

TOWARD THE JUST RESTORATION OF NEW ORLEANS:
READINGS ON RACISM AND RESISTANCE
BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER KATRINA
FOR SOLIDARITY ACTIVISTS

March 2006

Prepared for Common Ground Volunteers
Compiled by Sharon Martinas and Rachel E. Luft

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Left Turn Magazine
ColorLines Magazine
Training for Change
Bay to Gulf Solidarity
Bay Area Katrina Solidarity Committee

We dedicate this reader to a life long fighter for racial justice who passed on while we were compiling it:

ANNE BRADEN.

As a southern, white, anti-racist organizer, Anne devoted 50+ years to struggling for justice. Her life is a model for those of us committed to carrying on her legacy.

*For comments, questions, and/or feedback, please contact
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Wade in the Water

There was still water
standing
6 ft deep
in people's homes
two weeks
after the flood.

Through waters laced
with chemicals
and human excrement
and bloated bodies,
black and brown people
went out every day
to save the kin
left behind,
shredded
and discarded.

King George said
let them eat flood water
and they choked
on the watery ashes
of progress.

Please
he said
standing in a small canoe
floating in what remained
of the 9th ward
hands in the air
eyes trained on the hypnotic guns
of three officers
who minutes before had
fired 4 shots
that may or may not
have been warnings
Please
he said
heart heavy in his mouth
I am looking for the body of my son
Let me find my son's body.

The Mississippi river
was dragged in the 60's to find

the bodies of three civil rights workers
believed to have been murdered
by the klan.
Hundreds of human remains were found
all black all nameless
they were unimportant
to officials and bureaucracy and media coverage
and "good" race relations
so they were thrown back
to the river.
How many lives were submerged
until they stopped kicking?
The Mississippi is claiming the bodies
of the lynched
once again.

Muddied rings still stain
houses halfway up
and the bodies of rotting dogs
still congeal in the stilted Louisiana sun.
In a town an hour outside of New Orleans
there are still corpses
unearthed
from their graves,
set free to float down the street.
An old man sits on his porch:
"I built this house
with my hands.
Lived here 53 years
With my wife
until she died three years ago.
I saw her casket
in the waters
two weeks ago.
No one will help me
put her back in the ground
so she can sleep.
Won't anyone help me?"

DEAR GOD PLEASE HELP US
FEMA
DON'T LEAVE US TO DYE
Read the graffiti on a house
That was completely surrounded
by water
Three weeks and no FEMA

Three weeks and no relief
Three weeks and no aid

“Yeah, they gave us sumthin,”
the brotha snorted,
dreads coiled and purring on his head.
“On the 5th day Red Cross
dropped some hard rock candy on our heads.
Don’t let them tell you Red Cross
never gave us nuthin.”

And they gave them
National Guard and NYPD and US Forestry Dept. (sic—that’s how it’s printed)
and the INS and Border Patrol
and state troopers
and detachments and battalions
and tanks
and automatic weapons and hummers
and curfew and work camps and concrete floors
and nightsticks
and blood and bullets
Don’t let them tell you they never gave us nuthin.

The water has receded
and the human tide
trickles in.

An oldyoung woman
stands in her decomposing house,
black mold climbing up the walls,
coating baby pictures
and high school diplomas.
Her four daughters
run after their 11 collective children.
The grandmother holds the youngest in her arms
and he is nothing
but wise eyes and heavy brow.
“Of course I’m staying,”
she hefts the tiny sage to the other hip.
“I don’t know what we will do
but this
is ours.
We won’t leave it.”

And she does not mean the cramped house
and the dead yard out front.

She means this spark of hope
soggy
sputtering
but burning out
enuf space
to catch a breath.

Walidah Imarisha
(*Community Organizing Collective Newsletter*, Winter 2005)

*Walidah Imarisha is a poet and an independent journalist who works with the Philly-based prisoner family organizing group The Human Rights Coalition, AWOL Magazine and is part of the poetry duo Good Sista/Bad Sista (www.poetryoffthepage.com). She can be reached at [walidahi \(at\) hotmail.com](mailto:walidahi@hotmail.com). Walidah went down to New Orleans for a week in October as a volunteer and journalist, and is working on the documentary *Finding Common Ground* that she shot while down there.*

RACISM AND RESISTANCE IN NEW ORLEANS: An Only -Touching -the- Surface Timeline Nov. 2005 Sharon Martinas, CWS

COLONIZING ERA:

- 1444** Portuguese who captured Africans and brought them to Europe called them 'prisoners of war.'
- 1708** Jean Baptiste Moyne, Sieur de Bienville, brought a crew of businessmen to the swampy delta at the base of the Mississippi. He decided that he needed Africans to drain the swamps in order to make the land profitable.
- 1717** John Law, a Scottish businessman, began to import 3000 Africans per year to Louisiana. His company was called 'Company of the West.'
- 1718** Bienville officially founded New Orleans. In the same year, the Company of the West began to import African men, 17 years or older, for sale at \$660 per African. Settlers could purchase an African on credit if they lacked cash.
- 1722** First record of free Africans in New Orleans. African Americans born into freedom during this period came to be called *gens de couleur libre* or "free people of color," while enslaved Africans who were freed were called "free blacks."
- 1724** Bienville adapts 'Code Noir' (Black Code) from Haiti (then called Sainte-Dominique) as the legal code enabling small white male French colony in New Orleans to rule over labor and bodies of enslaved Africans. The code calls for the death penalty of any African who struck a Frenchman and bruises his face. Punishments varied from cutting off ears, hamstringing, branding, whipping or death. Children of enslaved mothers automatically become enslaved for life.
- 1726** Population of Louisiana was 1925 French land owners, 276 European indentured servants, 229 captured indigenous people, 1540 Africans.
- 1727** Escaped Africans join forces with Natchez Nation for a successful raid against French Commander of Louisiana Etienne de Perier, who was attempting to appropriate Natchez land in what is today Mississippi.
- 1730** Enslaved Africans offered freedom if they fight with French Louisiana Commander Etienne de Perier against Natchez.
- 1731** Enslaved Africans plan major rebellion against French slaveholders, and are discovered. Slaves beheaded and heads impaled along Mississippi as a warning to other slaves.
- 1734** Enslaved Africans offered freedom if they fight with French against Choctaw.
- 1740s** Enslaved Africans establish African market and cultural center in Place des Negres, today Congo Square on Ramparts, just outside the French quarter.

FOUNDING OF THE U.S.

1791 Enslaved Africans in Haiti revolted against French owners, defeated Napoleon's army and became the first republic in the Americas free of slavery. The victory terrified slave owners in the U.S.

1803 U.S. purchases a huge swath of land from the French once called 'The Louisiana Territory.' France has to sell because the loss of Haiti and the defeat of its army has impoverished the French government.

1808 Slave trade becomes 'illegal' though it continues. With the reduction of kidnapped Africans coming to the U.S., the slave auction block became the major means of purchasing enslaved labor. New Orleans became the largest slave market in the U.S. (The auction block, originally located at the St. Louis Hotel, corner of St. Louis and Royal in the French Quarter, was moved to the Old Mint on Decatur Street after slavery ended.)

1811 Rebellion of enslaved Africans in St. John the Baptist Parish of Louisiana fails. 100 rebels are killed.

1831 Nat Turner's rebellion in Virginia horrifies slave owners who tighten rules and punishments to try to prevent escapes.

1841 Enslaved peoples revolt on board the 'Creole' enroute from Virginia to New Orleans. They over power the crew, sail to the Bahamas and are granted asylum.

1849 Harriet Tubman escapes from slavery in Maryland. She returns 19 times to the South land and leads more than 300 enslaved people to freedom.

Before Civil War:

New Orleans developed a three tiered racial hierarchy: whites on top, 'Creoles' or mixed race people in the middle, Africans on the bottom. About 25% of total population was Creole. Of these, 75% were skilled craftsmen, 25% were professionals. Unlike enslaved Africans, Creoles were permitted to learn to read and write; they could testify in court and own property. But they could not marry whites.

Before the Civil War, African labor built New Orleans: They built the levees, ran the mills, cut cane and sugar, were barbers, porters, tailors and light skin women were rented out by their owners as courtesans.

Slave owners rented out 'their' enslaved labor by the day, month or year. Louisiana held the largest plantations in the South.

RECONSTRUCTION PERIOD: 1862-1877

1862 New Orleans surrenders to Union.

1866 Massacre leaves 37 Unionists dead.

Black leaders and Creoles begin organizing right after war. They do not rely on whites. By 1870 they have first integrated police force in the country, 1/3 of cops are Black. From 1870-1877, they integrate public schools. With white Republicans, they are elected (Black men now have the vote) to the state legislature. Pritchard, a Black man, becomes Lieutenant Governor. They rewrite the State Constitution to ensure integration, and they take over the New Orleans School Board to ensure funding.

In response the white population takes its children out of public schools, and sets up 81 private and Catholic schools for white children between 1868-71.

1874 Corporate and middle class whites set up White League (predecessor of White Citizens Councils in the 1950's) to derail the political and economic aspirations of Black people. More working class whites found the Knights of the White Camellia, a secret terrorist organization like the KKK.

1874 In 1874, a White League militia overcomes the Republicans at the 'Battle of Liberty Place' on what is now Canal Street. Beginning of end of an era. White mobs forced Black children out of public schools. They seized the white superintendent overseeing integrated schools in New Orleans, kidnapped him and threatened to lynch him if he didn't sign an order to end segregation. He signed it.

1877 U.S. government withdraws federal troops from the South and disarms Southern Black soldiers. Reconstruction ends. Violence, sharecropping, chain gangs, prisons, disenfranchisement of Black voters and segregation become the law of the land.

ERA OF APARTHEID, LYNCHING AND HEIGHT OF WHITE SUPREMACY:

1877-1950'S

1892 In New Orleans, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) calls a general strike. Unions of Black and white workers, though segregated work together. They all win a 10 hour day, overtime pay but no union shop.

1896 Under the Populist Party banner, an alliance of Black and poor white farmers nearly elect a white Republican governor. But the fragile alliance is broken as poor whites move into the Democratic Party at the expense of Blacks.

1898 The Democratic Party of Louisiana, now fully in power, rewrites the state constitution requiring a literacy test and property ownership for all voters. Poor whites are 'grandfathered' out of this policy (if their grand daddies voted, they can vote), thus ensuring a mass electoral base for white supremacy.

Between 1896 and 1904, Black voters in Louisiana went from 126,849 to 1718, or from 45% to 2% of the total electorate.

1900 Robert Charles, a man of African descent enraged by apartheid, kills 4 white police and shoots several white bystanders in New Orleans. A white mob kills him on the spot. And begins a white riot.

(From 1860's to 1940's, Louisiana has 400 *reported* lynchings. Only Mississippi, Georgia and Texas top that record, and most lynchings go unreported. 86% of the lynched people are Black.)

1906-07 Black and white workers on the levees and the docks, in 36 different unions, stage a lengthy strike in New Orleans. Though the media, employers and the city government all try to keep Black unionists out of the negotiations, both Black and white unions refuse to negotiate. Thanks to their unity, the unions win all their demands.

1921 Four furious white women sue the New Orleans transit system after they are arrested for refusing to sit in the 'colored' section of the bus. Apparently the bus driver thought they were 'Creole.' Their suit alleged they were of 'the pure Caucasian race and from the best families.' They won their suit.

CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT ERA: 1940'S - LATE 1960'S

1940's New Orleans NAACP struggles in court against apartheid laws, especially after U.S. Supreme Court strikes down white primaries in 1944, and President Truman orders armed forces to be desegregated in 1948. But most Black New Orleanians focus on building their own institutions: churches, social clubs, and civic leagues. These will become the foundations of Black activism in the 1950's.

1954 Black students in New Orleans boycott 'McDonough Day which honors John McDonough, called the 'patron saint of New Orleans public schools. By apartheid custom, Black children had to wait in the hot sun while white school children went into the public building first. This action, taken right after the U.S. Supreme Court declared segregated schools to be unconstitutional, was called the first Louisiana boycott based on issues of racism. The boycott was led by A.J.. Chapital, a Black postal worker and NAACP activist.

1954 ff. Whites in New Orleans flock to the newly formed White Citizens Councils determined to keep segregation at all costs.

1957 White run Community Chest, a predecessor to United Way, kicks out the Urban League because it advocates for integration.

1958 City Park facilities, state colleges and universities, and New Orleans transit system are all integrated.

1959 Black activists boycott stores of Dryades business district which have a 90% Black customer base. Boycott led by Consumers League which later became a younger, more militant CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) chapter.

1961 Black social clubs, coordinated under the umbrella of 'United Clubs,' blackouts Mardi Gras for a year. They plan to carnival parades or balls and plan to use the money saved to build a Black social hall. Instead, they donated the money to the NAACP Legal Defense Fund.

Youth sit in at Woolworth's on Canal Street as part of sit in movement throughout South. In response, an elite secret 'Citizens Committee of New Orleans organized by the Chamber of Commerce begins to meet to oversee process of integration in businesses. Their purpose is economic, and they want to integrate without marches or demos.

1960-1962 Period of intense racist mobs attacking Black first graders trying to go to public school in working class white section of the Ninth Ward. White School Board had deliberately chosen schools in neighborhoods totally opposed to integration, though other neighborhoods requested to be integrated. White integrationists formed Save Our Schools to support Black community. White youth carrying Confederate flags threatened to kill Black children while police refused to arrest the mob. White supremacist parents removed their children from the public schools as more Black children entered. White Citizens Council set up 9th Ward Cooperative School for white kids with public tax money. In 1972, schools were 72% Black; in 1992, 92% Black.

1963 NAACP Youth Council pickets 35 stores on Canal Street demanding that Black people be hired above menial jobs. They believe in nonviolence but right to self defense. When a white man hits Raphael Cassimere, the main organizer in the face, the picketer broke his picket sign over the white man's head.

1963 10,000 mostly Black activists march from Shakespeare Park in Central City to City Hall. Banner says 'We march in dignity for human dignity.' March for integration.

1964 A small group of African American men, most of them veterans of World War Two and the Korean War, founded the Deacons for Defense and Justice in the town of Jonesboro, Louisiana. Another chapter was founded in Bogalusa, just 60 miles from New Orleans. The purpose of the organization was to provide armed self defense for civil rights workers, many of whom practiced nonviolence in the face of deadly white supremacist violence.

Their Bogalusa chapter fought off the KKK in a bloody campaign. They had many chapters throughout the South and were investigated by the FBI. Apparently, they left the scene in 1968.

1972 Louisiana legislature removes all Jim Crow laws from books. Intermarriage now legal. Black people can move into white neighborhoods. But 1/3 of the legislators refused to vote!

1978 Ernest 'Dutch' Morial becomes first African American mayor of New Orleans.

WHITE LASH AND REACTION: THE REAGAN ERA & BEYOND

(The information in this section is woefully inadequate. Please do your own research!)

1980 Dr. Jim Dunn and Ron Chisom found The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond in Ohio, and it soon moves to New Orleans where Ron has been a community organizer for years. The People's Institute has become a national collective of experienced organizers and educators dedicated to building an effective movement for social change. P.I. considers racism the primary barrier preventing communities from building useful coalitions and overcoming institutionalized oppress and inequities. .P.I. believes that an effective, broad based movement for social transformation must be rooted in the principles of:

- * Undoing Racism;
- * Sharing Culture,
- * Learning from History,
- * Developing Leadership,
- * Maintaining Accountability,
- * Networking,
- * Undoing Internalized Oppression (Internalized racial inferiority & Internalized Racial Superiority),
- * Gatekeeping,
- * Analyzing the manifestations of racism.

People's Institute organizers worked with the Black residents of St. Thomas housing projects, and with the mostly white workers in the institutions of the Irish Channel surrounding the St. Thomas projects, for over 15 years until the city's and federal government's programs of public and private gentrification wiped out the housing for low income people, and replaced it with condominiums and a huge Walmart.

1989 David Duke, ex Klansman, elected to state House of Representatives. His primary base of white supremacist support comes from the white working class parishes surrounding New Orleans.

1989-91 Louisiana Coalition Against Racism and Fascism comes together in response to the election of David Duke. The coalition is a multiracial but mostly white group that spearheads the organized opposition to Duke when he runs again in 1991 for governor of Louisiana.

Duke's platform is opposition to affirmative action, support of the concept of 'reverse racism' against white people, opposition to welfare, denigration of poor Black women, and equation of Black men and 'criminals.' He wins 55% of the white vote in the statewide election: 156,119 in New Orleans, 665,409 statewide.

Building on Black opposition to Duke's vicious racism, Jewish opposition to Duke's admiration of Nazism, and white corporate fear that a Duke election will damage the tourist trade; the Louisiana Coalition builds an electoral front grounded in the massive Black vote in New Orleans that defeat's Duke.

THE BUSH, CLINTON AND BUSH YEARS: 1990-2005: RACISM, PATRIARCHY, AND CAPITALISM/IMPERIALISM WIPE OUT THE GAINS MADE BY OPPRESSED PEOPLE OF COLOR OVER THE LAST 60 YEARS.

