

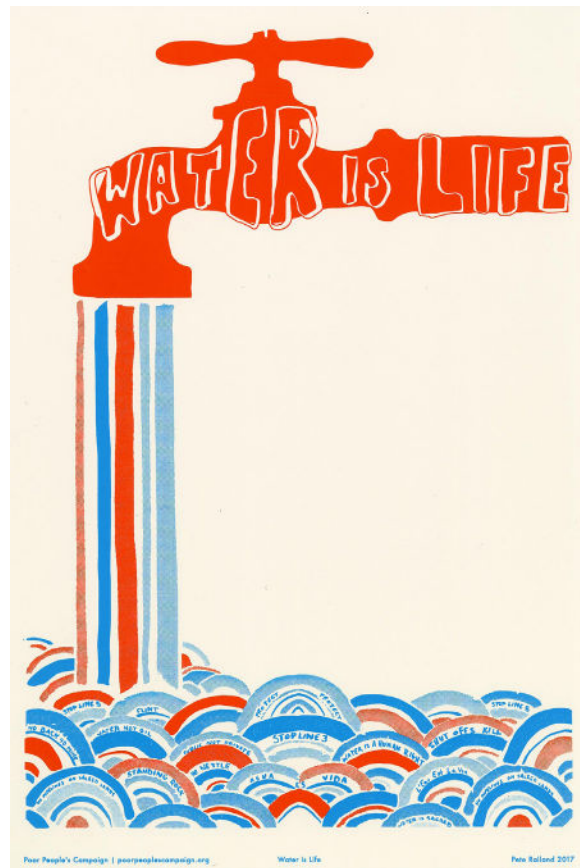
# Water and Environmental Racism

BY MATT REED AND URSULA WOLFE-ROCCA

THE FLINT WATER CRISIS IS ONE OF THE most egregious examples of environmental racism in recent memory. In 2011, Michigan Governor Rick Snyder appointed an “emergency manager,” an unelected official, to oversee the majority-Black city’s budget and cut costs. To save money, the manager ended the city’s five-decade practice of piping treated water for its residents from Detroit, and opted to pump highly corrosive, untreated water from the Flint River. While residents immediately complained of skin rashes, hair loss, and foul smelling and tasting water, it took more than a year before the contaminated water was addressed by the government, and many more years of litigation and grassroots organizing to win a settlement for victims. At least a dozen people died of Legionnaires’ disease and many more were sickened with lead and other toxins.

Flint is not anomalous. In every corner of the country, poor people and people of color are disproportionately burdened by environmental contamination — in their neighborhoods, schools, and homes.

In this mixer activity, inspired by the 2016 *Democracy Now!* documentary [Thirsty for Democracy](#), students learn about the struggle of residents to access safe water for drinking, cooking, and bathing in the majority-Black cities of Flint, Michigan; Jackson, Mississippi; and Newark, New Jersey. By bringing the circumstances of these different locales into conversation with one another, students see that these water crises are not simply accidents that could have happened anywhere; they are manifestations of racism, past and present, that happen in some places — and to some people — far more than others. As Robert Bullard, known as the “father of environmental



*Water is Life* by Pete Railand

justice,” a scholar featured in the activity, says, “Zip code is still the most potent predictor of an individual’s health and well-being.”

In the mixer, each student takes on the persona of someone whose life is touched by these crises — along with some scholars and experts who offer important background — and hear stories from each other to surface patterns across the different cities. In conversations, they find others who can help answer mixer questions. For example: “Find someone who was directly affected or harmed by one of the water crises. Who are they?”

Just Seeds Poor People’s Campaign Portfolio

How were they affected or harmed?”

Students meet Kawanne Armstrong, a Flint grandmother who tested her water when it started running brown and smelling foul, and found it had dangerous levels of lead. Now she relies entirely on bottled water for herself and her grandson, which is not always easy to come by. Students meet Kehinde Gaynor, of Jackson, who explains the painful calculus of parenting through a water shutdown:

My daughter loves to eat fruit. She says, “Daddy, can I get an apple?” But rather than just grab one and give it to her, I’m weighing washing that apple off with the same bottle of water that we’re using to brush our teeth, to drink, to clean. Do I have enough water to give my daughter an apple?

Students also encounter stories of community activists. Shakima Thomas says that it was her 5-year-old testing positive for lead — a neurotoxin that can permanently damage children’s brains — that pushed her to join the Newark Water Coalition and lobby the city to replace the lead pipes. Nayyirah Shariff works with the Flint Democracy Defense League (FDDL), which organized a door-to-door campaign delivering bottled water, water filters, and replacement filters, and to document people’s stories about the water crisis.

