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USA Environment

Climate Change and Environmental Injustice: Jackson, Mississippi

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Earlier this month, storms caused flooding in Jackson, the state capital and the largest city in the state of Mississippi, knocking out the water system and leaving residents without running water. The flood overwhelmed the city's antiquated water system leaving the 150,000 residents, 85 percent of whom are Black, with no drinking water, no water for toilets, or bathing for a week. One young mother, Monica LaShay Bass, told a reporter, "It's a hurtful feeling when you don't have no water, especially when you've got newborn babies."

The storms and the flooding were the result of climate change, which is accelerating as a result the use of coal and oil to fuel our capitalist world economy and is affecting us all but unequally. As in Jackson, the results of climate change often fall most heavily on working people and the poor. Climate injustice or environmental racism, as it is sometimes called, is a result of the economic system and the political decisions that are similar in many cities throughout the country. But let's look at the case of Jackson, an extreme version of many typical problems.

In the nineteenth century, Mississippi was one of the wealthiest American states. In 1860 Mississippi's plantations and its 430,000 Black slaves produced a million bales of cotton. The slaveholder class was fabulously wealthy while most other whites lived in poverty and Blacks were slaves. After the U.S. Civil War abolished slavery in 1865, white planters remained in control of the land. Slavery was replaced by share-cropping which became debt peonage and Black people continued to work the land and produce cotton. Whites violently attacked the Black population, took over all political power, and by the 1880s had established the Jim Crow system: Black people were denied the right to vote, were racially segregated, and lived under the threat of lynching. Not until the Civil Rights Movement of 1954 to 1968 did Black people succeed in forcing an end to legal segregation and recovering their political rights and civil liberties.

Yet, the former slave states of the South remain the poorest in America. Mississippi is the poorest of all with 18.8% of its residents living in poverty and 15 percent food insecure. It has the highest child poverty rate. It has the second lowest educational levels in the country (after West Virginia), is among ten states with least affordable housing, and is ranked as among the bottom five in health care.

Jackson, once somewhat better off, has suffered a dramatic decline in the last forty years. In 1980 it had a population of just under 203,000, about half white, but tens of thousands of whites fled, undermining the tax base so that city government could no longer maintain social services, like the water system. Today individual incomes in Jackson average \$23,714 compared to a national average of \$62,518. Residents are often unable to pay their water bills and collectively owe millions of dollars.

The mayor of Jackson is Democrat Chokwe Antar Lumumba, a self-described socialist and revolutionary who has worked alongside Cooperation Jackson, a network of cooperatives and worker-owned, democratically self-managed enterprises. But Lumumba has had to deal with the state's rightwing Republican governor Tate Reeves and the majority Republican legislature, both of which have neglected and punished Jackson. Now the governor wants to privatize the water system.

It will take billions of dollars to repair Jackson's water system, and the Democratic congress recently passed a budget with funds earmarked for such programs, but it will take months if not years to get money to Jackson.

As Ms. Olugbala-Aziz, a local resident says, "We're not asking for mansions, we just want to live and have the normal stuff, running water, clean water."

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The climate crisis, affecting everyone but especially the poor, must be fought at the national and global level and by all of us.

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