2003 Critical Resistance, an organization devoted to the abolition of prisons, forms its Southern chapter after a highly successful conference in New Orleans.

2005 Incite! Women of Color Against Violence, a national organization committed to ending all forms of violence against women, holds its conference in Treme, the oldest continuous Black community in the U.S.

NEW ORLEANS BLACK COMMUNITIES CONTINUE TO STRUGGLE. THIS HISTORY NEEDS TO BE RESEARCHED. THE FILES OF THE PEOPLE'S INSTITUTE DOCUMENTING THE POWERFUL COMMUNITY ORGANIZING OF THIS PERIOD VANISHED IN THE FLOOD. EVEN THOUGH AFRICAN AMERICAN, LATINO AND ANTI-RACIST WHITE NEW ORLEANIANS ARE SCATTERED THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY, THE STORIES OF THEIR SURVIVAL AND THEIR RESISTANCE NEEDS TO BE TOLD.

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- (2) Mary Gehman, *The Free People of Color of New Orleans*. 1994. Margaret Media, Inc.
- (3) Philip Foner, *ORGANIZED LABOR AND THE BLACK WORKER: 1619-1973*. NY: International Publishers, 1974 p. 89-92 for sections on Black workers.
- (4) For information on Deacons of Defense, googling, watching the film, and stories from activists back in the 1960's.
- (5) For material from The People's Institute, the St. Thomas Residents Council and the St. Thomas/Irish Channel Consortium, training materials from the People's Institute in the mid 1990's. See www.pisab.org.

This timeline was compiled by Sharon Martinas of the Challenging White Supremacy workshop. Your constructive criticism is welcome! Please email cws@igc.org.

Reconstruction II: The Fire Next Time

Back in 1962, James Baldwin wrote about the nightmare of race in the US. He spoke of the hopelessness of those born into a black skin. "Even the most doltish and servile Negro could scarcely fail to be impressed by the disparity between his situation and that of the people for whom he worked... and to realize how little one could do to change one's situation." He repeats God's warning to Noah after the great flood that sinners would not be given repeated chances to get it right: it would be "the fire next time."

In New Orleans and the South, the order was reversed. The first time was the fire, and the second time was the flood. In both cases, the fire and the flood revealed a nation divided.

The South suffered level-five scale devastation during the Civil War. In that case, it was a man-made catastrophe. New Orleans, for example, had been a bustling center of trade with mansions and banks and the glory of financial success—for whites. How did they get so rich and create such a fair city? Slave labor created that beauty and that wealth that accrued to those who were born into a white skin. Some say that white New Orleanians sacked the city themselves rather than deliver it to the Unionists, so dead set were they against giving up the comforts of the slave system. In any case, the city was reduced to rubble and to an economic condition from which it never fully recovered.

Reconstruction I

With the end of the Southern slave system, Reconstruction was not meant to reconstruct New Orleans and the South as a replica of what it had been before the Civil War. On the contrary. Its goal was to construct a new Southern economy that would overcome the legacy of slavery, and to provide the newly freed slaves with the opportunity to gain wealth and power equal to that of their former owners and oppressors. It was to build an economy not of the very rich few and the very poor multitudes, but to enable everyone to reach the dream of prosperity.

To accomplish this, it was obvious to leaders from both North and South that it would be necessary to provide the freed slaves with financial independence from whites. Economic self-sufficiency was a prerequisite to political power as well. Land would be needed and a tool to work that land: forty acres and a mule.

When hurricane Katrina blew the cover off of New Orleans nearly a century and a half later, it revealed the failure of Reconstruction I. The Freedman's Bureau set up in 1865 worked to get jobs, protect rights, and distribute land to freed Blacks. But there was a lack of resources and a lack of will to ensure a peaceful transition to an integrated South. In 1867, two years after the end of the War, the Freedmen's Bureau in New Orleans reported on "the number of outrages" reported to them:

"Freedmen killed by whites	70
Freedmen supposed to have been killed at Riot	10
Freedmen murdered - no clue to perpetrators	6
Freedmen shot at, whipped, stabbed, beaten &c	210
Freedmen supposed to have been wounded at Riot	20

Freedmen murdered by Freedmen	2
Whites murdered by Freedmen	1

"In no instance in any of the foregoing cases has a white man been punished for killing or ill treating a freedman... On the other hand, of the three freedmen charged with murder, two have been convicted and hung. There can be no doubt but that in some of the North Western Parishes of this state many murders and outrages have been committed which will never be brought to right and it is thought the aggregate number of murders given above would be more than doubled had all the cases been reported to the Agents of the Bureau."

Whose law? Order for whom?

Alan Farago wrote in *The Orlando Sentinel* that "the single lesson to take from Hurricane Katrina is how little separates civilized society from lawlessness when large-scale systems fail." For most of their time in these United States, African Americans have not lived in a civilized society where large-scale systems protected them. It was true in 1867, and it was true in 2005. No levees were made strong enough in their neighborhoods, no arrangements were made to take them out of the city, no water or food or rescue was thought through beforehand. And yet, white society was appalled when those left behind with nothing in the wake of Katrina took what they needed to survive from abandoned stores and homes. That was how "lawlessness" was defined from the white majority point of view.

No Acres, No Mule

The Freedmen's Bureau has a list of those applying for land. For instance, "James Morgan, Freedman...New Orleans, La., September 8, 1865. Number of men: 1. Number of women: 1. Number of children: 0. Means: 1 horse cart & c., small amt. of corn & forage, \$50 in money. *Remarks:* This applicant is a discharged soldier and desires (10) ten acres of ground or less located if possible on Metarie Ridge, Parish Jefferson."

Did Mr. Morgan get his 10 acres? Was he able to keep it if he did? Since President Andrew Johnson returned all land to their Confederate owners in 1866, just a year after the Bureau was created, very few freed slaves were able to acquire the basic minimum to guarantee their ability to profit from the fruits of their own labor. Forced back into dependency on white farmers/employers and into a life based on subsistence, most blacks were not able to save or to own property, or to pass along what they owned to their children. Each generation has been economically limited to jobs in which a meager survival is eked out. If Reconstruction had given former slaves opportunities similar to those for European immigrants, we would not have seen the racialization of poverty on the rooftops of New Orleans after Katrina.

Reconstruction II

It was interesting to hear the word "reconstruction" fall from President Bush's lips as he talked about the disaster. Once again, reconstruction is needed. Once again, the reconstruction of the Gulf Coast and the city of New Orleans should not be about re-creating the old New Orleans, with its gross economic and racial inequalities. A new paradigm is needed: to broaden wealth and opportunity while addressing the structural racial inequalities in our society.

Katrina gives us an opportunity to get it right the second time around. This country has had a tradition of government assistance to European Americans through redistributing wealth, whether that be through land grants, government funded colleges, subsidized home mortgages, worker and business protections, social infrastructure, and tax incentives. The Gulf Coast should be rebuilt in this tradition—only for those left out the other times around. This time, we can build equity and create stakeholders, not a new generation of low-wage virtual sharecroppers.

Nearly a century and a half after the Civil War, nearly 50 years after the Civil Rights movement, the great-grandchildren of those who created the wealth of the South, who fought for equality in several wars, and who have been repeatedly promised full enfranchisement, are still in desperate poverty. It is not only African Americans who are in this boat. Native Americans, many of whose ancestors were force-marched from their Southern homelands in abrogation of treaty rights to Oklahoma and other states, have also been left out of the economy. More recent Latino immigrants have created large profits for their employers pay taxes, but they too have been left out of relief efforts due to their immigration status.

This Second Reconstruction should *repair* the failures of the past. Reconstruction dollars should build capacity and ownership of local community development organizations. They should pay a living wage to workers. It should create new stakeholders, new landowners and homeowners. It should jumpstart new businesses that employ local residents at living wages. Land should be taken and redistributed to those who have lived and worked in the city and who want to return.

Funding the Dream

A Second Reconstruction requires a bold commitment of treasure, not more debt for our children or regressive taxes on workers. The burden of rebuilding the Gulf should not fall primarily on low and middle income taxpayers. These resources should come from a progressive federal tax system that reverses the billions in dollars of tax breaks given to multi-millionaires and corporations: wealth whose origins lie in the land of Native peoples and the labor of African Americans.

The Civil War exacted a terrible cost—and yet, the nation stopped short of making good on its promises. We have seen the cost of that failure in the faces of the sons and daughters of Katrina. With a new national awakening to the dangers of a house divided, we cannot afford to stop short this time.

We cannot afford to wait for the fire next time.

New Orleans: A Choice Between Destruction and Reparations

By David Billings

There is this monument to white supremacy in New Orleans. It is called the Liberty Monument. It commemorates the 1871 Battle of Liberty Place in which local white militia attempted to wrest control of the city from the Reconstruction forces after the Civil War. Thirty-three militia were killed. In their honor, this monument stood at the foot of Canal Street for over 125 years. It stood even as the city became majority African-American in population and even as successive black mayors attempted to have it removed. It was finally moved—around the corner—in 1999 to a spot just outside the city’s French Quarter and next to its waterfront. The Liberty Monument survived Hurricane Katrina.

Just about everything else in New Orleans was destroyed.

The Liberty Monument symbolizes New Orleans to me. During the thirty-four years I lived in the city, from 1971 to 2004, that monument reminded me of who really controls the city. White people do. We own it all.

Before Katrina, black folks staffed New Orleans. Black folks worked it. But white folks ran it. The statistics are startling. Less than a third of the population of Orleans Parish was white (27%) and two-thirds was black (66%), but according to local nonprofit agencies, almost all of the wealth in New Orleans has been held in the hands of whites—mostly the very rich white folks who have been there for generations and profit handsomely from its resources: the river, oil and gas, tourists. Theirs are the houses of the stately Garden District and St. Charles Avenue, and the tucked-away, hidden enclaves of the French Quarter. They survived Hurricane Katrina.

Just about everything else in New Orleans was destroyed.

Here are two scenarios for New Orleans.

SCENARIO I: New Orleans as a new Disney World

New Orleans will be a different city when it is rebuilt. Old money will stay wealthy. But new money will rebuild New Orleans and get even richer. The future of New Orleans will be Disney World: not the California or Florida version, but a raunchier version—more like Vegas or Rio. It will be replete with gambling casinos and restaurants galore. It will have music clubs and second-line parades. Bourbon Street will have strippers and Café du Monde will still sell beignets, but it will all be fake. “Faux New Orleans,” if you will. Sanitized, commercialized, tourist-flavored New Orleans available to all at a price only a few will be able to afford.

It will have to import its funk.

Workers will have to be trained to dance in second-lines and flambeaux carriers will be outlawed as fire hazards. Mardi Gras parades will continue on St. Charles and down Canal Street, but the bands will be hired and brought into town and the crowds will be made up of people from the Midwest and points north. Few locals will remain.

Just about everything else in New Orleans will be destroyed.

In this scenario, there is no way all those poor folks are going to be allowed to return home. The poor folks you saw screaming for help on television. The people who were trapped on rooftops and nursing homes and hospitals and evacuation centers as the waters rose and the food and drinking water ran out.

They will be dispersed across America. They are not the type of poor people likely to elicit this country's sympathies. Not for very long.

The United States likes poor people to be docile and compliant, certainly grateful and appreciative for the help given them. However late and however limited this help might be.

But many of New Orleans flood victims were anything but grateful. They were angry and frustrated over years of neglect, injustice and unfair treatment. While Katrina was the most recent example of institutional breakdown when it came to poor black people in New Orleans, it was not the first.

In 1927, during the Great Mississippi River Flood so well chronicled in John Barry's book *Rising Tide*, the levees were bombed to save the French Quarter and the Central Business District at the expense of the poor and working-class people of the city's Ninth Ward and the immediate areas adjacent to them, St. Bernard Parish.

Hurricane Betsy in 1965 would breach the levees again and flood those same areas. One would be hard pressed to find any living resident of the Ninth Ward who does not believe those levees were again bombed to save the rich white parts of town.

Yet New Orleans has a long history of resisting white rule and control. The largest rebellion by enslaved Africans in the United States took place in 1811 right outside New Orleans. Forces led by Charles Deslondes marched on the city. They were called murderous savages and looters. They instilled deep fears in the white folk. Governor Claiborne called out the military. Deslondes was captured, his followers killed and hanged. They were beheaded and their skulls stuck on fence posts as a gruesome reminder of what happens in New Orleans to lawless thugs, looters, anarchists.

At the opening of the 20th century, Robert Charles, a young black man from Woodville, Mississippi, was so outraged when he witnessed everyday official brutality and murder of African-Americans in New Orleans that he set out to kill white people. Barricaded in a Central City house, he managed to shoot twenty-seven white people, including seven police officers. What he also struck was those deep fears buried in the psyches of white people of black men with guns. Massive reprisals of whites against African-Americans resulted in scores of black deaths.

In 1972, Mark Essex, a twenty-three-year-old Navy veteran from Emporia, Kansas, went on a shooting spree that ended on the top of a Howard Johnson's hotel across from the New Orleans City Hall. Essex, African-American, held off the entire police department and National Guard of New Orleans (at that time still almost totally white in an already black-majority city). Essex killed five police officers, including the Deputy Chief Louis Sergo. Black people watched from chairs they set up across the street from the Howard Johnson's. They were not afraid since they knew Mark Essex was not shooting at them. When Essex was finally killed, 200 bullets were found in his body.

So when Hurricane Katrina struck and the city flooded, the poor people who shoved and pushed, shouted and cried, knew what was happening. Alternating between being scared senseless and enraged, they knew this was not the first time the systems of the state had failed them. It was just the latest.



New Orleans' poorest people have been dealt with as nothing all their lives. Jobless for generations, they were ignored by the city's schools. At the time Katrina struck, 50% of New Orleans adults aged eighteen to sixty-five were virtually illiterate (sources: 1993 National Adult Literacy Survey and www.gnocdc.org). Before Katrina, 65% of New Orleanians were renters. Most public housing had already been gutted. Five years prior to Katrina's ravages, a federal policy of neglect and disinvestment we can call "Hurricane HOPE VI" had

already destroyed four major public housing developments named Desire, Florida, Magnolia, and St. Thomas.

Poor black people were in the way before Katrina and they would be in the way afterwards. They have no claim on the new New Orleans.

The new New Orleans will be filled with mixed-income developments, subsidized and guaranteed by the government. These mixed-income communities will be carefully monitored to control the percentages of poor people in any given neighborhood. As Congressman Richard Baker (R-LA; 6th Congressional District, Baton Rouge) was overheard saying shortly after the storm waters wiped out huge swaths of the city: "Mother Nature accomplished what we couldn't. She emptied the housing projects of New Orleans."

The people in charge of New Orleans didn't give a damn about poor black people. So some of the poor black people didn't give a damn either. Somewhere deep in their psyche they knew they could all be locked up and forgotten and white folks would not shed a tear. So some of them broke into white folks' homes and businesses. One don't-give-a-damn deserves another.

In this scenario, a rebuilt New Orleans will be a free-market paradise rooted in unbridled capitalism and anti-public-sector values. Finally, in the heretofore most unlikely of American cities, public officials can hand out private school vouchers rather than reconstruct a failed public school system. Finally, they have an opportunity to put faith-based initiatives to work because black preachers have lost their base. Because everything else in New Orleans has been destroyed.

Or has it?

Let's take a look at:

SCENARIO 2: Reparations for New Orleans now!

Why not rebuild New Orleans as the first major down payment of reparations for the descendants of Africa kidnapped and enslaved in the Americas? Instead of a New Orleans Disneyland built by riverfront developers for condo-buying real estate investors and pleasure seekers, let New Orleans represent a counter-diaspora. Let's rebuild the city with African-Americans and other peoples of color in the lead as a testimony to this nation's efforts to destroy white supremacy once and for all. Let's guarantee that those families spread so far afield by Katrina will design and lead the reconstruction. Let's implement a Second Reconstruction. And this time we will get it right.

Let's rebuild New Orleans with equity in mind, rooted in the strengths that made it America's most unique city. Let's use government resources to invest in and preserve some of America's greatest cultural heritages.

Let's rebuild City Hall in Louis Armstrong Park—in the heart of Treme, the oldest African settlement in the United States. Build it around Congo Square, the one location that Africans were allowed to gather for celebration, dance, and (unbeknownst to white people) organizing—not as a neglected artifact of slavery past, but as the cultural rooting of a liberated future. Far-fetched notion? Well, Congo Square survived Katrina.

Not everything in New Orleans has been destroyed.

There are thousands ready to rebuild and who have a plan.

Community Labor United (CLU) is one. CLU is organizing evacuees to actively participate in the rebuilding of New Orleans. In their call to action, just four days after the storm, CLU stated, “We will not go quietly into the night, scattering across this country to become homeless in countless other cities while federal relief funds are funneled into rebuilding casinos, hotels, chemical plants and the wealthy white districts of New Orleans.... We will not stand idly by while the disaster is used as an opportunity to replace our homes with newly built mansions and condos in a gentrified New Orleans.”