Those on the frontlines also share their analysis of the roots of the crises. From Claire McClinton, founder of FDDL, students learn it was Flint’s *unelected* emergency manager, who sought to save money by switching Flint’s drinking water from the Detroit system to the poisonous Flint River, where General Motors had dumped industrial toxins for decades. She insists the Flint crisis is not only a water problem, but also “a democracy problem.” From Kendrick Hart in Jackson, students learn that one of two main water treatment plants in the city is more than 100 years old but that when Jackson is under a boil-water notice or water pressure is too low to flush a toilet or take a shower, the water systems in the majority-white suburbs continue to operate without problem.

The activity also includes a handful of “experts,” people who are neither residents of

the cities, nor directly organizing on their behalf, but who share critical context about the systemic causes of the crises. From journalist Judd Legum, students learn that a massive multibillion dollar corporation — Siemens — brokered a \$90 million contract with the city of Jackson to fix the water system, which it utterly failed to do. From hydroclimatologist Dr. Upmanu Lall, students learn that all parts of the U.S. municipal water system need massive upgrades and investment. But, he points out, while the United States has a Department of Energy (which continues to prop up the death-dealing fossil fuel industry), it has no Department of Water to coordinate the vast and critically important undertaking of ensuring clean water for the nation.

Ultimately, the stories included in this activity suggest that the injustices faced by the residents in Flint, Newark, and Jackson will not be addressed by merely swapping out pipes or building a new water treatment plant. There is a water crisis; but there is also a housing crisis, a health care crisis, a governance crisis, a funding crisis, and yes, a white supremacy and capitalism crisis. This activity helps students identify key causes of environmental racism so they are better equipped to demand and enact lasting solutions that will add up to a more just world for us all.

## Suggested Procedure

*Note:* This activity is a role play. We encourage you to read the Zinn Education Project’s [primer on role plays](#) before leading this activity with students.

1. **Optional openings:** When we taught this lesson recently in Portland, Oregon, we opened the lesson in two different ways:
  - a. When we had the time, we took students on a short field trip to the nearest water fountain in the school and had a short discussion. One of the teachers took a long and dramatic swig of water from the fountain and asked students, “So was that safe? To drink this water?” Some students affirmed it was; others weren’t

so sure. In one class, a student shrugged and said, “I don’t think it’s safe, but I drink it anyway. Bottled water is too expensive.” Next we asked: “How do you know whether to trust the water or not?” As the discussion continued, students recalled their elementary years when the school district shut off school water fountains because of unsafe levels of lead; they also talked about water protocols at home — water filters or tap water or bottled water. The goal of this conversation was to give students a concrete connection to what we’d be learning and to bring some analytic focus to a daily ritual (water use) that is shaped by many factors (geographic location and class, for example) but can appear universal.

- b. When we were short on time, we displayed a slide that asked, “What is environmental racism?” and “Can you think of any examples of environmental racism? In Portland?” We asked students to turn to a table partner to discuss the two questions; we also encouraged them to jot down some notes that we’d return to at the end of the activity.
2. Introduce the mixer. We said, “Today we are going to do an activity about three different places that recently experienced environmental racism related to water — Flint, Michigan; Jackson, Mississippi; and Newark, New Jersey. We are going to learn about what happened in each place and how different groups responded. At the end of the activity, we’ll come back to the question: What is environmental racism?” Hand out a name tag and role sheet to each student. There are 26 roles. (We know not all classes have 26 students. For smaller classes, we encourage you to use the roles in order — roles 1-15 for a class of 15, 1-20 for a class of 20; since there are multiple roles that speak to each geographic location, we have arranged them so that even small groups should get a good sample of information and experiences. For

larger classes, some students will represent the same role.)

3. Give students 10 minutes to read their roles a couple of times. Encourage them to underline key information, facts, and experiences. Explain to students that they will represent this person in the mixer activity, so they want to be as familiar as possible with the facts included in the role description. After they’ve had a chance to read and mark up their roles, ask students to flip over the role sheet and jot down a few facts about their role — name, location, key experiences and knowledge about the water crises. Assure students that this is not a quiz; it is just a way of identifying the information they need to go back to the role to try to memorize.
4. Now ask students to turn their attention to the mixer questions. Tell them that these are the questions they’ll use to guide their discussions with other students. Read them aloud and ask students to mark with a small check mark each question that their role can answer. Tell them, “When you meet someone new in the mixer, you can say, ‘I can help you answer questions 1, 2, and 5,’ for example.”
5. Review the rules for a mixer. Students will move around the room, meeting, talking, and taking notes about their conversations. Some guidelines:
  - a. Keep conversations one-on-one. No huddles or beehives.
  - b. Answer only one question per conversation; meet a different role to answer each question.
  - c. Represent the role with care — these are all real people.
6. During the mixer, as the teacher, you have options. In one recent class, we took on roles, and participated alongside students. This was beneficial in a couple of ways. It gave us an opportunity to keep tabs on when it made sense to begin wrapping up the activity — to track the energy in the room. It is also nice

when there are an odd number of students, to be able to hop in to meet a student in search of a partner. If you decide not to participate in the mixer, we encourage you to nevertheless move around the room, reminding students of the rules and encouraging them to circulate around the *whole* room, not just wait for others to come to them.

