA)."

The necessity of bringing into existence these infrastructural improvements are a matter of life and death. Such a monumental set of priorities can only be realized through a mass movement which confronts local, state and federal entities in a concerted organized campaign to save and improve the water systems throughout the U.S.

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*Featured image: Jackson Mayor Chokwe A. Lumumba (Source: Abayomi Azikiwe)*

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