The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond is another. It has called for an investigation by the United Nations. “This calamity demonstrates how racism manifests itself in every institution in this country,” said Ron Chisom, co-founder of the twenty-five-year-old organization headquartered in New Orleans. Core trainer Daniel Buford said from the West Coast office of the Institute, “We need the United Nations to oversee an international public works campaign similar to the post-tsunami rebuilding efforts in South Asia and the Pacific. We can't allow this tragedy to become a ‘cash cow’ for those who always benefit from war and crisis... Only an international body can guarantee that.”

There are many others steeled for resistance. Many of us who love New Orleans, despite its racist history, are looking toward building its future with anti-racist fervor.

Not everything in New Orleans has been destroyed.

Alas, the Liberty Monument still stands. Protected by its proximity to the huge concrete barriers that hold the Mississippi at bay, it is a constant reminder of the axiom that regardless of how much things change, some things remain the same.

David Billings is a core trainer and organizer with The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond. He is an ordained United Methodist minister, and in 1986 co-founded European Dissent, a collective of white anti-racist activists. A native of McComb, Mississippi, David lived in New Orleans for three decades, moving to New York City in 2004.

There's No Such Thing as a Natural Disaster

By Neil Smith

It is generally accepted among environmental geographers that there is no such thing as a natural disaster. In every phase and aspect of a disaster – causes, vulnerability, preparedness, results and response, and reconstruction – the contours of disaster and the difference between who lives and who dies is to a greater or lesser extent a social calculus. Hurricane Katrina provides the most startling confirmation of that axiom. This is not simply an academic point but a practical one, and it has everything to do with how societies prepare for and absorb natural events and how they can or should reconstruct afterward. It is difficult, so soon on the heels of such an unnecessarily deadly disaster, to be discompassionate, but it is important in the heat of the moment to put social science to work as a counterweight to official attempts to relegate Katrina to the historical dustbin of inevitable “natural” disasters.

First, causes. The denial of the naturalness of disasters is in no way a denial of natural process. Earthquakes, tsunamis, blizzards, droughts and hurricanes are certainly events of nature that require a knowledge of geophysics, physical geography or climatology to comprehend. Whether a natural event is a disaster or not depends ultimately, however, on its location. A large earthquake in the Hindu Kush may spawn no disaster whatsoever while the same intensity event in California could be a catastrophe. But even among climatic events, natural causes are not entirely divorced from the social. The world has recently experienced dramatic warming, which scientists increasingly attribute to airborne emissions of carbon, and around the world Katrina is widely seen as evidence of socially induced climatic change. Much as a single hurricane such as Katrina, even when followed by an almost equally intense Hurricane Rita, or even when embedded in a record 2005 season of Atlantic hurricanes, is not in itself conclusive evidence of humanly induced global warming. Yet it would be irresponsible to ignore such signals. The Bush administration has done just that, and it is happy to attribute the dismal record of death and destruction on the Gulf Coast – perhaps 1200 lives by the latest counts – to an act of nature. It has proven itself not just oblivious but ideologically opposed to mounting scientific evidence of global warming and the fact that rising sea-levels make cities such as New Orleans, Venice, or Dacca immediately vulnerable to future calamity. Whatever the political tampering with science, the supposed “naturalness” of disasters here becomes an ideological camouflage for the social (and therefore preventable) dimensions of such disasters, covering for quite specific social interests.

Vulnerability, in turn, is highly differentiated; some people are much more vulnerable than others. Put bluntly, in many climates rich people tend to take the higher land leaving to the poor and working class land more vulnerable to flooding and environmental pestilence. This is a trend not an iron clad generalization: oceanfront property marks a major exception in many places, and Bolivia's La Paz, where the wealthy live in the cooler valley below 13,000 feet, is another. In New Orleans, however, topographic gradients doubled as class and race gradients, and as the Katrina evacuation so tragically demonstrated, the better off had cars to get out, credit cards and bank accounts for emergency hotels and supplies, their immediate families likely had resources to support their evacuation, and the wealthier also had the insurance policies for rebuilding. Not just the market but successive administrations from the federal to the urban scale, made the poorest population in New Orleans most vulnerable. Since 2001, knowing that a catastrophic hurricane was likely and would in all probability devastate New Orleans, the Bush administration nonetheless opened hundreds of square miles of wetland to development on the grounds that the market knows best, and in the process eroded New Orleans' natural protection; and they cut the New Orleans Corps of Engineers budget by 80%, thus preventing pumping and levee improvements. At the same time, they syphoned resources toward tax cuts for the wealthy and a failed war in Iraq (Blumenthal 2005). Given the stunned amazement with which people around the world greeted images of a stranded African American populace in the deadly sewage pond of post-Katrina New Orleans, it is difficult not to agree with Illinois senator Barack Obama: “the people of New Orleans weren't just abandoned during the hurricane,” but were “abandoned long ago” (DailyKos 2005).

After causes and vulnerability comes preparedness. The incompetence of preparations for Katrina, especially at the federal level, is well known. As soon as the hurricane hit Florida, almost three days before New Orleans, it was evident that this storm was far more dangerous than its wind speeds and intensity suggested. Meteorologists knew it would hit a multi-state region but the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), overseen by a political appointee with no relevant experience and recently subordinated to the Homeland Security Administration, assumed business as usual. They sent only a quarter of available search and rescue teams to the region and no personnel to New Orleans until after the storm had passed (Lipton et. al. 2005). Yet more than a day before it hit, Katrina was described by the National Weather Service as a “hurricane with unprecedented strength” likely to make

the targeted area “uninhabitable for weeks, perhaps longer” (NYT 2005). Days afterward, as the President hopped from photo-op to photo-op the White House, not given to listening to its scientists, seemed still not to understand the prescience of that warning or the dimensions of the disaster,.

The results of Hurricane Katrina and responses to it are as of this writing still fresh in our memory but it is important to record some of the details so that the rawness of what transpired not be rubbed smooth by historical rewrite. The results can be assessed in thousands of lives unnecessarily lost, billions of dollars of property destroyed, local economies devastated and so forth, but that is only half the story. The images ricocheting around the world of a crippled United States, unconcerned or unable to protect its own population, receiving offers of aid from more than 100 countries, only reaffirmed for many the sense, already crystalizing from the debacle in Iraq, of a failing superpower. The level of survivors’ amply televised anger, bodies floating in the background, shocked the world. Reporters were not “embedded” this time, and so the images were real, uncensored, and raw. As the true horror unfolded, the media were working without a script, and it took almost a week before pre-existing absorptive news narratives regained control. But by then it was too late. Distraught refugees,¹ mostly African American, concluded that they were being left in the New Orleans Superdome and Convention Center to die; they pleaded for help, any help, as they angrily demanded to know why, if reporters could get in and out, they could not.

When the National Guard did arrive, it was quickly apparent that they were working under orders to control the city militarily and protect property rather than to bring aid to the desperate. Angry citizens, who waded through the fetid city looking for promised buses that never came, were prevented, at gunpoint, from getting out. “We are not turning the West Bank [a New Orleans suburb] into another Superdome,” argued one suburban sheriff. Groups of refugees who tried to organize water, food and shelter collectively were also broken up at gunpoint by the national guard. Numerous victims reported being besieged and the National Guard was under orders not to distribute their own water (Bradshaw and Slonsky, 2005; Whitney 2005). As late as four days after the hurricane hit New Orleans, with government aid still largely absent, President Bush advised refugees that they ought to rely on private charities such as the Salvation Army (Breed 2005). When the first federal aid did come, stunned recipients opening boxes asked why they were being sent anthrax vaccine. “These are the boxes Homeland Security told us to send,” came the reply.

Unfortunately, shocking as it was, the tragedy of New Orleans is neither unique nor even especially unexpected, except perhaps in its scale. The race and class dimensions of who escaped and who was victimized by this decidedly unnatural disaster not only could have been predicted, and was, but it follows a long history of like experiences. In 1976, a devastating earthquake eventually killed 23,000 people in Guatemala and made 1.5 million people homeless. I say “eventually,” because the vast majority of deaths were not the direct result of the physical event itself but played out in the days and weeks that followed. Massive international relief flooded into Guatemala but it was not funneled to the most affected and neediest peasants, who eventually came to call the disaster a “classquake” (O’Keefe et. al. 1976). In communities surrounding the Indian Ocean, ravaged by the tsunami of December 2004, the class and ethnic fissures of the old societies are re-etched deeper and wider by the patterns of response and reconstruction. There, “reconstruction” forcibly prevents local fishermen from re-establishing their livelihoods, planning instead to secure the oceanfront for wealthy tourists. Locals increasingly call the reconstruction effort the “second tsunami.” In New Orleans there are already murmurings of Katrina as “Hurricane Bush.” It is not only in the so-called Third World, we can now see, that one’s chances of surviving a disaster are more than anything dependent on one’s race, ethnicity and social class.

At all phases, up to and including reconstruction, disasters don’t simply flatten landscapes, washing them smooth. Rather they deepen and erode the ruts of social difference they encounter. Within a matter of days, with bodies still uncollected and before the death toll was even approximately known, discussion in the press turned to the opportunity represented by the laying bare of New Orleans. With an estimated half million people excluded from the city, FEMA began organizing mobile home parks to accommodate as many as 130,000 refugee families in far flung state parks, boy scout camps, any plausible tract of vacant land far from the city. On the face of it, this might be a reasonable strategy, except that one has to invest a lot of faith to imagine that the first item of business in New Orleans, with federal funding from the staunchly pro-market Bush administration, will be to reconstruct public housing so that those most in need can return to the city. Already, in the interlude between Katrina and the reflooding wrought by Hurricane Rita, businesses and homeowners were the privileged who were allowed back through military cordons into the city. It is far more likely therefore that working class and African American New Orleanians will be held on the outskirts for months and years on the grounds that they have no home to go back to, and in the hope or expectation that they will simply disperse in frustration.

In fact, many evacuees from hurricanes Charley and Ivan in 2004 remain in trailer parks in Florida. And neo-conservative *New York Times* editorialist David Brooks wasted no time arguing that “people who lack middle-class skills” should not be allowed to resettle the city: “If we just put up new buildings and allow the same people to move back into their old neighborhoods, then urban New Orleans will become just as run down as before” (Brooks 2005). If it were true that the character of neighborhoods depended first and foremost on who moved into them there might be some truth in this. But if, as several generations of urban theory now argues, the fate of a neighborhood has as much if not more to do with how capital (public or private) invests in a neighborhood (and how it also disinvests), then the spotlight should be less on blaming the victims of this dreadful disaster than on the motives of capital investors. Congressional Representative Richard Baker of Baton Rouge provides little solace in this regard. “We finally cleaned up public housing in new Orleans,” chuckled an unguarded Baker. “We couldn’t do it, but God did” (quoted in Dowd 2005).

The final lesson of environmental geography concerning disasters is that far from flattening the social differences, disaster reconstruction invariably cuts deeper the ruts and grooves of social oppression and exploitation. And so, while abolishing competition by giving no-bid contracts to some of the same companies that operate in Iraq – Bechtel, Fluor Corp., Haliburton – the Bush administration has mandated cutthroat competition among desperate workers by suspending the federal law that requires federal contractors to pay at least the prevailing local wage. Meanwhile, with many of the dead still unaccounted for, developers descended on New Orleans with wallets bulging and chops smacking. In anticipation that the city will be rebuilt with higher and better levees and with many fewer working class and African Americans, New Orleans two weeks after Katrina already looked like a developers’ gold rush (Streitfeld 2005; Rivlin 2005). These people, these developers and these corporations, say many New Orleanians, are the “true looters.” By contrast, those displaced, with no private property to reclaim, face lower wages, escalating costs for scarce housing, and as the initial sympathy wears away, increased stigmatization.

When President Bush insists that “out of New Orleans is going to come that great city again,” it is difficult to believe that good quality, secure and affordable social housing is what this administration has in mind. Wholesale gentrification at a scale as yet unseen in the United States is the more likely outcome. After the Bush hurricane, the poor, African American and working class people who evacuated will not be welcomed back to New Orleans, which will in all likelihood be rebuilt as a tourist magnet with a Disneyfied BigEasyVille oozing even more manufactured authenticity than the surviving French Quarter nearby.

We can look back and identify any number of individual decisions taken and not taken that made this hurricane such a social disaster. But the larger picture is more than the sum of its parts. It is not a radical conclusion that the dimensions of the Katrina disaster owe in large part not just to the actions of this or that local or federal administration but the operation of a capitalist market more broadly, especially in its neo-liberal garb. The refusal to tackle global warming is rooted in the global power of the petroleum and energy corporations which fear for their profits and which, not coincidentally, represent the social class roots of the Bush administration’s power; the New Orleans population were vulnerable not because of geography but because of long term class and race abandonment – poverty – exacerbated by the dismantling of social welfare by Democratic and Republican administrations alike; the incompetence of FEMA preparations expressed cocooned ruling class comradery, cronyism and privilege rather than any concern for the poor and working class; and the reconstruction looks set to capitalize on these inequalities and deepen them further. Not at any point in the next few decades will African Americans again account for two-thirds of New Orleans’ population.

There are alternatives. The Kyoto protocols were far from perfect but they represented a lowest common denominator in fighting global warming that the US would not even sign onto. As regards preparedness, both Oxfam America and the United Nations have pointed to Cuba as a plausible model. When Hurricane Ivan stormed through the Caribbean in September 2004, 27 people died in Florida and almost 100 in Granada, yet none died in Cuba which also took a direct hit on its west end. They were not always so successful, but the UN and Oxfam credit their record to several factors. First, Cubans learn from an early age about the danger of hurricanes and how to prepare and respond. Second, before the hurricane hits, local communities organize cleanup to secure potentially dangerous debris. Third, preparation and evacuation are organized and coordinated between the central government and local communities, and transportation away from danger is organized as a social community project rather than left to the private market, as happened in New Orleans and Houston. To prevent fires, gas and electricity supplies are cut off before the hurricane hits. During a hurricane, pre-organized state-sponsored emergency teams guarantee water, food and medical treatment – 2,000 such teams in the case of Ivan. The government also organizes resources for communities to reconstruct (Gorry, 2004).

By contrast, post-Katrina reconstruction in the United States will be dominated by top-down government contracts for tens if not hundreds of billions of dollars to major corporations and by billions of dollars of insurance payments to property owners so that they can reconstruct in the same vulnerable locations already destroyed. Such a solution may be good if measured by the yardstick of capitalist profit—a new buying binge by the Gulf raises all yachts, and, incredibly, insurance company stocks tend to rise following major disasters – but the same private market logic that caused such social destruction spells social and environmental disaster for those not in line to profit from government contracts and property insurance payments.

But there is an alternative. “We will not stand idly by while this disaster is used as an opportunity to replace our homes with newly built mansions and condos in a gentrified New Orleans,” reads a statement from a citywide coalition of New Orleans low-income groups, Community Labor United (Klein 2005). They went on to insist that the rebuilding of the city not be dominated by top-down corporate welfare but that those evacuated from New Orleans have the primary power over how the reconstruction proceeds. The billions of dollars already committed by Congress and the funds raised by charities belong by rights to the victims. Some will respond that reconstruction is very complicated, and it is, but the record of companies like Bechtel and Haliburton in Iraq are hardly evidence for the defense of a top-down Iraq model for New Orleans.

In the end, the reconstruction question is only secondarily technical. It is in the first place political, and the same corporate and federal abandonment that fostered such a widespread disaster can hardly be expected to perform an about-turn by empowering a disempowered population. Given the visceral response to the hundreds of unnecessary deaths resulting from Katrina, any attempt to impose a top-down solution by force is likely to incite an equally visceral response from below. If the Bush administration’s first instinct was to eschew government and trust private charities to help the victims of Katrina, it should follow that instinct as regards the ordinary refugees of New Orleans and their ability to rebuild from the bottom up. There is no such thing as a natural disaster, and the supposed naturalness of the market is the last place to look for a solution to this disastrous havoc.

Endnotes

¹ George Bush has declared that “these people are not refugees, they are Americans.” The effort at such a distinction is doubly cynical. It seeks to sanitize the experience of the approximately 400,000 people displaced, evacuated and evicted from New Orleans by bestowing on them some kind of superiority and respect not normally given to “refugees.” It therefore also exposes what Bush thinks of the rest of the world, demeaning millions of others who remain merely “refugees,” a social category presumably lower than “Americans.” That Jesse Jackson should have made a similar argument, albeit in an attempt to establish respect for African Americans at home but at the expense of foreign “refugees,” is disappointing.

'This is criminal': Malik Rahim reports from New Orleans

by Malik Rahim

Malik Rahim, a veteran of the Black Panther Party in New Orleans, for decades an organizer of public housing tenants both there and in San Francisco and a recent Green Party candidate for New Orleans City Council, lives in the Algiers neighborhood, the only part of New Orleans that is not flooded. They have no power, but the water is still good and the phones work. Their neighborhood could be sheltering and feeding at least 40,000 refugees, he says, but they are allowed to help no one. What he describes is nothing less than deliberate genocide against Black and poor people. - Ed.