7. After about 25 minutes of mixing, ask students to return to their seats and answer some questions in writing. This writing gives students a chance to gather their thoughts before discussing. We gave students about eight minutes to write on four questions:
  - a. What did you learn? Any surprises?
  - b. What stories did you find most interesting or disturbing?
  - c. What are some similarities between Flint, Jackson, and Newark? What differences did you notice?
  - d. What's a question you're left with?
8. Ask students to form groups of four for a small group discussion. We encouraged them to start their conversations by sharing their questions — part d, above. Some of these were “big” questions: “Why doesn't the government care if we get sick?” Some of these were more clarifying questions: “Wait, was there also lead in the water in Jackson, or only in Flint and Newark?” Then we asked them to discuss:
  - a. What are the similarities between the Flint, Jackson, and Newark examples?
  - b. What caused these crises? Who or what is to blame?
  - c. How are people in Flint, Jackson, and Newark taking action in response to these crises?
  - d. How do the stories in this activity illustrate “environmental racism?”

9. For the final, full group discussion, we focused on the questions: *What caused these crises?* and *Who or what is to blame?* Many students' first answer was racism. They noted that the higher the concentration of Black people in cities (in some cases linked to housing and bank policies that kept Black people out of certain neighborhoods; in other cases caused by white people abandoning cities to avoid school desegregation) the more likely it seemed those places would have water problems. Other students focused on the role of government, agreeing with the Flint Democracy Defense League that the water crisis was symptomatic of a larger democracy crisis, in which elected officials fail to provide even the most basic health and environmental protections to their Black constituents. One student was convinced that someone must be making money off these crises; she asked, “Does the government have an incentive to make us sick? I mean, do they get more money the more time we spend in the hospital?” Although we clarified that this was not the case, we also affirmed that she was right to think about incentives in the system, and about who might benefit from segregating not just people, but also toxins, pollutants, and crumbling infrastructure. Soon students were asking questions about taxes, budgets, and federal versus state responsibility for ensuring residents' access to clean water. We ended the discussion unpacking with students the oft-quoted reminder: “Budgets are moral documents.”

This was a one-period (90-minute block) lesson. Due to a number of constraints, we did not elaborate and extend this curriculum into the multiple days that it deserved. However, were we to have had the time, we would ask students to return to the words of Flint residents, Kenyetta Dotson and Nayyirah Shariff. Dotson says she still doesn't “feel whole” five years after the crisis. Shariff says, “We need Flint residents to be made whole.” We would want to ask students: *What would it require to make the residents of Flint, Newark, and Jackson whole?*

One way to help students answer this question would be to introduce lessons on the fight for reparations — not just for enslavement and Jim Crow segregation, but for contemporary and ongoing manifestations of white supremacy. In “[Repair: Students Design a Reparations Bill](#),” students take on the role of activist-experts (including some from Flint) to improve upon a mock Congressional bill for reparations; the task requires students to consider how to redress environmental racism and resulting health disparities, along with injustices related to voting, education, the criminal justice system, employment, and housing. ❖

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# Mixer Roles

## **Dr. Paul Mohai**

*University of Michigan School for Environment and Sustainability*

I am a professor at the University of Michigan. What happened in Flint, Michigan, is the most egregious example of environmental injustice and racism in my more-than three decades of studying this issue. One hundred thousand people, largely poor and Black, were unable to drink from their taps when the community's drinking water source was switched by a city leader they had no say in electing. Residents were killed, sickened, and permanently disabled by their tap water. It's extraordinary. But it also follows a pattern you can see in every corner of the country. Poor people and people of color are disproportionately burdened by environmental contamination. These groups are seldom given meaningful say in the decisions that affect their communities and quality of life. Their concerns about pollution and its health impacts are minimized, discounted, or dismissed. Flint residents noticed the change in water quality immediately and complained about it. But the response by Michigan state officials was to dismiss those concerns and make false assurances that the water was safe.

## **Claire McClinton**

*Flint Democracy Defense League*

I helped launch the Flint Democracy Defense League's water task force in Flint, Michigan, to address the fact that as our water bills were skyrocketing, the safety of our water was plummeting. I tell people, "We do not have a water problem. We have a democracy problem." In 2011, Michigan Governor Rick Snyder signed a law enabling him to send an *unelected* "emergency manager" to cities deemed to be in fiscal crisis. It just so happened most of those places are majority African American. Well, Flint's emergency manager was the one who thought he could save money by switching Flint's drinking water from the Detroit system to the poisonous Flint River, where General Motors had dumped all its industrial toxins over decades. We, the mostly African American residents of Flint, did not have any say in that choice. And we are the ones being poisoned by it.