New Orleans, Sept. 1, 2005 - It's criminal. From what you're hearing, the people trapped in New Orleans are nothing but looters. We're told we should be more "neighborly." But nobody talked about being neighborly until after the people who could afford to leave ... left.

If you ain't got no money in America, you're on your own. People were told to go to the Superdome, but they have no food, no water there. And before they could get in, people had to stand in line for 4-5 hours in the rain because everybody was being searched one by one at the entrance.

I can understand the chaos that happened after the tsunami, because they had no warning, but here there was plenty of warning. In the three days before the hurricane hit, we knew it was coming and everyone could have been evacuated.

We have Amtrak here that could have carried everybody out of town. There were enough school buses that could have evacuated 20,000 people easily, but they just let them be flooded. My son watched 40 buses go underwater - they just wouldn't move them, afraid they'd be stolen.

People who could afford to leave were so afraid someone would steal what they own that they just let it all be flooded. They could have let a family without a vehicle borrow their extra car, but instead they left it behind to be destroyed.

There are gangs of white vigilantes near here riding around in pickup trucks, all of them armed, and any young Black they see who they figure doesn't belong in their community, they shoot him. I tell them, "Stop! You're going to start a riot."

When you see all the poor people with no place to go, feeling alone and helpless and angry, I say this is a consequence of HOPE VI. New Orleans took all the HUD money it could get to tear down public housing, and families and neighbors who'd relied on each other for generations were uprooted and torn apart.

Most of the people who are going through this now had already lost touch with the only community they'd ever known. Their community was torn down and they were scattered. They'd already lost their real homes, the only place where they knew everybody, and now the places they've been staying are destroyed.

But nobody cares. They're just lawless looters ... dangerous.

The hurricane hit at the end of the month, the time when poor people are most vulnerable. Food stamps don't buy enough but for about three weeks of the month, and by the end of the month everyone runs out.

Now they have no way to get their food stamps or any money, so they just have to take what they can to survive.

Many people are getting sick and very weak. From the toxic water that people are walking through, little scratches and sores are turning into major wounds.

People whose homes and families were not destroyed went into the city right away with boats to bring the survivors out, but law enforcement told them they weren't needed. They are willing and able to rescue thousands, but they're not allowed to.

Every day countless volunteers are trying to help, but they're turned back. Almost all the rescue that's been done has been done by volunteers anyway.

My son and his family - his wife and kids, ages 1, 5 and 8 - were flooded out of their home when the levee broke. They had to swim out until they found an abandoned building with two rooms above water level.

There were 21 people in those two rooms for a day and a half. A guy in a boat who just said "I'm going to help regardless" rescued them and took them to Highway I-10 and dropped them there.

They sat on the freeway for about three hours, because someone said they'd be rescued and taken to the Superdome. Finally they just started walking, had to walk six and a half miles.

When they got to the Superdome, my son wasn't allowed in - I don't know why - so his wife and kids wouldn't go in. They kept walking, and they happened to run across a guy with a tow truck that they knew, and he gave them his own personal truck.

When they got here, they had no gas, so I had to punch a hole in my gas tank to give them some gas, and now I'm trapped. I'm getting around by bicycle.

People from Plaquemine Parish were rescued on a ferry and dropped off on a dock near here. All day they were sitting on the dock in the hot sun with no food, no water. Many were in a daze; they've lost everything.

They were all sitting there surrounded by armed guards. We asked the guards could we bring them water and food. My mother and all the other church ladies were cooking for them, and we have plenty of good water.

But the guards said, "No. If you don't have enough water and food for everybody, you can't give anything." Finally the people were hauled off on school buses from other parishes.

You know Robert King Wilkerson (the only one of the Angola 3 political prisoners who's been released). He's been back in New Orleans working hard, organizing, helping people. Now nobody knows where he is. His house was destroyed. Knowing him, I think he's out trying to save lives, but I'm worried.

The people who could help are being shipped out. People who want to stay, who have the skills to save lives and rebuild are being forced to go to Houston.

It's not like New Orleans was caught off guard. This could have been prevented.

There's military right here in New Orleans, but for three days they weren't even mobilized. You'd think this was a Third World country.

I'm in the Algiers neighborhood of New Orleans, the only part that isn't flooded. The water is good. Our parks and schools could easily hold 40,000 people, and they're not using any of it.

This is criminal. These people are dying for no other reason than the lack of organization.

Everything is needed, but we're still too disorganized. I'm asking people to go ahead and gather donations and relief supplies but to hold on to them for a few days until we have a way to put them to good use.

I'm challenging my party, the Green Party, to come down here and help us just as soon as things are a little more organized. The Republicans and Democrats didn't do anything to prevent this or plan for it and don't seem to care if everyone dies.

Malik's phone is working. He welcomes calls from old friends and anyone with questions or ideas for saving lives. To reach him, call the Bay View at (415) 671-0789.

October 9, 2005
Wading Toward Home
By MICHAEL LEWIS

I. Kings and Queens (and Squires) in Old, Old New Orleans

There's a fine line between stability and stagnation, and by the time I was born, New Orleans had already crossed it. The difference between growing up in New Orleans, starting in 1960, and growing up most other places in America was how easy it was to believe, in New Orleans, that nothing meaningful occurred outside it. No one of importance ever seemed to move in, just as no one of importance ever moved away. The absence of any sort of movement into or out of the upper and upper-middle classes was obviously bad for business, but it was great for what are now called family values. Until I went away to college, I had no idea how scattered and disjointed most American families were. By the time I was 9, I could ride my bike to the houses of both sets of grandparents. My mother's parents lived six blocks away; my father's parents, the far-flung ones, lived about a mile away. I didn't think it was at all odd that so much of my family was so near at hand: one friend of mine had all four of her grandparents next door, two on one side, two on the other. At the time, this struck me as normal.

Every Christmas, my mother's side of the family gathered for a party that confirmed for me that just about all white New Orleanians, even the horrible ones, were somehow blood relations. Before I could do long division, I knew the difference between a third cousin and a first cousin twice removed. Wherever I went, I was defined by family, living and dead.

My mother's family, the Monroes, were the arrivistes: they had been in New Orleans since only the 1850's. Nevertheless, my great-grandfather J. Blanc Monroe, descended from James Polk on one side and James Monroe on the other, became the spearhead of the New Orleans aristocracy. In "Rising Tide," John Barry's history of the 1927 flood, Papa Blanc, as he was known, is cast as one of the villains who pressed the government to dynamite the levees below New Orleans and flood the outlying parishes in order to spare the city; he then stiffed the victims, on behalf of the city, when they came for reparations. My father's side, the Lewises, were the old New Orleanians. They came down from Virginia in 1803, when Thomas Jefferson sent my father's great-great-grandfather Joshua Lewis to be a judge for the territory of Orleans after the Louisiana Purchase. Eventually he joined the Louisiana Supreme Court, wrote the state's first legal opinion, gave the celebratory toast at the banquet given to honor Andrew Jackson in 1815 after the Battle of New Orleans and, as the Protestant candidate, narrowly lost the governor's race to his Catholic opponent, Jacques Philippe Roi de Villere, whose descendant Sandy lived across the street from my parents until last year. Joshua's son John Lewis was elected mayor of New Orleans and was wounded at the Battle of Mansfield.

As a boy, I had no idea when the Lewises arrived in Louisiana, or that Thomas Jefferson himself had sent them. I just knew that everyone around me had been there forever, mostly in the same houses. I took it as the normal state of affairs, the done thing, that when the old carnival organizations went looking for royalty, they came to my Uptown neighborhood. There was, for instance, a Mardi Gras krewe for adolescents called Squires, which mimicked exactly the masked balls of the adults. When I was 16, I was dubbed its king: a group of five young men in suits, led by the departing king, turned up in our living room to tap my shoulders. After school for the next several weeks, I went straight from baseball practice to a school for royals

in a cottage just off St. Charles Avenue, where a woman experienced in the ways of European royalty had taken up residence - presumably because we had the one growth market in the world for kings and queens. The tone of her sessions was serious, bordering on solemn. In that little cottage, I spent hours practicing to be king, a crown on my head, an ermine cape on my shoulders and a glittering scepter in my left hand that I waved over imaginary subjects, unaware that there was anything the slightest bit unusual about any of it.

Perhaps because their position in it was so fixed, my parents were never all that interested in New Orleans society - my father once said to me, "My idea of hell is a cocktail party." On the other hand, they have always been deeply engaged in civic life; they are, I suppose, what's left of that useful but unfashionable attitude of noblesse oblige. Without making any sort of show of it at all, my mother has run just about every major charitable organization in the city: as camouflage in the public-housing projects, where she spends a lot of her time, she has always insisted on driving the world's oldest and least desirable automobiles. (And, yes, she has many black friends.) My father is a different sort, less keen on getting his hands dirty. For 40 years, from the comfort of his private library, he has, every other Saturday, watched my mother push a lawn mower back and forth across the front lawn without so much as a passing thought that he might lend a hand. He was fond of citing the Lewis family motto:

Do as little as possible
And that unwillingly
For it is better to incur a slight reprimand
Than to perform an arduous task.

Like my mother, he seldom mentioned what he did away from home. Yet at one point in my childhood, he was president of so many civic and business enterprises that I didn't understand why they didn't just get it over with and make him president of the United States, too. He is still president of an unelected board of city elders, the Board of Liquidation, an artifact of Reconstruction that has, incredibly, the powers to issue bonds on behalf of New Orleans and to levy taxes to pay off those bonds.

But my parents have lived their entire adult lives fighting an unwinnable war. In their lifetimes, New Orleans has gone from the leading city of the South to a theme park for low-rollers and sinners. All the unpleasant facts about a city that can be measured - crime, poverty and illiteracy rates, the strange forms of governmental malfunction - have remained high. The public schools are a hopeless problem, and the public housing is a source of endless misery. A disturbing number of my parents' white neighbors have fled to white towns on the far side of Lake Pontchartrain. My parents would never put it this way, but they are fatalists; they have come to view change as unfortunate and inevitable. That's one difference between stability and stagnation. A stable society has the ability to reject or adapt to change. A stagnant one has change imposed on it, unpleasantly. The only question is from what direction it will come.

On the night of Sunday, Aug. 28, it came from the south. That's when my mother reached me in California to let me know that she and my father, along with my sister (a former, reluctant Mardi Gras queen) and her husband and their children, were stuck in a traffic jam heading for central Alabama. "We had to evacuate for the hurricane," she said. HURR-i-cun. New Orleanians generate many peculiar accents but nothing like a conventional Southern one.

Anyone in New Orleans with a Southern accent is either faking it or from somewhere else. My mother often changes the standard pronunciation of words by stressing a first syllable. (Umbrella is UM-brella.)

"What HURR-i-cun?" I asked.

We had never left New Orleans to escape a hurricane. Betsy, in 1965, and Camille, in 1969, the meteorological stars of my youth, were wildly entertaining. Each in turn wiped out the weekend house built by Papa Blanc on the Mississippi Gulf Coast - Camille left behind nothing but the foundation slab - but that's what Mississippi was for: to get wiped out by hurricanes. A hurricane in Mississippi was not a natural disaster but an excuse for a real-estate boom.

In this unchanging world, something else was about to change. . . but what? My father believes in knocking on wood, and also that bad things come in threes. Having endured this past summer both a nasty heart operation and the death of his closest friend, he was happy to see that the third bad thing was merely another hurricane. He, like I, assumed they would drive to their friend's place in central Alabama, wait a day or two and then return to the same New Orleans they had fled. That was Sunday. The storm hit Monday morning, and the levees that protected the city from the lake broke. Then, of course, all hell broke loose. The mayor started saying that 10,000 people might be dead and that the living wouldn't be allowed to return for months. My parents left Alabama for a house in Highlands, N.C., that Papa Blanc bought in 1913. When the water is rising, it's nice to own a house in the highest incorporated town east of the Rocky Mountains - even if it is an old, chilly house without modern conveniences and a big sign inside that reads, "Yee Cannot Expect to Be Both Grand and Comfortable."

It's even nicer when you have immediate family accounted for. But on Sunday evening, my little brother, in hot pursuit of one of those Darwin Awards that are bestowed upon the unintentionally suicidal, looked at the traffic jam heading north out of New Orleans and decided instead to go south, toward Katrina, where the roads were clear and he could drive fast.

II. Rumors, Rumors Everywhere - and Haywood Hillyer

Three days after Katrina made landfall, I flew to Dallas and then, the next morning, squeezed between two FEMA workers on a flight into Baton Rouge. My father, even more risk-averse than usual, had phoned me and insisted that I shouldn't go home. When I wouldn't listen, he became testy with me for the first time in my adult life. "After what we've been through the past few months, you want to go and do this . . .," he started, though when he realized he wasn't going to change my mind, he changed his tune. "In that case," he said, "grab me a couple of tropical-weight suits and a pair of decent shoes. And just a handful of bow ties."

On my way into the city, at a gas station, I ran into two young men leaving in a pickup truck. They had just been stopped by the police in New Orleans and related the following exchange:

Cops: "Are you armed?"

Young men: "Heavily."

Cops: "Good. Shoot to kill."

The first surprise was that a city supposedly blockaded wasn't actually all that hard to get into. The TV reports insisted that the National Guard had arrived - there were pictures of soldiers showing up, so how could it not be true? - but from the Friday morning of my arrival through the weekend after Katrina hit, there was no trace of the Guard, or any other authority, on high ground. New Orleans at that moment was experiencing the fantasy of the neutron bomb: people obliterated, buildings intact. No city was ever more silent. No barks, shouts, honks or wails: there weren't even cockroaches scurrying between cracks in the sidewalks. At night, I soon learned, the sound of the place was different. At night, the air would be filled with helicopters reprising the soundtrack from "Apocalypse Now." But on that bright blue summer Friday, the city could not have been more tranquil. It was as if New Orleans had a "pause" button, and the finger that reached in to press it also inadvertently uprooted giant magnolias and snapped telephone poles in two.

The next surprise was that a city supposedly inundated had so much dry land. When the levees broke, Lake Pontchartrain stole back the wetlands long ago reclaimed for housing. Between the new lake shore and the Mississippi River of my youth is dry land with the houses of about 185,000 people. The city government in exile has categorized the high-ground population as 55 percent black, 42 percent white and 3 percent Hispanic. The flood did not discriminate by race or class. It took out a lot of poor people's homes, but it took out a lot of rich people's homes too. It did discriminate historically: it took out everything but the old city. If you asked an architecture critic, or a preservationist, to design a flood of this size in New Orleans, he would have given you something like this one.

This wasn't supposed to be. After the levees broke, Mayor Ray Nagin, who grew up in New Orleans, predicted that even Uptown would be under 15 to 20 feet of water. But most of Uptown was dry. Chris O' Connor, vice president of the Ochsner Clinic, the one hospital still open, would tell me: "As the water rose, everyone was quoting different elevation levels. One doctor said Ochsner was 2.6 feet above sea level. Someone else said Ochsner was 12 feet above sea level. No one knew where the water would stop." But it stopped a far way from Ochsner. There's a long history to this sort of confusion: as a child I was told many times that the highest point in New Orleans was "Monkey Hill." Monkey Hill was a pile of dirt near the Audubon Zoo, Uptown, used chiefly as a bike ramp by 10-year-old boys. The rest of the city was "below sea level." That the whole city was below sea level, along with the fact that we buried people in tombs above ground because we couldn't dig into the soil without hitting water, was what every New Orleans child learned from seemingly knowledgeable grown-ups about the ground he walked on. If there was ever a serious flood, the only place that would be above water was Monkey Hill - which caused a lot of us to wonder what the grown-ups were thinking when they brought in earth-moving machinery and flattened it. Now we didn't even have Monkey Hill to stand on.

Apart from a few engineers, no one in New Orleans knew the most important fact about the ground he stood on: its elevation. It took some weaving to get a car to my family's house, but water wasn't the obstacle. There was no water here; the damage from the wind, on the other hand, was sensational, like nothing I had ever seen. Telephone poles lay like broken masts in the middle of the street. Wires and cables hung low over the streets like strings of popcorn on a Christmas tree. But the houses, the gorgeous old New Orleans houses, were pristine, untouched.

Beyond Uptown, here is what I knew, or thought I knew: Orleans Parish prison had been seized by the inmates, who also controlled the armory. Prisoners in their orange uniforms had been spotted outside, roaming around the tilapia ponds - there's a fish farm next to the prison - and whatever that meant, it sounded ominous: I mean, if they were getting into the tilapias, who knew what else they might do? Gangs of young black men were raging through the Garden District, moving toward my parents' house, shooting white people. Armed young black men, on Wednesday, had taken over Uptown Children's Hospital, just six blocks away, and shot patients and doctors. Others had stolen a forklift and carted out the entire contents of a Rite Aid and then removed the whole front of an Ace Hardware store farther uptown, on Oak Street. Most shocking of all, because of its incongruity, was the news that looters had broken into Perlis, the Uptown New Orleans clothing store, and picked the place clean of alligator belts, polo shirts with little crawfish on them and tuxedos most often rented by white kids for debutante parties and the Squires' Ball.