## **Kawanne Armstrong**

*Flint, Michigan, resident*

It's cold and icy here and I am out on the streets looking for water for my grandson. It's shameful that I cannot turn on my tap and get my infant grandson clean water; it's even more shameful that they expect us to pay for poisoned water! After the water was switched from the Detroit system (piped from Lake Huron) to the Flint River, I turned on my tap and brown, foul-smelling water ran out — it smelled horrible, like rotten eggs. And it wasn't the government or the water company who offered to test my water. It was the folks from Flint Democracy Defense League — just community members like me. They found lead in it. Lead is dangerous for anyone, but in children — like my grandson — it is even worse. It can cause severe damage to their brains. To add insult to injury, the day after Christmas, I got a shut-off notice from the water company saying if I did not immediately pay \$196, my water would be completely shut off. I have a question for Governor Snyder: If this was your grandchild, would you be OK with this?

## **Kehinde Gaynor**

*Jackson, Mississippi, resident*

If you have consistent access to clean water, you probably don't notice how much you use it. But lose it, and you'll suddenly notice all the little things. My daughter loves to eat fruit. She says, "Daddy, can I get an apple?" But rather than just grab one and give it to her, I'm weighing washing that apple off with the same bottle of water that we're using to brush our teeth, to drink, to clean. Do I have enough water to give my daughter an apple? My family went 18 days with no water at all. A month later and we still have a boil advisory. After several days of wall-to-wall news about the water crisis in Texas (in 2021), I wondered why no one was talking about Mississippi. So I made a video highlighting all the daily indignities of trying to survive with no access to running water. The video went viral, but a year later? Another water crisis — this time so severe schools had to close. So now I can't give my daughter an apple or send her to school! Those 114 square miles of aging water infrastructure in Jackson are not going to fix themselves. But the state government — dominated by white Republicans — seems unwilling to help Jackson, a mostly Black and mostly Democratic city.

## **Dr. Aaron Packman**

*Center for Water Research*

I am a researcher who studies the history of the federal government's investment in infrastructure — roads, bridges, electrical grids, water systems, etc. Jackson, Mississippi, is like a lot of places. In Jackson, the mostly Black residents suffer regular episodes of no water or unsafe water, a crisis that has been unfolding over years. The federal government bears a lot of responsibility. In the late 1970s, 30 percent of spending on water systems came from the federal government; now, federal spending on water utilities has plummeted to less than 4 percent. This decrease in federal spending began during the Reagan presidency in the 1980s. Reagan hated taxes. He said, "The power to tax is the power to destroy." Just as more and more cities were electing people of color to lead them, the Reagan administration said, "We don't trust you to manage federal money." So now states are pretty much on their own. And the most vulnerable groups — poor people, Black people, the elderly, the disabled — in those states? Basically, the government has decided to let people suffer.



## **Pauline Rogers**

*RECH Foundation, Jackson, Mississippi*

We have 180,000 mostly-Black residents in Jackson who are without access to safe drinking water — again. Our organization offers housing and work opportunities to women coming out of prison and other folks affected by incarceration. In Mississippi, 62 percent of the prison population is Black, while Black people make up only 39 percent of the overall population. Just as Black people are more likely to lack clean water, they are more likely to become entangled in the criminal legal system. My husband and I are both formerly incarcerated ourselves and know how hard it is to stitch together a life after years behind bars. Two of the houses I run are totally without water. Another has severely low pressure. Not having access to water makes an already-hard process of rebuilding your life after prison much more difficult. How are you supposed to get a job if you cannot shower? We've been through this enough times now that we know that when the water slows you need to collect as much as you can. We fill a giant barrel and every old Clorox bottle we can find. Water is a necessity for us all. You can't leave anybody behind in a crisis. But being left behind is a daily ordeal for formerly incarcerated people. Too many people think we deserve constant punishment, ongoing unforgiveness. We have learned we have to fend for ourselves. No one is coming to save us.

## **Kendrick Hart**

*Jackson, Mississippi, resident*

My dad is in his 70s and he has been complaining since he was my age — I am 30 — about the water in Jackson. I remember when I was a kid my dad would say, “They need to do something about the water before it gets bad.” In Jackson, we've got two main water treatment plants. One of them is over 100 years old. The other one is 30 years old, and it breaks down *all* the time. Sometimes there is such low water pressure, we can't flush toilets or take showers. Sometimes they send us boil-water notices saying that the water isn't safe to drink unless we boil it first. In recent years, when it freezes or floods — which it does more and more — we don't have any water at all.

I saw the president on TV saying he had spoken with the mayor and he was sending federal help to get us through the most recent crisis, the flooding of the Pearl River. But why has it taken so long to address this problem? There could have been something done a long time ago to prevent all this. Right now, I have friends and family who are visiting relatives and colleagues in the majority-white suburbs — to take a shower and fill up water containers. A question: Why do those nearby towns still have water while we, a majority-Black city, have none?

## **Yvette Jordan**

### *Newark Education Workers Caucus*

I am an educator in Newark, New Jersey, and a member of the Newark Education Workers Caucus. We are a group of educators across Newark committed to smashing racism, sexism, imperialism, and exploitation as we build a new world based on human need, not profit. So when we learned that the lead in our water was nearly as poisonous as the water in Flint, Michigan — and that half of all our schools had high levels of lead in the water — we joined the National Resources Defense Council’s lawsuit against the city. That’s not all we did. We also made sure people had enough safe water to drink when the city would not.

We organized volunteer teams to deliver bottled water, distribute water filters, and canvas neighborhoods so that all residents knew that their tap water might be unsafe. Why? Because the city’s own plan to distribute bottled water excluded those who were most vulnerable to lead — often low income, elderly, and disabled people. And the water filters the government handed out did not actually filter the lead! I’ve been a long-time supporter of our mayor and our elected leaders. But this failure to protect residents has broken my trust in them.

## **Nayyirah Shariff**

### *Flint Democracy Defense League (FDDL) and Flint Rising*

In Flint, Michigan, it’s not just poisonous water that is running into people’s homes; it’s also the misinformation and confusion coming from government officials. First, we were told the water was safe; then, when the state came to test our water, they told us to let it run for five minutes before taking a sample. Well, that was to make the numbers look better than they are! Then when the Environmental Protection Agency came to investigate, the report they issued was kept secret for months! That is why FDDL is going door-to-door. We are handing out fresh water, water filters, and replacement filters. But we are also handing out accurate information and gathering people’s stories about the water crisis. When this immediate crisis passes, we need Flint residents to be made whole. That means not just replacing pipes and water mains, but appliances, and in some cases, entire homes. It means adequate health care for everyone. It means wraparound services for the children who have lead poisoning, who may need lifelong care because lead poisoning can cause *permanent* brain damage. And most importantly, it means creating a government that listens to us, invests money in our needs, and actually believes that we deserve safe and healthy neighborhoods.

## **Sabre Bee**

### *Newark Water Coalition*

Since 2016, our majority Black and Latinx city has been in a public health crisis. The water that comes out of our faucets is poisoned with lead. What people feel is not just frustration or anger about environmental racism; it's ecological grief. That's why I co-founded the Newark Water Coalition. Our mission is to make sure everyone has access to clean water, especially the poor and working-class Black and Latinx communities that are often forgotten about. We do not believe that Superman, or any superhero for that matter, is going to come and take the lead out of our pipes. We believe in people power — that solutions to problems in our communities come directly from everyday people acting together. We use protests to amplify our message. You might have seen us outside of the 2019 MTV Video Music Awards with our signs that read, "Clean Water 4 Newark Now!" and "NJ Officials: Will you let Flint happen to Newark?" And you know what, people power is working. After one of our protests, the city of Newark announced that it would replace thousands of pipes across the city. Does this mean our work is done? No. Look at Flint. Flint is still fighting for clean water five years after it became international news. We refuse to stop fighting until every person has clean water. That's when we know we've won.

## **Dr. Robert D. Bullard**

### *Texas Southern University*

I am a sociologist and environmental activist. I have been called the father of the environmental justice movement — a movement that understands that systemic racism and environmental destruction are interlocking forms of oppression. In my very first study of environmental racism — about garbage disposal in Houston, Texas — I found that *all* city-owned landfills and six of eight city-owned incinerators (that burn garbage) were in Black neighborhoods. Three of the four privately-owned landfills were also located in Black neighborhoods.

In a city that is only one-quarter Black, more than 80 percent of all the garbage in Houston was being disposed of in Black communities. I already knew the United States is segregated, but that study helped me realize that pollution is too. Yes, Black people tend to live in poorer neighborhoods with under-resourced schools relative to their white counterparts. But they are also much more likely to be deprived of high-quality sanitation services and clean water, and to be exposed to higher-than-average levels of pollutants. It has been almost 50 years since my first study, and today, zip code is *still* the most potent predictor of an individual's health and well-being.

## **Dr. Upmanu Lall** *Columbia University*

I am a hydroclimatologist who studies drinking water in the United States. When I see all the media attention devoted to the recent crises in Flint, Michigan, and Jackson, Mississippi, I want to make sure we do not miss a critical truth — the crisis is not just in Flint or Jackson; it’s nationwide. My colleagues and I have looked at thousands of water utilities’ records from the last several decades. Water-quality violations of the U.S. Safe Drinking Water Act more than doubled between 1980 and 2015. In 2015 alone, the water of 21 million Americans was cited for violating safe standards for drinking water. There are three big parts of the U.S. water system, and all need immediate attention. One is storage — reservoirs and dams are in desperate need of replacement. The median age of U.S. dams (which are built to last 50 years) is around 60 years. Two is conveyance — the pipes that bring water to our homes and the sewers that take waste away. In the United States, there are 850 water-main failures *a day*. Third is the treatment system. Every time you hear about a “boil water” notice? That is a broken treatment system. We need massive upgrades, but where is the government will? There are seven or eight different federal agencies with some jurisdiction over water, but no *one* agency is ultimately accountable. Compare that with the situation for energy, where we have the Energy Information Administration and the Department of Energy. Why is there no “Department of Water” in the United States?