I also knew, or thought I knew, that right up to Thursday night, there had been just two houses in Uptown New Orleans with people inside them. In one, a couple of old coots had barricaded themselves behind plywood signs that said things like "Looters Will Be Shot" and "Enter and Die." The other, a fortlike house equipped with a massive power generator, was owned by Jim Huger - who happened to grow up in the house next door to my parents. (When I heard that he had the only air-conditioning in town and I called to ask if I could borrow a bed, he said, "I'm that little kid you used to beat on with a Wiffle Ball bat, and I gotta save your ass now?") In Jim Huger's house, until the night before, several other young men had holed up, collecting weapons and stories. Most of these stories entered the house by way of a reserve officer in the New Orleans Police Department, a friend of Jim's, who had gone out in full uniform each day and come back with news directly from other cops. From Tuesday until Thursday, the stories had grown increasingly terrifying. On Thursday, a police sergeant told him: "If I were you, I'd get the hell out of here. Tonight they gonna waste white guys, and they don't care which ones." This reserve cop had looked around and seen an amazing sight, full-time New Orleans police officers, en masse, fleeing New Orleans. "All these cops were going to Baton Rouge to sleep because they thought it wasn't safe to sleep in New Orleans," he told me. He had heard that by the time it was dark "there wouldn't be a single cop in the city."

On Thursday night, Fort Huger was abandoned. Forming a six-car, heavily armed convoy, the last of Uptown New Orleans, apart from the two old coots, set off into the darkness and agreed not to stop, or even slow down, until they were out of town. They also agreed that they would try to come back in the morning, when it was light.

With one exception: one of the men who had taken his meals inside Fort Huger declined to leave New Orleans. Haywood Hillyer was his name. He had been two years behind me in school. We weren't good friends, just pieces of furniture in each other's lives. He had grown up four blocks away from me and now lived two blocks down the street, in the smallest house in the neighborhood. Any panel of judges would have taken one look at Haywood's house and voted it Least Likely to Be Looted. Haywood nevertheless insisted on risking his life to protect it. Outwardly conformist - clean-shaven, bright smile, well-combed dark wavy hair, neatly pressed polo shirts, gentle and seemingly indecisive manner - Haywood was capable all the same of generating a great deal of original behavior. This he did in the usual New Orleans way, by thinking things through at least halfway for himself before leaping into action. This quality

in Haywood, the instinct to improvise, is also in the city; it's why New Orleans is so hospitable to jazz musicians, chefs and poker players.

The others couldn't decide whether to pity or admire Haywood, but in the end they gave him all their extra guns and ammo. By the time the convoy left the city Thursday night, Haywood had himself a .357 magnum, a .38 Special, a 9-millimeter Beretta and a sleek, black military-grade semiautomatic rifle, along with a sack holding 1,000 rounds of ammunition. Like most of the men in Uptown New Orleans, Haywood knew how to shoot a duck. But he had never fired any of these weapons or weapons remotely like them. He didn't even know what the sleek black rifle was; he just called it an "AK Whatever It Is." But that Thursday night, he took the three pistols and the AK Whatever It Was and boarded himself up inside his house.

Immediately he had a problem: a small generator that powered one tiny window air-conditioning unit. It cooled just one small room, his office. But the thing made such a racket that, as he put it, "they could have busted down the front door and be storming inside and I wouldn't have eard them. There could have been 20 natives outside screaming, 'I'm gonna burn your house down,' and I'd a never heard it." Fearing he might nod off and be taken in his sleep, he jammed a rack filled with insurance-industry magazines against the door. (Haywood sells life insurance.) In his little office, he sat all night - as far as he knew, the last white person left in New Orleans. He tried to sleep, he said, but "I kept dreaming all night long someone was coming through the door." He didn't leave his air-conditioned office until first light, when he crept out and squinted through his mail slot. In that moment, he was what Uptown New Orleans had become, even before the storm: a white man, alone, peering out through a slot in search of what might kill him. All he needed was the answer.

But that moment passed, and when the sun rose, he did, too, and went back to Fort Huger for food and clean water and a bath, in the form of a dip in the swimming pool. An hour later, in his underpants, and with a pistol in his hand, he discovered that he had accidentally locked the door to Fort Huger behind him, leaving all his keys and clothes and guns, save the one pistol, inside the fort. He couldn't think of what to do - he certainly didn't want to do anything so rash as break one of Jim Huger's cut-glass windows - so he plopped down on the porch in his soggy boxer shorts with the gun in his lap, and waited, hoping that the good guys would reach him before the bad guys did.

III. The Ex-Israeli Commandos and Their Russian Flying Machines

That's when I arrived - on the heels of the young men who fled town the night before. Unaware of Haywood's plight, I pulled up across the street from my parents' house, into the only spot clear of debris, in front of old Ms. Dottie Perrier's place. For many years now, the easiest way to determine if she was home had been to pull your car right up in front: if she was in, she would throw open her upstairs shutter and ask, sweetly, that you park someplace else. Now, along with going the wrong way down one-way streets, running stop signs and crossing the Audubon Park on the grass, parking right in front of Ms. Perrier's house was one of the new pleasures of driving around a city without any people in it.

The moment I cut the engine, her shutters sprang open. Out the front door she flew, with her white hair nicely coiffed and her big blue eyes blinking behind the oversize spectacles perched on her nose without earpieces. She had the air of an owl who has mistaken day for night. After

spending the last five days inside her house, she was intensely curious.

"Where is everybody?" she asked.

"There's been a hurricane," I said. "The city has been evacuated. Everybody's gone."

"Really! So they've all left, et cetera?"

Her surprise was as genuine as her tone was pleasant. Two days before, it turned out, one of the men inside Fort Huger passed by and noticed outgoing mail in her slot. One letter was her electric bill - four days after the entire city lost power. He knocked on her door, told her she really should get out of town and then tried to explain to her that the postman wasn't coming, perhaps for months. Whereupon Ms. Perrier put her hands on her hips and said, "Well, no one informed me!"

Just then a car turned the corner, rolled up to a house in the next block and stopped. Its appearance was as shocking as the arrival of a spaceship filled with aliens - apart from Ms. Perrier, I hadn't seen a soul, or a car, for miles. Four men with black pistols leapt out of it. Two of them looked as if they belonged in the neighborhood - polo shirts, sound orthodontia, a certain diffidence in their step. But the other two, with their bad teeth and battle gear, marched around as if they had only just captured the place. Leaving Ms. Perrier, I wandered down and met my first former Israeli commandos, along with their Uptown New Orleans employers, who had come to liberate their homes.

They had just landed Russian assault helicopters in Audubon Park. Not one, but two groups of Uptown New Orleanians had rented these old Soviet choppers, along with four-to-six-man Israeli commando units (platoons? squads?), and swooped down onto the soccer field beside the Audubon Zoo. Down, down, down they had come, then jumped out to, as they put it, "secure the perimeter." Guns aimed, eyes darting, no point on the compass uncovered. As a young man in this new militia later told me: "Hell, yes, I was scared. We didn't know what to expect. We thought Zulu nation might be coming out of the woods." But the only resistance they met was a zookeeper, who came out with his hands up.

All of this happened just moments before. Right here, in my hometown. All four men were still a little hopped up. The commandos went inside to "clear the house." A nice little yellow house just one block from my childhood home. Not a human being - apart from Ms. Perrier and me - for a mile in each direction. And yet they raised their guns, opened the door, entered and rattled around. A few minutes later they emerged, looking grim.

"You got some mold on the upstairs ceiling," one commando said gravely.

IV. Fears, From High Ground to Troubled Waters

Pretty quickly, it became clear that there were more than a few people left in the city and that they fell broadly into two categories: extremely well armed white men prepared to do battle and a ragtag collection of irregulars, black and white, who had no idea that there was anyone to

battle with. A great many of the irregulars were old people, like Ms. Perrier, who had no family outside New Orleans and so could not imagine where else they would go. But there were also plenty of people who, like the portly, topless, middle-aged gay couple in short shorts walking their dogs down St. Charles Avenue every day, seemed not to sense the slightest danger.

The city on high ground organized itself around the few houses turned into forts. By Saturday morning, Fort Huger was again alive with half a dozen young men who spent their day checking on houses and rescuing the two groups of living creatures most in need of help: old people and pets. Two doors down from my sister's house on Audubon Park was Fort Ryan, under the command of Bill Ryan, who lost an eye to a mortar in Vietnam, was hit by a hand grenade and was shot through the arm and then returned home with a well-earned chestful of ribbons and medals. Him you could understand. He had passed the nights sitting on his porch with his son at his side and a rifle on his lap. "The funny thing is," he told me, "is that before now my son never asked me what happened in Vietnam. Now he wants to know."

The biggest fort of all was Fort Ramelli, a mansion on St. Charles Avenue. At Fort Ryan, they joked, lovingly, about Fort Ramelli. "We used to say that if a nuclear bomb went off in New Orleans, the only thing left would be the cockroaches and Bobby Ramelli," said Nick Ryan, Bill's son. "Now we're not so sure about the cockroaches." Bobby Ramelli and his son spent the first five days of the flood in his flat boat, pulling, they guessed, about 300 people from the water.

The police had said that gangs of young black men were looting and killing their way across the city, and the news had reached the men inside the forts. These men also had another informational disadvantage: working TV sets. Over and over and over again, they replayed the same few horrifying scenes from the Superdome, the convention center and a shop in downtown New Orleans. If the images were to be reduced to a sentence in the minds of Uptown New Orleans, that sentence would be: Crazy black people with automatic weapons are out hunting white people, and there's no bag limit! "The perspective you are getting from me," one of Fort Huger's foot soldiers said, as he walked around the living room with an M-16, "is the perspective of the guy who is getting disinformation and reacting accordingly." He spoke, for those few days, for much of the city, including the mayor and the police chief.

No emotion is as absurd as fear when it is proved to be unjustified. I was aware of this; I was also aware that it is better to be absurdly alive than absurdly dead. I broke into the family duck-hunting closet, loaded a shotgun with birdshot and headed out into the city. Running around with a 12-gauge filled with birdshot was, in the eyes of the local militia, little better than running around with a slingshot - or one of those guns that, when you shoot them, spit out a tiny flag. Over the next few days, I checked hundreds of houses and found that none had been broken into. The story about the Children's Hospital turned out to be just that, a story. The glass door to the Rite Aid on St. Charles near Broadway - where my paternal grandfather collapsed and died in 1979 - was shattered, but the only section disturbed was the shelf stocking the Wild Turkey. The Ace Hardware store on Oak Street was supposed to have had its front wall pulled off by a forklift, but it appeared to be, like most stores and all houses, perfectly intact. Of all the stores in town, none looked so well preserved as the bookshops. No one loots literature.

Oddly, the only rumor that contained even a grain of truth was the looting of Perlis. The window of the Uptown clothing store was shattered. But the alligator belts hung from their carousel, and the shirts with miniature crawfish emblazoned on their breasts lay stacked as neatly as they had been before Katrina churned up the gulf. On the floor was a ripped brown paper sack with two pairs of jeans inside: the thief lacked both ambition and conviction.

The old houses were also safe. There wasn't a house in the Garden District, or Uptown, that could not have been easily entered; there wasn't a house in either area that didn't have food and water to keep a family of five alive for a week; and there was hardly a house in either place that had been violated in any way. And the grocery stores! I spent some time inside a Whole Foods choosing from the selection of PowerBars. The door was open, the shelves groaned with untouched bottles of water and food. Downtown, 25,000 people spent the previous four days without food and water when a few miles away - and it's a lovely stroll - entire grocery stores, doors ajar, were untouched. From the moment the crisis downtown began, there had been a clear path, requiring maybe an hour's walk, to food, water and shelter. And no one, not a single person, it seemed, took it.

Here, in the most familial city in America, the people turned out to know even less of one another than they did of the ground on which they stood. Downtown, into which the people too poor to get themselves out of town had been shamefully herded by local authorities, I found the mirror image of the hysteria uptown. Inside the Superdome and the convention center, rumors started that the police chief, the mayor and the national media passed along: of 200 people murdered, of countless rapes, of hundreds of armed black gang members on the loose. (Weeks later, The Times Picayune wrote that just two people were found killed and there had been no reports of rape. The murder rate in the city the week after Katrina hit was unchanged.) There, two poor people told me that the flood wasn't caused by nature but by man: the government was trying to kill poor people. (Another reason it may never have occurred to the poor to make their way into the homes and grocery stores of the rich is that they assumed the whole point of this event was for the rich to get a clean shot at the poor.) In their view, the whole thing, beginning with the levee break and ending with the cramming of thousands of innocent people into what they were sure were death chambers with murderers and rapists, was a setup.

My great-grandfather J. Blanc Monroe is dead and gone, but he didn't take with him the climate of suspicion between rich and poor that he apparently helped foster. On St. Claude Avenue, just below the French Quarter, there was a scene of indigents, old people and gay men employed in the arts fleeing what they took to be bombs being dropped on them by Army helicopters. What were being dropped were, in fact, ready-to-eat meals and water in plastic jugs. But falling from the sky, these missiles looked unfriendly, and when the jugs hit concrete, they exploded and threw up shrapnel. The people in the area had heard from the police that George W. Bush intended to visit the city that day, and they could not imagine he meant them any good - but this attack, as they took it, came as a shock. "Run! Run!" screamed a man among the hordes trying to outrun the chopper. "It's the president!"

V. Securing Things, Including Dottie Perrier

Four days after I arrived, I walked down St. Charles Avenue and watched the most eclectic convoy of official vehicles ever assembled. It included (I couldn't write fast enough to list them

all): the New York City Police Department, the Alameda County Fire Department, the Aspen Fire Department, the S.P.C.A. from somewhere in Kentucky, emergency-rescue trucks from Illinois and Arizona, the Austin Fire Department, the U.S. Coast Guard, the Consulate of Iceland and several pickup trucks marked, mysteriously, FPS: Federal Protection Services. The next day, the police chief said that New Orleans was "probably the safest city in America right now," and the mayor, removed to Dallas, announced that the city would be forcibly evacuated. The old social logic of New Orleans was now turned on its head: the only people welcome inside were those who had never before been there.

Overnight, the city went from being a place that you couldn't get out of to a place you had to be a conniver to stay in. In the few people who still needed to be saved there was a striking lack of urgency. When Lt. Gov. Mitch Landrieu, rescuing people in a boat, spotted three young men on a roof and tried to ferry them out, they told him to leave them be and said, "We want to be helicoptered out." After my host, Jim Huger, took a pirogue to help an old man surrounded by flood waters, he passed an old woman sitting on her porch and offered to rescue her too. "Are you the official Coast Guard?" she asked. He said he wasn't. "I'm waiting for the official Coast Guard," she said and sat back down.

I had a half-dozen equally perplexing encounters. For instance, on one occasion I ran into a lady of a certain age, wearing a broad straw hat, pedaling a decrepit bicycle down the middle of St. Charles Avenue. She rode not in a straight line but a series of interlinked S's; it was as close as bike riding gets to wandering. I pulled up beside her in my car, rolled down the window and saw, in her lap, a dog more odd than she. "It has two purebred pedigrees," she said. "One is Chihuahua and the other is poodle."

"Are you all right?" I asked.

"I'm fine!" she said. "It's a beautiful day."

"Do you want to evacuate?" I asked, because I couldn't think of what else to say.

"I have \$80," she said, still smiling. "I'd like to go to New York, but you tell me how far you can go in New York with \$80."

In the back of my car, I now had about 60 gallons of water, picked up from beside Uptown houses, with the intention of redistributing them to the needy. "Do you need anything?" I asked her. "Water? Food?"

"No," she said, still pedaling. "I have a lot of water and even more food."

As I pulled away toward the water, she shouted, "But I could use some ice!"

Until now it had been possible to get around without credentials. But with the National Guard banging on doors, telling people they had to leave the city, out came the most outlandish fake ID's I had laid eyes on since high school. One fellow got around on a Marriott Hotel security badge, another dummied up a laminated picture of himself that said he was a doctor. On Louisiana Avenue, one of the world's leading dealers of African sculpture, Charlie Davis, answered his door to National Guardsmen. He told them he was employed by newspapers as a

photographer, but when he turned to get his (fake) press pass, he told me, "the guns went up." When asked how much force he would use to remove people from their homes, Police Chief Eddie Compass said that he couldn't be precise because "if you are somebody who is 350 pounds, it will obviously take more force to move you than if you are 150 pounds." (Compass has since resigned.) Even the people who had come back home in Russian assault helicopters made a hasty exit, invariably leaving behind them, flying from a porch, the American flag. It was a symbol not of liberty but of personal defiance, a tribute to underdogdom. It was aimed at the enemy and said, Take that! The Confederate flag had become unnecessary.

I drove over to give Ms. Perrier the news. Ms. Perrier weighs far less than 150 pounds. It would take almost no force, and little time, for the soldiers to cart her away. Wouldn't it be better if I drove her quietly out to the one hospital still open, the Ochsner Clinic, where she could be cared for?

"I'd rather go to Touro," she said. Touro is another New Orleans hospital, not as distinguished as Ochsner, but closer to her house.

"Touro's closed," I said. "Ochsner's the only hospital open in the city."

"Really! Why?"

We agreed that she would be packed and ready to go in the morning – and she was. She came out wearing a bright dress and a brave smile, carrying an ancient silver suitcase.

"When's the hurricane coming?" she asked.

"It already hit," I said, then realized it must seem callous to her to relate this shocking news in such a dull tone.

"You're kidding!" she said. "Well, I'm glad the worst is over."

It went like this all the way to the Ochsner E.R. I left her at check-in, with an understanding that she would be evaluated and, I assumed, admitted. She sat down at the bank-teller-like window and produced her wallet with various ID cards. The lady in the window assured me that Ms. Perrier would be taken care of.

VI. Afloat and Adrift

>From there I set out into the water with a purpose. My brother had been found unjustifiably alive in Lafayette, La., studying satellite photographs on the Internet to determine just how many miles he would need to swim to get to his house. He alone of my immediate family had set up home beyond Uptown, but even so he had bought an old house. For some time now, he has had this thing about his little shotgun cottage - it isn't just an ordinary affection; it's true love - and so the last few days he had been contemplating total loss. It's all gone!

I reached the flood water a mile or so from the river. A mile farther, the street signs vanished below the surface, and the upper branches on old oak trees rose up from the water like the

fingers of drowning men. But the water didn't simply get deeper the closer you got to the lake. There were local highs and lows, so that it was actually very hard to get around in anything but a pirogue or an airboat without scraping the bottom. I picked up Charlie Davis, the African sculpture dealer masquerading as a photojournalist, and we drove down the Esplanade Ridge through a foot or so of water until we were as close as we assumed we could get to my brother's place. I had no idea that there was such a thing as the Esplanade Ridge - a strip of high ground that runs from the (high) river to the (low) lake - but in retrospect I should have. It is the one strip of land, apart from old Crescent City decorated with lovely old homes. (It's where Degas lived during his year in New Orleans.) People built here originally because it was dry.

Before plunging off the side of the ridge, we shimmied into duck-hunting waders, surgical masks and rubber gloves. The water was black and viscous and smelled only of petroleum, but the doctors at the Ochsner Clinic had said they were finding chemical burns on people who had been in it. Waist deep, we gently ascended to the back of my brother's house - which was high and dry. The leaves in his yard crunched underfoot like fresh cornflakes. He had made his home on what amounted to a peninsula off one side of the Esplanade Ridge, saved by his preference for old New Orleans architecture.

On the way out, we were able to loop around to the car without getting wet. That's when we first heard the gunshots.

Pop!

Pop!

Pop!

They were coming from a house just across the street, maybe 30 yards away.

"That's a .22," Charlie said. The last time Charlie was amid gunfire was when he went to Liberia to buy African sculpture and wound up hiding in an elevator shaft during a coup. He knows his gunshots.

Several things happened all at once. A hissing sound (Psst! Psst!) that, it occurred to me only later, and a bit hopefully, must have been bullets whizzing past us. (After the fact, more danger is always better than less.) Overhead, two sheriffs' helicopters swooped down. Coming toward us by land was the 82nd Airborne in their jaunty red berets. We ran.

The trouble was, there was nowhere to go. We reached the end of the Esplanade Ridge and found that the only way out was back the way we came. Retracing our path, we passed the house of the man with the gun, now surrounded by the 82nd Airborne. "He's not actually shooting at anybody," the soldier in charge said wearily. "He was just trying to get someone to bring him some water."

Three hours after I dropped her off, I returned to visit Ms. Perrier, who, I assumed, would be propped up in the geriatric ward, sipping warm milk, maybe watching a game show. The lady behind the desk looked down at a sheet. "She's been discharged," she said.

"How? She doesn't even have a car."

"She'd have been bused out," she said.

It was that word, "bused," that chilled the spine. The buses were controlled by the authorities. New Orleans now had a new word for what happens to people unlucky enough to fall into the hands of the authorities purporting to save them: domed. As in "I just got domed," or "If the police knock on your door, don't answer, 'cause you might get domed." To be domed is to be herded into a domed sports building - the Superdome, the Astrodome, the Maravich basketball arena at Louisiana State University - for your own safety. Ms. Perrier hadn't really wanted to leave her house in the first place. She had entrusted herself to me. Now she had been domed.

VII. Two Very New Orleanian Reasons for Staying in New Orleans

New Orleanians often are slow to get to the point: in my youth it was not unusual for someone to call my mother, keep her on the phone for 20 minutes, hang up, then call back because she never got around to what the call was about in the first place. The point is never really the point. Conversation in New Orleans is not a tool but a pastime. New Orleans stories are given perhaps too much room to breathe; they go on and on so entertainingly that only later do you realize that there were things in them that made no sense.

At some moment, I realized that Haywood Hillyer's story made no sense. Why, really, had he stayed? The first time I asked him, he replied: "These other guys had children, so they felt it wasn't worth the risk. I didn't have children." This may have been true as far as it went, but it didn't really answer the question: childlessness is not a reason to risk your life. Just three months earlier, he married a lovely young woman who was reason enough to live. He wasn't by nature defiant, or belligerent. He was just different, in some hard-to-see but meaningful way.

The fourth time (in four days) that I put the same question to him - Yeah, but why did you stay? - Haywood stood and, with the air of a man ready to make his final statement, said: "O.K., I'll tell you why I stayed. But this it totally off the record."

"Fine, it's off the record."

"Totally off the record."

"O.K., totally off the record."

"There were these feral kittens under my house," he began, and off he went, explaining how these little kittens had come to depend upon him, how three of them now live with him but two still refuse to let him near them, even though he feeds them. There's a long story that he swore was interesting about how these cats got under his house in the first place, but the point was this: If he left, there would be no one in New Orleans to feed the cats.

Haywood Hillyer stayed and, for all anyone knew then, risked being skinned alive or worse to feed cats. And the cats didn't even like him.

Two days later, as he was pulling out of town, I explained to Haywood that he just had to let me put his story on the record. "It'll make me look like a wuss," he said. I convinced him that in view of the fact that his bravery exceeded that of the entire Police Department and possibly the Armed Forces of the United States, the last thing he would look like is a wuss.

"All right," he finally said, "but then you got to get the story exactly straight. There was one other reason I stayed. It wasn't as important as the cats. But it wouldn't be a true story unless you mentioned the other reason."

"What's the other reason?"

"The traffic."

"What?"

"It took my wife 12 hours to drive from New Orleans to Jackson on Sunday," he said. "She left Sunday at 1 p.m. and arrived in Jackson at 1 a.m."

"So?"

"That's usually a two-and-a-half-hour drive."

"Right. So what?"

"You don't understand: I hate traffic."

VIII. A City of Storytelling - and a Little Hope

There's a reason that New Orleanians often turn out to be as distinctive as their homes. The city doesn't so much celebrate individualism as assume it. It has a social reflex unlike any other I've encountered: people's first reaction to other people is to be amused by them - unless of course they've been told by the police that they are about to be killed by them.

If the behavior of the people was peculiar once the flooding started, it was peculiar in the way New Orleanians are peculiar. At the outset people were shockingly slow-footed. But then New Orleanians are always shockingly slow-footed. Even the most urgent news, the levee break, took 20 hours to officially reach the people in harm's way, long after the water itself did. But news isn't what New Orleanians tell; stories are. And the long days after the waters leveled off were a perfect storytelling environment - no reliable information, a great many wild rumors, the most outlandish fictions suddenly plausible - and the people used it to do what they do best. But so far as I can tell - and I covered much of the city, along with every inch of the high ground - very few of the many terrible things that people are reported to have done to one another ever happened. With the brutal exception of the violent young men forcibly detained in the Superdome and the convention center with 25,000 or so potential victims, civilians actually treated one another extremely well. (There's a different story to tell about government officials.) So far as I can tell, no one supposedly defending his property actually fired a shot at anyone else - though there have been a couple of stories, unconfirmed, of warning shots being fired. Yet even as the water flowed back out of the city, my father called to say that a friend in

exile had just informed him that "they had to shoot about 500 looters." The only looter admitted to Ochsner, the city's one functioning hospital, was a white guy who was beaten, not shot - though badly enough that a surgeon had to remove his spleen.

Driving out of New Orleans to search for Ms. Perrier, I had a delicious sensation I associate with home, of feeling something that I ought not to feel and of being allowed to feel it. I had come to New Orleans because I felt obliged: I had skipped too many funerals already and didn't think I should miss the last big one. But the flood did not drown the past; it forced it to the surface, like one of those tightly sealed plastic coffins that, when the water comes in over the graveyard, shoot through the dirt and into broad daylight. (Yes, it turns out that we buried some of our dead in the ground too, and that the ground was perfectly capable of receiving them.) The levees were breached, but something else cracked, too, inside the people behind them. The old facade; the pretense that New Orleans was either the Big Easy or it was nothing; that no great change was ever possible. A lot of New Orleanians, from the mayor on down, obviously did not feel so easy. They harbored a deep distrust of their own city and their fellow citizens - which is why they were so quick to believe the most hysterical rumors about one another. The waters came to expose those fears and to mock them. The ghosts have been flushed out of their hiding places; now there's a chance to chase them away, or at least holler at them a bit.

The late great novelist Walker Percy, a lifelong New Orleanian, was attracted to the psychological state of the ex-suicide. The ex-suicide is the man who has tried to kill himself and failed. Before his suicide attempt, he had nothing to live for. Now, expecting to be dead and discovering himself alive, something inside him awakens: so long as he's alive, he might as well give living a shot. The whole of New Orleans is in this psychological state. The waters did their worst but still left the old city intact. They did to the public schools and the public-housing projects what the government should have done long ago. They called forth tens of billions of dollars in aid, and the attention of energetic people, to a city long starved of capital and energy. For the first time in my life, outsiders are pouring into the city to do something other than drink. For the first time in my life, the city is alive with possibilities. For the first time in my life, it doesn't matter one bit who is born to be a king. Whatever else New Orleans is right now, it isn't stagnant. As I left, I thought about what an oddly characteristic thing it would be if it was a flood that saved New Orleans.

There was to be no finding Ms. Perrier in the flesh, only the spot where her trail went cold. After a frantic search, a woman at Ochsner found that Dorothy Perrier of State Street had been bused with other refugees to the Maravich arena in Baton Rouge. From there, no one could say what had become of her. "This isn't going to take five minutes," a woman working in Missing Persons at the basketball arena said. "We have no records for most of the people who came through here." But it took exactly five minutes for her to return with the news that there were no records for Ms. Perrier. Anywhere. "Even if she did go through here, we wouldn't necessarily have a record," she said. Most likely, she added, she was bused to a shelter in Alexandria or Lake Charles. To me that sounded like wishful thinking: there wasn't room in the state for but a relative handful of the one million New Orleanians who evacuated in the past week. But on my way out, she handed me a piece of paper with phone numbers for the Red Cross. "You might try them," she said. "Sometimes they can find lost people."

I don't know why it never occurred to me to call the Red Cross. I suppose I always thought of them as something to give money to, not ask help from. But from my gate at the airport, I phoned the Red Cross, and in what seemed like an instant, a man told me, "Here she is - in Battle Creek."

"Battle Creek, La.?" I asked, hopefully.

"Battle Creek, Mich.," he said. He gave me another number, and in a minute or so Ms. Perrier herself was on the other end of the line. She couldn't have been more pleasant, even as she remained bewildered by what had just happened to her. It all took place so fast, she said, that she didn't even remember how she got from her house on State Street all the way to Michigan. (And thank God for that.) "Everyone up here is so nice, et cetera," she said. "But I really just want to go home."

Michael Lewis is a contributing writer for the magazine.

Indian Tribes and Hurricane Katrina: Overlooked by the Federal Government, Relief Organizations and the Corporate Media

Though there has been massive attention to the devastation brought by Hurricane Katrina, some victims have been overlooked. An estimated 4,500 American Indians living along the southeast Louisiana coast lost everything to Hurricane Katrina according to state officials and tribal leaders. Hurricane Rita, which hit four weeks after Katrina, dealt another blow to the tribes. Officials estimate that 5,000-6,000 American Indians lost their homes or possessions in that storm. The Louisiana tribes most affected by the back-to-back hurricanes are the United Houma Nation, the Pointe-au-Chien Tribe, the Isle de Jean Charles Indian Band of Biloxi-Chitimasha, the Grand Caillou-Dulac Band and the Biloxi-Chitimasha Confederation of Muskogees.

Tribal leaders have complained that they are being overlooked by the media, by relief organizations and by the federal government. Houma Nation Chief Brenda Dardar-Robichaux said in an article published in the Houma Nation newspaper last week, "We are an Indian tribe here that is falling through the cracks. Nobody has made contact with us except the native media. Everything we are doing has been a grassroots effort, and it's taken weeks to get this far with the help of many volunteers and private donations. We're basically doing it on our own." The problem is made worse for the Houma nation and some of the smaller tribes because they lack federal recognition from the government and the accompanying money that comes with such official acknowledgement.

- **Brenda Dardar-Robichaux**, Principal Chief of [United Houma Nation](#).
- **Charles Verdin**, Chairman of the Pointe-au-Chien Indian Tribe.

AMY GOODMAN: We are joined on the phone now by Brenda Dardar-Robichaux, the Principal Chief of the United Houma Nation. We are also joined by Charles Verdin, the Chair of the Pointe-au-Chien Indian tribe. We welcome you both to Democracy Now! Let's begin with Brenda Dardar-Robichaux, can you describe where in Louisiana the tribe is and what has happened?

BRENDA DARDAR-ROBICHAUX: I'll begin by giving a brief history. We were once in the area of Baton Rouge, that's our state capital. Baton Rouge stands for Red Stick, which was a boundary marker between us and a neighboring tribe. We migrated south and were once in the area of New Orleans. If you were to visit Louis Armstrong Park, you would see a commemorative plaque that states it was our ceremonial grounds and our hunting grounds, and we played the traditional game of stickball there.

We continued to migrate south and our largest population lives along the bayous of Terrebonne Parish and Plaquemines Parish, all along the eastern coast. In the mid-30s and -40s there were no educational opportunities for our children, so some tribal members moved back to the New Orleans area, because they could attend school there. And it's those isolated settlements and communities that was destroyed with Hurricane Katrina.

And then we forward a few weeks and Hurricane Rita came, and the people who live along the bayous of southeast Louisiana were devastated by Hurricane Rita. If you know anything about

storms, Rita came to us and was on our eastern side, which brings a tremendous amount of flooding. And that's what happened to our bayou communities.

AMY GOODMAN: Can you talk about right now, the kind of aid that you are getting?

BRENDA DARDAR-ROBICHAUX: The aid we have gotten has been from people who are upset with the administration, from people who feel that they did not act quickly enough and properly, and people who want to come out and make a difference. And we are humbled and blessed that they have come to our rescue. They have been providing us with much needed services to be able to recover from the storm, and it has been Indian tribes and Indian organizations throughout the United States that has come to our aid, as well.

AMY GOODMAN: Can you describe what federal recognition has to do with it or not having federal recognition that you have been fighting for for several decades?

BRENDA DARDAR-ROBICHAUX: Right. We have been in the federal recognition process now for 21 years, and we still have not received what is called the final determination from the federal government. And that has hindered our relief efforts, as well, because we're not qualifying for certain money, certain funding, certain relief aid that would be out there if we were a federally recognized tribe. And so we are having to do this on our own. And as I said earlier, we are blessed that Indian tribes and Indian communities and people from throughout the United States have come to help us in our relief efforts. If you were to look at my yard right now, there's probably about 20 tents that are set up, people from all over the United States who are coming in and helping us to provide services, everything from outreach, bringing much needed food and cleaning supplies and medical needs to our Indian communities, as well as a group of construction workers who's trying to do roof repair and just cleaning, just basic cleaning. With our flooding came a lot of sludge and mud that went into the homes. And it really takes a major effort to be able to clean all that out. And so they are in there, lending a hand, helping some of our tribal elders clean their homes, as well.

We had a group with the Eagles Organization who came down and provided much needed medical assistance. They were administering tetanus shots, as well as flu shots, and providing just basic general first aid and medical needs. Because when our tribal members are in the middle of all of this, trying to clean and recover, they are really not taking care of themselves. They are not addressing their medical needs. They are not taking their medications. They are not eating properly. And so we have been able to do outreach and make sure that they are getting the proper nourishment and that they are receiving medical attention.

AMY GOODMAN: We are also joined by Charles Verdin, Chair of the Pointe-au-Chien Indian tribe. Did I pronounce that right?

CHARLES VERDIN: Yes, ma'am.

AMY GOODMAN: Can you talk about where your tribe is and how it has been affected by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita?

CHARLES VERDIN: We are located about 60 miles southwest of New Orleans, and we are right on the coast, about 15 miles from the Barrier Islands from the Gulf of Mexico. We are a small community. We have been there since the earliest time, you know. We are basically from the

Chitimachas, and then we have other Indian tribes that's come over history to live with us as the Indians were being moved around from one end to the other.