## **Chokwe A. Lumumba** *Mayor of Jackson, Mississippi*

I was elected in 2017 with 93 percent of the vote. I campaigned to make Jackson “the most radical city on the planet.” I still stand by that goal, because it will take a radical transformation of our politics to make one of the poorest cities, in the poorest state in the union, worthy of its people. Tate Reeves, the white Republican governor of Mississippi, says the water crisis in Jackson is my fault, the consequence of my “incompetence.” This comment reflects a racist narrative with deep roots in U.S. history.

During Reconstruction, the era after the Civil War, formerly enslaved people elected leaders across the South and began rebuilding the nation. But white supremacists quickly regrouped and destroyed their progress — with violence and fraud.

When Black people protested Reconstruction’s demise, we were told our experiment in self-government had failed because of our “incompetence.” Sound familiar? It is unconscionable that the residents of Jackson have to live with water treatment plants that are, in some cases, more than 100 years old and break down all the time, leaving the community with water pressure too low to flush toilets or take a shower — and in some cases with no water at all.

That’s why I wrote the governor, months before the most recent crisis, asking the state for \$47 million for emergency infrastructure improvements. He never answered my letter. Now, after years of back-and-forth, the Congress — the federal, not state, government — has approved \$600 million to overhaul our city’s water system. And what are Mississippi Republicans doing? They are trying to take it over by passing a new law that would give the governor (white, Republican) and lieutenant governor (white, Republican) the power to appoint the majority of members of a new water authority board that would control water, wastewater, and stormwater utilities in Jackson, whose population is 82 percent Black. This is plantation politics — and it’s the 21st century.

## Judd Legum

*Journalist*

When it comes to who is at fault for the fact that the residents of Jackson, Mississippi, keep finding themselves without access to safe water — or any water at all — there is a lot of blame to go around. You could point the finger at racism. After all, the origins of the dilapidated water infrastructure in Jackson go back to the desegregation of the schools there in the 1960s.

Many affluent white families fled the city rather than share schools with Black people. Fewer people — and, in particular, fewer property owners — in Jackson meant less tax revenue and less money to make repairs or updates to the water system.

You could also point the finger at the Republican-controlled state legislature. Recently, Jackson (a majority Democratic city) requested \$47 million to address aging water infrastructure. But the state allocated only \$3 million. You can't fix 100-year-old water treatment plants and 114 square miles of old pipes with \$3 million! Another guilty party? Siemens — the massive multinational corporation. They lobbied the city for a no-bid contract to install new automated water meters, a new billing system, and make repairs to water treatment plants and sewer lines.

Yes, it would be costly — \$90 million — but Siemens promised it would more than pay for itself within 15 years. Instead, the project was a disaster. Siemens installed one-third of the water meters incorrectly, the billing system didn't work, and residents received bills that were unusually high. Siemens made an already-bad situation worse. But what do they care? They're a multibillion dollar corporation headquartered in Germany. They have no allegiances to the people of Jackson.

## Melissa Mays

*Water You Fighting For and Flint, Michigan, resident*

When I say the water here in Flint is making people sick, I'm not exaggerating. All three of my sons are anemic now. They have bone pain every single day and miss a lot of school because they're constantly sick. And me? I have seizures and diverticulosis — my digestive tract is painfully inflamed. Almost every system in our bodies is suffering. It turns out that when Flint's emergency manager switched the source of our drinking water, he did not include any corrosion-control — the additives that can be put into the water to stop lead from old pipes flowing through people's taps. And it's not just the lead pipes that are a problem. *All* the pipes here have been corroded by the Flint River water — so you've got copper, aluminum, tin, and chromium in our water too, all the poisons that General Motors dumped into our waterways for decades. Human bodies cannot handle that. Our mayor asked the state for \$55 million to replace all the lead pipes; the governor said we could have half that. You know, the United Nations has the Geneva Convention that says what is and is not OK in a war. And it says it's illegal to poison a city's water source, even in war. Well, we're not at war, but it feels like it.

## **Erik Olson**

*National Resource Defense Council*

I am a lawyer with the National Resources Defense Council. Our organization advocates for people across the country whose right to safe drinking water is being violated by local governments. Too often, it is communities of color who are most severely affected. When we learned that hundreds of children in Newark, New Jersey — a majority Black and Latinx city — had elevated levels of lead in their blood, and that nearly half of the homes tested and of all schools had poisonous water, we acted fast. Joined by teachers from the Newark Education Workers Caucus, we sued the city of Newark. One of the problems in Newark, like many other cities, is that local governments often downplay and hide how serious the lead poisoning is. So we demanded greater transparency and more control by residents. Residents of Newark should not be punished for the failures of government leaders to act. There are a lot of other cities — Flint, Michigan; Chicago; Baltimore and others — that have a lot of these old lead pipes, many of them 100-years-old. It may not always be as serious as Newark or Flint. But we have a national problem, and we really need a national solution. We need federal funding and some real commitment across the country to fixing the problem.

## **Kali Akuno**

*Jackson, Mississippi. Cooperation Jackson*

I am the co-founder and co-director of Cooperation Jackson. Our organization is devoted to addressing the many unmet economic and social needs of our city's working people. Mississippi is the poorest state in the Union, and Jackson is even poorer than that. We need jobs, living wages, access to affordable high-quality foods, health care, housing — and water. Right now, Jackson residents are living through a water crisis: months-long periods where you can't drink the water without boiling it, water pressure too low to flush the toilet, and no water at all when it freezes or the local Pearl River floods. Enough is enough!

Here are our demands:

1. The state and federal government immediately fund the complete overhaul of the Jackson water treatment and delivery systems.
2. That the new system remains fully within the democratic control of the city of Jackson.
3. That the new system be built by the people of Jackson...to ensure equity and the development of intergenerational wealth in our communities.
4. That the new system be ecologically designed and built with as many locally and or regionally sourced resources as possible.

We weren't born yesterday. We know that these demands will not be immediately met. So as we work toward these long term goals, we are also organizing to help meet people's needs right now — transporting and distributing clean water to those who need it and building up mutual aid networks to get us through the next storm.

## **Larry Marshall**

*Flint, Michigan, resident*

I come to the Great Holy Temple Church of God at five o'clock in the morning to wait in line for cases of bottled water for my family. I wait in line for five hours — sometimes more. I am a widower. So it's on me to secure water for my four kids. It's been five years since the so-called "Flint water crisis." Two years ago, the government stopped distributing free bottled water to residents. They say the water from the pipes is safe now. But I do not believe anything the government says. They lie so much and talking to them is like talking to the wind. Remember, they told us the water was safe when it was coming out of the tap brown and smelling like rotten eggs. The bottom line is that water is a basic necessity. This is not something we should have to stand in line for. This is not something we should rely on churches for.

## **Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha**

*Children's Hospital of Michigan*

A friend in Flint told me she suspected the water there was not being treated properly. I decided to look into it. I knew about the severe impacts lead can have on human health, especially on kids. In children, lead damages the brain and nervous system, delays growth and development, and causes learning and behavior problems. I pulled all the medical records I could find and compared levels of lead in kids' blood before and after the emergency manager ordered that Flint's water be switched over to the Flint River. It was terrifying. Kids' lead levels were significantly higher after the change and they were even higher in the city's poorest areas. Scientists are supposed to publish findings in academic journals where they're peer reviewed; but that would take too long. So I immediately held a press conference and raised the alarm. State officials accused me of faulty data and of causing mass hysteria. But my data was sound, which even the state ultimately admitted — much too late. During the crisis, I was hardly ever at home for my two young daughters; but I think they understand. I needed to care for their 6,000 siblings — the other children of Flint.

## **Ivelisse Mincey**

*Newark, New Jersey, resident*

I feel betrayed. Lead was found in the drinking water at my 12-year-old son's neighborhood school. It turns out that nearly 50 percent of all the schools have lead in the drinking water. Thirteen percent of all children in New Jersey who tested positive for lead are from Newark, even though our children only make up 3.5 percent of all children in the state. What particularly upsets me is that the school district and our city's leaders hid this information for over a year. They should have protected my son. Instead, they protected themselves. For years, Black and Latinx parents like me have demanded that school leaders clean up the toxic mold and asbestos that poison our children in their own classrooms. But our political leaders ignore us. Although we make up the majority of the city, the fact of the matter is that people of color don't have enough power to make sure crises like lead poisoning don't happen. I'm tired of this. My son, and all our Black and Latinx children, should count just as much as white students.

## **Anthony Diaz**

*Newark Water Coalition*

I was never an “environmental justice” person. I thought that environmental justice was for tree-hugging white people who cared about polar bears. But when tests showed that the water in our schools and homes was poisoned with lead — higher levels than in the infamous Flint, Michigan, water crisis — I had to act. I co-founded Newark Water Coalition with my friend, Sabre Bee. We believe that access to safe water, housing, and food are fundamental human rights. But in Newark, it is disproportionately Black and Brown people who are forced to live without these rights. The lead that is poisoning our water is just the latest example. Some are quick to tell us, “Just replace the pipes and all will be fine.” But that’s not the root of the problem. Years of “white flight” and disinvestment, and a lack of homeownership by the majority of residents are to blame. Decades ago, wealthy white homeowners fled Newark for nearby suburbs, taking tax dollars with them —roughly 10 percent of Newark’s population today is white. Less tax revenue means less money for infrastructure projects, like replacing lead pipes. Newark has one of the highest percentages of renters in the country, nearly 80 percent. Renters have no say whether or not the pipes in their home are replaced, only landlords do. And many are difficult to track down. To solve our water crisis, we must address the economic neglect of Black and Brown communities in Newark.