But we are just a small fishing community. Most of our tribe who lives in our community are all fishermen, either from shrimping, crabbing, and oystering; all others do work for the oil field. But we were -- our community was covered with water. We had anywhere from eight to nine feet of water. And some of the homes that were high on [inaudible], that were pulled up before, you know, we are doing okay, but those who were not able to pick their homes up, you know, we have about 40 homes that were taken over from water.

AMY GOODMAN: What presence is there of FEMA, of the federal government in your area?

CHARLES VERDIN: FEMA has visited a couple of families, and a couple of families have received some help. But most of our members have received nothing and have not even seen FEMA.

AMY GOODMAN: What do people understand they have to do to get help?

CHARLES VERDIN: It's just a long process with paperwork, and a lot of our members are older members who do not have no education. So if somebody comes there and gives them forms, you know, they have -- they don't know what to do with it. So, we try to get people out there to help them fill out these forms. And it just takes some time.

AMY GOODMAN: Brenda Dardar-Robichaux, what about you, in terms of the presence of FEMA? When we were down in the New Orleans - Baton Rouge area right after Katrina, as we drove between the two cities, there was always that exit for Houma, and we understood that there was a mass evacuation site or infirmary there of about 1,000 people who were in Houma. How does that relate to the Houma Nation?

BRENDA DARDAR-ROBICHAUX: We have -- we did have quite a few of our tribal members that did have to evacuate to one of the local shelters. And right after Hurricane Rita hit I was able to go down and visit the bayou. I wanted to see firsthand the devastation that our tribal members would be facing. And when I got to visit, you could not even see the line in the highway. So I went over to the shelter later that afternoon after our site visit and visited with about 35 families who were in one of the local shelters and told them that we were there to help them to try to provide relief effort by way of clothing that had been donated to us by Wal-Mart, as well as some food supplies, because a lot of them left with just a couple of changes of clothing, never imagining that they would lose everything in their homes.

And so, in visiting with them, I invited them to come to our relief center the following day, which they did. But while they were there, they received a call from the shelter that stated that they had to get out. It was 11:30 in the morning, and they had to be out by noon because, as the lady put it, they were being thrown out, and I can't tell you the sadness that overtook the shelter and just tears from parents and children asking their mothers, "But where are we going to go." Because they knew that they could not go back into their homes that were still flooded, and at the same time they had to leave that shelter, and what they ended up doing was moving them to the larger shelter that still had people from the New Orleans area that had been evacuated there.

But some of them chose to go back into their homes, even though they were in no condition for them to return to. They chose to go back into their homes. And so we do have some tribal members who are living 30, 20 people, family members, in one home, maybe three bedrooms, one bath. And so, we are just trying to take each other in, community to community, friend to family, just trying to recover from this. But we do have some of our tribal members that are still in shelters. And when we contact FEMA and tell them about some of the struggles we are facing -- I have a family, for instance, in the New Orleans area, and it's a lady raising her grandchildren, and we visited the community in Lafitte. Her trailer, her home had no floor to it. Her floor was an area rug that she had put down. She had Visqueen strapped to the top of her ceiling. And that's what she was living in. So we contacted FEMA and said what does it take to get one of these mobile homes here, because if a person like this does not qualify, then tell me who does. And we've really had problems getting FEMA's attention. And we are not asking for a lot, but if there's a need, then these needs should be addressed.

And our tribal members do understand that they have got to fill out an application in order to be serviced. We understand that. But a lot of our tribal members have a very limited education. So what we were asking FEMA was to allow us to help them to help our tribal members in this process, because they don't know enough, you know, they are not formally educated enough to understand the paperwork. So we would want to be there with them, because a lot of them speak only our native language of French and they just cannot communicate well because of language barriers, because of cultural barriers and so we would want to assist them in this paperwork process. And that has not happened, as of yet. FEMA has not come to allow us to help them help our tribal members.

AMY GOODMAN: Charles Verdin of Pointe-au-Chien Indian tribe, what is the spirit of the people of your tribe right now?

CHARLES VERDIN: We still have lot of them that got their spirits up. A lot of them, you know, just have been through this ordeal already. And, you know, we rebuild. You have some of our older people that's just tired. They're getting to old to do this cleanup job like this, and some of their spirits are down. And some of them talk about getting out, you know. But we tried to get some kind of relief to help them rebuild higher. And when I talked to them about this, they were all for it. And some older members again are -- they don't like the idea of going too high up. The home would have to be picked up about 10-12 foot high, and it would be hard for them to go up and down. So we are trying to get some process to where we could fix them up. It would be kind of hard, but with this we have no help from FEMA. We're trying to do this with a local group and a couple other Indian tribes who came in the area to help us.

AMY GOODMAN: Who came in to help, which tribes?

CHARLES VERDIN: We have a group from the Poarch Creek out of Alabama, and with the Mennonites. They have made no promise yet but they're in our area, you know, looking and talking with people and see what kind of help they could give us. And I guess within the next month or so we ought to know. But they did send some mattress down to our area, because we still had some people that were sleeping on the floors and some of us were sleeping in their cars and staying by their home, where they could do some cleaning up during the daytime, and nighttime it either smelled too bad or just plain too hot. So --

AMY GOODMAN: Well, Charles Verdin, Chair of the Pointe-au-Chien Indian tribe, and Brenda Dardar-Robichaux of the United Houma Nation, Principal Chief, I want to ask you to stay with us.

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The *Real* Looting: Katrina Exposes a Legacy of Discrimination and Opens the Door for 'Disaster Capitalism'

By Robert D. Bullard and Beverly Wright

Special to SeeingBlack.com

BATON ROUGE, LA—As floodwaters recede in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast region, it is clear that the lethargic and inept emergency response after Hurricane Katrina is a disaster that overshadows the deadly storm itself. Questions linger: Is government equipped to plan for, mitigate against, respond to, and recover from natural and manmade disasters? Can the public trust government response to be fair? Does race matter?

Using case studies dating back more than seven decades, government response to Hurricane Katrina can be examined in a historical context of response to other public health emergencies, natural disasters, industrial accidents, toxic contamination, epidemics (natural and manmade), and terrorism threats in African Americans communities. Generally, emergency response reflects the pre-existing social and political stratification, with communities of color receiving less priority than White communities. Equity issues revolve around which community needs are addressed first and which community is forced to wait.

Blinded by Racism

Blacks and Whites see the world through different lenses. Whites are far more likely to reject the notion that racial inequality remains a major problem in America and that race plays a part in government response to emergencies. Although Black and White hurricane survivors find themselves in similar circumstances (displacement from their homes), because of institutional discrimination, Blacks may face different experiences and challenges than Whites in rebuilding their lives, homes, businesses, institutions, and communities.

Hurricane Katrina left a wide path of destruction and despair across Gulf Coast counties in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. The powerful storm toppled offshore oil platforms and refineries sending shock waves throughout the economy with the most noticeable effects felt at the gas pump.

Thousands of Gulf Coast Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama residents lost their homes in the hurricane. The needs of many African Americans and low-income disaster survivors in Gulfport, Biloxi, and Mobile remain invisible to the relief and recovery process. African Americans in the region are "invisible" victims of Katrina and racism. At every class level, racial discrimination artificially limits opportunities and choices for African Americans. Unfortunately, this sad fact of American life is not wiped away by the floodwaters of Katrina.

Rebuilding Public Trust—A Matter of Homeland Security

Hurricane Katrina is the first major national catastrophe in the United States since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack. As such, Katrina also created waves of a different sort. Millions of Americans now question the nation's emergency preparedness, capability, and commitment to address natural disasters

in a fair and just way. The events unfolding in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast have national implications for emergency preparedness and homeland security. Billions of dollars have been given to local, state, and federal government agencies for homeland security "toys" (equipment) and "training" (counter-terrorism) in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attack—with little accountability or evaluation of program effectiveness.

Level of public trust—and for good reasons—differs widely across racial and ethnic groups. A legacy of slavery, "Jim Crow" segregation, institutionalized discrimination, and unequal law enforcement has left African Americans displaying greater distrust of physicians, medical research, and the health care system compared with Whites. Distrust that many African Americans and other people of color feel toward the government in general is an issue of social justice and the government has an obligation to eliminate or mitigate it.

Differences in trust reflect divergent experiences of African Americans and Whites. The mistrust of the medical profession and biomedical community dates back to the antebellum period in our nation's history when slaves and freed blacks were used in nonconsensual experimentation. Successful public health response to epidemics and related health emergencies will depend heavily on overcoming the historical legacy of suspicion and distrust.

The sad legacy of the infamous Tuskegee syphilis "experiment," the failure to address childhood lead poisoning (a preventable disease), the handling of the 2001 anthrax terrorist attack in Washington, DC (different treatment of the mostly White U.S. Senates staffers and the mostly Black Brentwood postal workers), and differential treatment of Blacks in Superfund emergency clean-up, industrial accidents and natural disasters, with the most recent being Hurricane Katrina, are important reasons for a national agenda to rebuild public trust in our local, state, and federal institutions.

Katrina has exposed shortcomings in emergency preparedness, command and control, accountability, communication, and public trust. It is clear that if those directly affected by natural and manmade disasters don't have confidence in authorities, then it may be difficult in the future to convince the public to take proper preventive steps. In order for homeland security programs—and related emergency preparedness programs for that matter—to be effective, they must have the cooperation and trust of all Americans.

Exposing the Racial and Class Divide

Katrina exposed the racial and class divide that had been hidden from sight for decades. Because of the enormous human suffering and physical devastation, the response to Katrina (rescue, evacuation, clean-up, rebuilding, and recovery) will test the nation's commitment to address lingering social inequality and institutional barriers that created and maintained the racial divide of "two Americas," one Black and poor and the other White and affluent.

Katrina struck a region that has a disproportionately large share of African Americans and poor people. For example, though African Americans make up only twelve percent of the United States population, New Orleans is nearly 68 percent black. The African American population in the coastal Mississippi counties where Katrina struck ranged from 25 percent to 87 percent black. African Americans make up nearly half (46.3 percent) of the population of Mobile, Ala., while, in 2000, 28 percent of New Orleans residents lived below the poverty line. The poverty rate was 17.7 percent in Gulfport, Miss., 17.7 percent

in Biloxi, Miss., and 21.2 percent in Mobile. Nationally, 11.3 percent of Americans and 22.1 percent of African Americans fell below the poverty line in 2000.

Displacement – Survivors, Evacuees, Not "Refugees"

More than a million Louisiana residents fled Hurricane Katrina of which an estimated 100,000 to 300,000 could end up permanently displaced. The powerful storm ravaged an eight-parish labor market that supported 617,300 jobs. Nearly 100,000 Katrina evacuees are in 1,042 shelters scattered across 26 states and the District of Columbia. Katrina has left environmental contamination in Gulf Coast neighborhoods that will need to be cleaned up before residents can return. An estimated 150,000 houses may be lost as a result of standing water from the storm.

FEMA's plan calls for housing evacuees in 125,000 trailers and mobile homes in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama until they find permanent housing. However, the pace of getting evacuees out of shelters has been slow because few sites have been found with the necessary infrastructure—water, sewer, and electricity—to accommodate trailers. Some Louisiana parishes near New Orleans have adopted "emergency ordinances" and "NIMBY-ism" (Not in My Back Yard) limiting density of mobile-home parks.

Katrina did not discriminate in its devastation but numerous studies show that race and class factors play a role in disaster victims' ability to obtain loans, locate temporary and permanent housing, settle insurance claims, recoup losses and return and rebuild. If social equity is not addressed in post-hurricane recovery planning in the Gulf Coast, permanent displacement could become a major social, economic, political, and human rights issue of the day. The groups most vulnerable to permanent displacement include the poor, families with children, elderly, disabled, renters, and African Americans.

Mental Health and Post-Traumatic Stress

Thousands of hurricane survivors along the Gulf Coast must now cope with the loss of relatives and friends, homes, and businesses, and "loss of community." Katrina displaced just under 350,000 school children in the Gulf Coast. An estimated 187,000 school children have been displaced in Louisiana, 160,000 in Mississippi, and 3,118 in Alabama. Katrina closed the entire New Orleans school system. More than 125,000 New Orleans children alone are attending schools elsewhere. More than 93 percent of New Orleans schools are African American. Evacuated children are being enrolled in school districts from Arizona to Pennsylvania, including almost 19,000 who will be attending school in Texas.

For the survivors who lost everything, it involves coping with the stress of starting all over. Two weeks after Katrina first struck, more than 2,500 children were still separated from their families. One can only imagine the mental anguish these children and families are experiencing.

Past studies show that Black disaster victims are more likely to suffer from delayed post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) than Whites. Black disaster victims often receive less support, information, and emotional help than equally affected disaster victims who are White. Studies also show that Blacks are also mistrustful of agencies staffed largely by Whites and are less willing to turn for aid.

Just Transportation—Still Separate and Unequal

Transportation is a major component in any emergency preparedness and evacuation plan. However, unequal access to transportation alternatives in natural disasters heightens the vulnerability of the poor, elderly, disabled, and people of color. Individuals with private automobiles have a greater chance of "voting with their feet" and escaping from hurricanes than individuals who are dependent on government to provide emergency transportation. Too often buses (public transit and school buses), vans (para-transit), and trains do not come to the rescue of low-income, elderly, disabled, and sick people. As in the case of Hurricane Katrina, buses were not used in emergency evacuation. Many vulnerable people were left behind and many died.

Transportation apartheid is made clear in [*Just Transportation: Dismantling Race and Class Barriers to Mobility*](#) and [*Highway Robbery: Transportation Racism and New Routes to Equity*](#), which illustrate how chronic inequality in transportation is firmly and nationally entrenched. American society is largely divided between those with cars and those without cars. The nation has been so preoccupied with building roads and highways, that we have neglected public transportation.

In urban areas, African Americans and Latinos comprise over 54 percent of transit users (62 percent of bus riders, 35 percent of subway riders, and 29 percent of commuter rail riders). Nationally, only about 5.3 percent of all Americans use public transit to get to work. African Americans are almost six times as likely as Whites to use transit to get around. Urban transit is especially important to African Americans. More than 88 percent of Blacks live in metropolitan areas and 53.1 percent live inside central cities. Nearly 60 percent of transit riders are served by the ten largest urban transit systems and the remaining 40 percent by the other 5,000 transit systems. In areas with populations of one million and below, more than half of all transit passengers have incomes of less than \$15,000 per year.

The private automobile is still the most dominant travel mode of every segment of the American population, including the poor and people of color. Clearly, private automobiles provide enormous employment access advantages to their owners. Car ownership is almost universal in the United States with 91.7 percent of American households owning at least one motor vehicle. According to the 2001 National Household Travel Survey (NHTS) released in 2003, 87.6 percent of whites, 83.1 percent of Asians and Hispanics, and 78.9 percent of blacks rely on the private car to get around.

Before Katrina, transit-dependent people and individuals who don't own cars were "invisible" Americans. Lack of car ownership and inadequate public transit service in many central cities and metropolitan regions with a high proportion of "captive" transit dependents exacerbate social, economic, and racial isolation—especially for disabled, elderly, low-income, and people of color residents. Nationally, only 7 percent of White households own no car, compared with 24 percent of African American households, 17 percent of Latino households, and 13 percent of Asian-American households. Two in ten households in the Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama disaster area had no car. People in the hardest hit areas were twice as likely as most Americans to be poor and without a car. Over one-third of New Orleans' African Americans do not own a car. More than 15 percent of New Orleans residents rely on public transportation as their primary mode of travel.

The bill for replacing and repairing the roads and bridges destroyed by Hurricane Katrina could exceed \$2.3 billion. Repairing damage to interstate highways and major state roads, such as I-10, alone could cost \$1.5 billion, to be paid with federal funds. An estimated \$77 million in repairs are needed on another 9,000 miles of "off system roads" in the disaster area. These roads are not controlled by local government and are not repaired or maintained with federal dollars. The \$2.3 billion price tag does not

include damage to state ports, airports, levees or mass transit systems, or funds to relieve traffic-gridlock in Baton Rouge streets that are filled with vehicles from New Orleans evacuees.

Katrina exposed a major weakness in urban evacuation plans. The problem is not unique to New Orleans and Gulf Coast cities. The recent evacuation of 2.7 million people from Houston fleeing from Hurricane Rita shows that there is no way to evacuate a large U.S. city quickly and smoothly. Many motorists ran out of gas after spending more than fifteen hours stuck in traffic. The disastrous New Orleans emergency transportation plan should alert other cities to the complexities of mass evacuation. Emergency plans that do not provide alternative transportation (buses, vans, trains, etc.) as an integral part of disaster evacuation is destined to fail low-income, disabled, elderly, sick, people of color and others who do not own cars and drivers licenses.