## **Ras Baraka**

*Mayor of Newark, New Jersey*

It is true that Newark, like Flint, Michigan, is a majority Black city. But that’s where the similarities end. Our lead crisis is not the same as the crisis in Flint. In fact, our city is a model for how to solve the crisis. In Newark, the lead in the water is leached from old underground lead pipes that go into people’s homes. About 25 percent of residents — 14,000 homes — were affected. So we told people that if they had old lead pipes, they needed to stop drinking the water and get it tested. We knew that we needed to replace the old pipes in order to solve this problem. But most people affected are renters, meaning they aren’t responsible for the upkeep of their homes. The landowners are. And the city is not allowed to replace pipes in homes without the owner’s permission. So we raised the money we needed to replace the pipes and changed the laws that prevented us from replacing the pipes. In two years, our city replaced 23,000 underground lead pipes. Flint has replaced only 10,000 pipes in five years. Best of all, dozens of residents of Newark — many who had been unemployed — were hired and trained by a local union and paid living wages to replace the pipes. Newark is not Flint.



## **Haley Lane**

*University of California, Berkeley*

I am a graduate student who was part of a team of researchers that recently published a report on pollution and housing segregation. We found that 20th-century redlining — the unfair lending practices that denied government-backed home loans to Black families and trapped them in segregated, under-resourced neighborhoods — is still having deadly environmental impacts. Our study focused on air quality and found that Black and Latinx people, who are concentrated in historically redlined neighborhoods, live with more smog and fine particulate matter from cars, trucks, buses, and coal plants. The toxic air inflames airways, reduces lung function, triggers asthma attacks, and can damage the heart and cause strokes. While our study did not look at water contamination, many other studies have shown that lead poisoning disproportionately affects Black families — particularly Black children — in the United States. Your zip code should not determine whether you can access clean air or water; but in the United States, it does.

## **Shakima Thomas**

*Newark Water Coalition and Newark, New Jersey, resident*

I am an active member of the Newark Water Coalition — we provide free water testing, free water and food, and trustworthy information to the people of Newark. I am also a mother of a beautiful child, Brice. No one should live in fear their child will be brain damaged from a sip of water out of the kitchen faucet. But I do. Brice is the reason I became an activist for clean and safe water in Newark. When he was 5-years-old he tested positive for lead in his blood. I later learned that lead came from the pipes that carry water into our house. Lead is a neurotoxin that causes cognitive and physical damage, especially to children. The lead is invisible. There is no smell to it. No taste. And our kids are being exposed to it. Every day. At first, I didn't think Newark was like Flint. Yes, our cities are both majority Black and Brown, but I thought that our elected officials (mostly Democrats) would act quickly to make sure no one lived with unsafe water. Instead, they tell half-truths and deny how serious this crisis is. One letter I received from the city said my water was safe to drink, but when I tested it, I learned it has dangerous levels of lead. I've lost trust that Newark city leaders are doing everything they can to protect my son and protect me. At this point, I think what's happening in Newark may become worse than Flint.

## **Christopher Daniels**

*Newark, New Jersey, resident*

One morning I awoke to a police officer pounding at my door. Cops at your door early in the morning is usually not a good thing. So I was surprised to learn that they were here to deliver good news. City water department crews were outside my 100-year-old home and needed me to move my car. It was my turn to have my underground lead pipes replaced with new copper lines. I moved my car and felt a wave of relief. I first learned that the water from my tap might have lead when tests revealed my 4-year-old grandson had high levels of lead in his blood. I felt like it was my fault. I watch him during the week while his parents work. My grandson drinks, eats, and bathes in the water from my home. As a renter on a fixed income, there is no way I can afford to live off bottled water indefinitely. And I'm not the only one. Most of my neighbors are in public housing and on a fixed income. They are stuck with poisonous water while they wait their turn and watch pipes get replaced in those luxury apartments downtown first. Having new pipes is a hallelujah moment for me. I think I'll stop using the water filters and bottled water. But some of my neighbors say they won't be so quick to trust the water again.

## **Kenyetta Dotson**

*Flint, Michigan, resident*

After five years, I know the water crisis is supposedly over, but I still fear for my children and for all the children of Flint. Yes, the city has promised to spend hundreds of millions of dollars to replace all the supply lines that were contaminated with lead when Flint's "emergency manager" thought he could save money by switching our drinking water from the Detroit system to the poisonous Flint River. But when will that project be done? And how will we know we can trust that the water is clean? Remember, they told us the water was safe when we could smell and taste that it wasn't! It is going to take some time for me to trust the government again, to feel whole. Until then, my children and I will continue to use bottled water to cook and brush our teeth. Would this have happened in a rich white suburb? Maybe. But would it have continued for as long as it has? I don't think so.