Homeownership and Wealth Creation

Natural disasters often push poor people deeper into poverty, exacerbate crowding conditions especially among families with children, and deepen the wealth gap between Blacks and Whites. Katrina has intensified the competition for affordable housing. The hurricane made Baton Rouge the "fastest growing city in America," with the East Baton Rouge Parish population doubling from 425,000 to 850,000. This unprecedented growth has strained the local apartment and home market. Housing prices in the Baton Rouge metropolitan area have risen by twenty percent since the hurricane. Before the storm, the area had 3,626 homes listed for sale. A week later, fewer than 2,500 homes were officially listed for sale, but 75 percent of those homes have been sold already.

Home ownership is still the cornerstone of the American Dream. It is the largest investment most families will make in their lifetime. Home ownership is a cushion against inflation, the cornerstone of wealth creation, and a long-term asset that can secure advantages and transfer across generations. Home ownership is a critical pathway for "transformative" assets—inherited wealth that lifts a family beyond their own achievement.

Ownership of property, land, and business is still a central part of the American dream of success—a dream that has eluded millions of Americans. The growing economic disparity between racial/ethnic groups has a direct correlation to institutional barriers in housing, lending, employment, education, health, and transportation. Housing discrimination denies a substantial segment of people of color communities a basic form of wealth accumulation and investment through home ownership. The average Black family holds only 10 cents of wealth for every dollar that Whites possess.

About 60 percent of America's middle-class families' wealth is derived from their homes. Much of the increase in Black wealth is due to rising home ownership, which increased from 42 percent in 1990 to 48 percent in 2003—still far behind the nationwide home-ownership rate of 68 percent. Addressing "wealth disparity" is one of the biggest issues facing urban, suburban, and rural areas for the next 50 years.

Insurance "Tug of War" in the Aftermath of Katrina

After the destruction of Hurricane Katrina, insurance adjusters begin the arduous task of processing the mountain of insurance claims. The storm has set the stage for a monumental "tug of war" between insurers and the storm victims. The total economic losses from Katrina will likely exceed \$125 billion, with insurance companies paying \$40 to \$60 billion.

Prices for home insurance in storm-ravaged Gulf Coast area of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama could easily jump an average of 15 percent to 30 percent due to Katrina. After the four hurricanes hit Florida in 2004, insurers began increasing the price for home insurance there by as much as 30 percent, with some homeowners hit with increases of more than 50 percent. For some homeowners in the most vulnerable areas, Katrina would push the price increases along the Gulf Coast even higher than in Florida.

A majority of households and businesses in the 12 counties most affected by the storm in Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana do not have flood coverage. FEMA estimates that 12.7 percent of the households in Alabama, 15 percent in Mississippi, and 46 percent in Louisiana have flood insurance. Similarly, only 8 percent of the businesses in hurricane-affected counties in Alabama, 15 percent in Mississippi, and 30 percent in Louisiana have flood coverage.

Generally, people of color have higher levels of physical damage but lower estimated losses, than Whites largely due to segregated housing in older, poorly built homes. Black households are less likely to have insurance to cover storm losses and temporary living expenses. Because of racism and racial redlining, Blacks are more likely than whites to receive insufficient insurance settlement amounts. Blacks are less likely than Whites to have insurance with major companies as a result of decades of insurance redlining.

Because of the legacy of "Jim Crow" segregation, many African American consumers in the Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama Gulf Coast region may be concentrated in the secondary insurance market—smaller and less well-known insurance firms. This could prove problematic for Katrina victims. For example, nearly a dozen small insurance companies collapsed after Hurricane Andrew, which cost the industry about \$23 billion in today's dollars. Andrew was the most expensive single hurricane until Katrina. The same thing could happen after Katrina. Many, if not most, of Katrina's low and moderate-income victims may not have resources to hire lawyers to fight the insurance companies.

Insurance "Looting" and Redlining

The insurance industry, like its housing industry counterpart, has long used race as a factor in appraising and underwriting property. Insurance redlining is not isolated to an individual insurance agent. The practice is widespread among big and small companies. The premium differentials between Black and White neighborhoods cannot be explained solely by loss data, i.e., theft, vandalism, fire, and larceny crimes.

Studies over the past three decades clearly document the relationship between redlining and disinvestment decisions and neighborhood decline. Redlining accelerates the flight of full-service banks, food stores, restaurants, and other shopping centers from black neighborhoods. It is not uncommon to find African Americans who live in majority black zip codes paying twice the insurance premium that whites pay for comparable housing in mostly White suburban zip codes.

Katrina no doubt will expose the unequal treatment of African Americans and intensify the long-running disputes between insurance companies and consumers after hurricane and floods—disputes that revolve around where standard homeowner's insurance coverage ends and flood insurance begins. For decades, consumers, Black and White, have complained about insurance companies denying their claims on the basis that damage was not wind-related but flood-related. Flood damage or rising water is covered only by government-backed flood insurance. Because of the enormity of the damage in the wake of Katrina,

insurance companies may try to categorize a lot of legitimate wind claims as flood-related. This problem of insurance "looting" will likely hit low-income, elderly, disabled, and people of color consumers hardest.

Fair Housing, Fair Lending, and the Color of Credit

Disasters place a special burden on Black renters and homebuyers seeking replacement housing. Many real estate and insurance agents respond to the fears and biases of Whites. The result is a "discrimination tax" that ends up costing Black renters and homebuyers more than Whites for comparable housing. Predatory lending also hits Blacks especially hard. Predatory lending creates separate and unequal housing opportunities for Black and white homebuyers.

Existing fair housing and fair lending laws need to be enforced to prevent discrimination against Hurricane Katrina victims. Because of the national implications of the problem along the hurricane-impacted counties in the Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana Gulf Coast region, immediate federal intervention is needed by the U.S. Department of Justice and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. [The Department of Housing and Urban Development \(HUD\)](#) investigates [individual cases](#) of discrimination in housing.

Under the Fair Housing Act, the Department of Justice may start a lawsuit where it has reason to believe that a person or entity is engaged in a "[pattern or practice](#)" of discrimination or where a denial of rights to a group of persons raises an issue of general public importance. In cases involving discrimination in home mortgage loans or home improvement loans, the Department of Justice may file suit under both the [Fair Housing Act](#) and the [Equal Credit Opportunity Act](#).

Small and Minority Businesses—Getting a Piece of the Pie

Small businesses provide the backbone of the U.S. economy. Most minority-owned firms are small businesses. The number of minority-owned businesses increased 31 percent to more than four million from 1997 to 2002, according to the Census Bureau. The survey is conducted every seven years. Overall, the number of U.S. businesses grew 10 percent in the period, to 23 million. Minorities owned 18 percent of those 23 million, up from 15 percent in 1997. The survey is conducted every seven years.

Disasters hit small and minority-owned businesses hardest because they are often undercapitalized, vulnerable, and sensitive to even small market shifts. The annual payroll alone in the metropolitan area hardest hit by Hurricane Katrina—New Orleans, La., Biloxi, Miss. and Mobile, Ala.—exceeded \$11.7 billion in 2002. Small businesses employed 273,651 workers in New Orleans, 54,029 in Biloxi, and 107,586 in Mobile.

African Americans comprise the largest share of minority-owned businesses in the hurricane-affected area in the Gulf Coast. The U.S. Census Bureau reported in 1997 that New Orleans had 9,747 black-owned firms, 4,202 Hispanic-owned firms and 3,210 Asian-owned firms. Minority-owned firms in the Biloxi-Gulfport area included 1,305 black-owned firms, 273 Hispanic-owned firms and 1,063 Asian-owned firms. Mobile, Ala. had 2,770 black-owned businesses, 478 Hispanic-owned businesses and 549 Asian-owned firms.

Black business entrepreneurs are still significantly more likely to be denied bank credit and, even when their loan application successful, they receive smaller loans relative to comparable non-minority

businesses. This is the case before and after disasters. Katrina devastated New Orleans small and minority-owned businesses.

New Orleans African American business entrepreneurs date back to before the civil war. Many survived "Jim Crow" segregation and other barriers (social and physical) placed in their path. They serve as a tangible reminder of how Black people throughout the city's history have adapted to forces that stymied Black community economic development. Historically, Black-owned banks have provided loans and other services to Black communities that were redlined by White banks and mortgage companies.

Cleanup Standards and "Dumping Grounds"

Hurricane Katrina has left environmental contamination in Gulf Coast communities that will have to be cleaned up. In the New Orleans area alone, an estimated 22 million tons of debris must be cleaned up and 145,000 cars ruined by hurricane floodwater will need to be disposed of. How, when, and to what extent contaminated neighborhoods are cleaned up is a major environmental justice concern for African American communities.

Where hurricane debris and waste ends up is another issue that causes concern because of pre-existing power arrangements and the historical legacy of differential treatment provided to communities of color. It is important that government officials not repeat the mistakes made in 1965 with debris from Hurricane Betsy that was disposed in an African American area, which later became the Agricultural Street Landfill Superfund site community. Black communities in the South, as documented in "Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality," are dotted with landfills, toxic waste dumps and hazardous waste disposal sites.

Disaster Capitalism

Katrina has created a New Orleans "government in exile." The city's elected officials, a majority of whom are African Americans, including the mayor, city council, school board, and judges, are scattered in Baton Rouge and surrounding parishes and its citizenry who elected them are scattered from Maine to Utah with no idea when they can return home. Clean-up contracts and rebuilding decisions are being made without the input, advise, or vote from duly elected New Orleans officials and citizens.

Hurricane Katrina has opened the floodgate of land speculation and redevelopment scenarios that plan "for" rather than plan "with" the storm victims. What gets built and redeveloped (and for whom) and who participates in the re-building process are major economic justice issues. A small group of private companies, nongovernmental organizations and members of think tanks have divided up "pre-completed" no-bid contracts. A predatory form of "disaster capitalism" exploits the desperation and fear created by catastrophe to engage in radical social and economic engineering.

The reconstruction industry works so quickly and efficiently that the privatizations and land grabs are usually completed before the local population knows what hit them. Katrina has also allowed government to suspend the Davis-Bacon Act, passed in 1931 during the Great Depression, which sets a minimum pay scale for workers on federal contracts by requiring contractors to pay the prevailing or average pay in the region.

The New Orleans case presents some important political and human rights implications involving American citizens "right to govern," "right to rebuild," and "right to return" to their homes after a

disaster. It also poses voting challenges regarding registration, redistricting, access to polls for the disabled, and the homeless. Identification is required at the polls and returning residents may not have access to traditional identification papers (birth certificates, drivers licenses etc.) destroyed by the hurricane.

New Orleans' repopulation and redevelopment plans also have Voting Rights Act implications, especially proposals that may decrease the number of African American elected officials as well as decrease the voting strength of African Americans.

Rebuilding New Orleans

Hurricane Katrina exposed the systematic weakness of the nation's emergency preparedness and response. If Katrina is the best emergency response that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) could muster, then the United States is in trouble. There can be no homeland security if people do not have homes to go to and if they lose trust in government to respond to an emergency in an effective, fair, and just way. No Americans, Black or White, rich or poor, young or old, sick or healthy should have to endure needless suffering from a disaster.

Clearly, Hurricane Katrina exposed the limitation of local, state and federal government operations to implement an effective emergency preparedness and response plan. Lines of authority and responsibility between the city of New Orleans (mayor), the state of Louisiana (governor), and the federal government appear to have been blurred. Clearly, the response that followed Katrina heightened the level of mistrust African Americans have toward local, state, and federal government—making it difficult for some displaced residents to take proper preventive steps against environmental and health threats left by the storm. For example, Black New Orleanians see "Jump Start Jefferson" and other mostly White residents in neighboring communities returning home, while they linger in shelters or in places far from home. It appears that some Black New Orleanians may be willing to return to the city and take unnecessary health risks to fend off what they perceive as a "land-grab" plot by government and developers.

Congress is debating proposed legislation to allow the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to waive environmental regulations for 120 days if it "is necessary to respond, in a timely and effective manner, to a situation or damage related to Hurricane Katrina." Allowing waivers of environmental standards could compound the harms already caused by Katrina and undermine health protection.

There is a racial divide in the way the U.S. government cleans up toxic waste sites in the country. White communities see faster action and better results than communities where Blacks, Hispanics and other minorities live. This unequal protection often occurs whether the community is wealthy or poor. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency should use uniform clean-up standards to ensure equal protection of public health and environmental justice. What gets cleaned up and where the waste is disposed are key equity issues. It is important that the government officials not repeat the mistakes made in 1965 with debris from Hurricane Betsy disposed in an African American area—later to become the Agricultural Street Landfill Superfund site community.

Dozens of toxic "time bombs" are ticking away in the Katrina-affect region and other communities around the country where African Americans and other people of color are fighting against environmental racism, and demanding protection of public health and relocation from toxic "hot spots."

Pollution from chemical plants located in populated areas pose a health threat to nearby residents. The plant themselves also pose a threat as possible targets for terrorism. While the Department of Homeland Security has spent billions of dollars shoring up plant security, little attention has been given to reducing elevated health threats to "fenceline" communities—communities that are disproportionately poor and people of color. These "environmental justice communities" also have a disproportionately large share of sick people. Residents in environmental justice communities are the most vulnerable populations in mass evacuations from natural and manmade disasters.

The "Rebuild New Orleans" logo is beginning to show up on ball caps, T-shirts, bumper stickers, and posters. Rebuilding New Orleans will be one of the largest urban reconstruction programs in the country. Reconstruction must include rebuilding and restoring Black cultural and education institutions, including the historically Black colleges and universities (Dillard University, Xavier University, and Southern University in New Orleans) that have produced Black leaders for more than a century.

Katrina survivors, who make up the large "African American Diaspora," are dispersed across the nation. Physically and emotionally battered (but not broken), with homes, jobs, and neighborhoods destroyed, many evacuees in the Houston Astrodome have vowed not to return. A recent survey by *The Washington Post* found that 43 percent of these evacuees in Houston plan on returning to New Orleans, 44 percent plan on settling somewhere else and thirteen percent were not sure.

Houston and Atlanta were prime benefactors of the New Orleans' "brain drain" before Katrina. Hurricane evacuees, whether they are in private homes, hotels, or shelters need to know that they have a place in the "new" New Orleans. Black teachers, students, business entrepreneurs, postal workers, doctors, lawyers, cooks, maids, musicians, and others need to know they have a role in the rebuilding and governance of their city.

Since Katrina, the African American Leadership Project, though scattered across the country, developed its own response to the disaster. This plan, presented to the Congressional Black Caucus 2005 Annual Legislative Conference held in Washington, DC, recommends that the hundreds of billions in federal resources be targeted to improve human development and capacity, rebuild the physical infrastructure, and rebuild the institutional systems. The group outlined some broad principles, framework, value orientation, and "Citizen Bill of Rights" that they would like to see used to guide the Rebuilding, Reconstruction and Recovery process in New Orleans. Katrina survivors are fighting for equal treatment and equal protection of their right to clean air, clean land, and clean water.

Finally, Katrina survivors have a right to self-determination. All displaced persons should be allowed to return to their home and neighborhood and allowed to exercise their democratic rights guaranteed under our constitution. It is imperative that evacuees from hurricane-damaged areas, who are scattered across the United States, be allowed to vote in elections and participate in decision-making that affects their communities.

Robert D. Bullard directs the Environmental Justice Resource Center at Clark Atlanta University. His most recent book is The Quest for Environmental Justice: Human Rights and the Politics of Pollution (Sierra Club Books, 2005). Beverly Wright directs the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice at Dillard University. She is a Hurricane Katrina survivor. For more information on environmental racism visit www.ejrc.cau.edu, where a version of this article first appeared.

— October 11, 2005

Looking for Common Ground **by David Bacon**

If Congress' current proposals for immigration reform pass this year or next, would they help the immigrant workers now doing reconstruction on the Gulf Coast? What about the residents hoping to return home—what would these proposals mean for racial divisions already fanned by New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin and syndicated newspaper columnist Ruben Navarette in the wake of the flood?

Both Nagin and Navarette play on growing insecurity on each side of the migration divide. "How do I ensure that New Orleans is not overrun by Mexican workers?" the Mayor asked in early November. Navarette praised immigrants for "not sitting around and waiting for government to come to the rescue. They're probably living two or three families to a house ... that's how it used to be in this country before the advent of the welfare state." African-American politicians, he said, just want to "keep the city mostly Black."

It's not a theoretical problem. The Gulf Coast disaster is having a profound and permanent effect on the area's workers and communities. The racial fault lines of immigration politics threaten to pit Latinos against Blacks, and migrant laborers against community residents hoping to return to their homes. Community organizations, labor and civil rights advocates can all find common ground in a reconstruction plan that puts the needs of people first. But flood-ravaged Mississippi and Louisiana could also become a window into a different future in which poor communities with little economic power fight each other over jobs.

Even before Hurricane Katrina hit, the unemployment rate of Gulf residents was among the nation's highest. According to a study commissioned by the Congressional Black Caucus, 18 to 30 percent of people in the region live under the poverty line, and among Blacks in New Orleans the poverty rate was 35 percent.

After the flood, jobs for workers in the area simply vanished along with their homes. Thousands of residents were dispersed to shelters and housing hundreds of miles away. Businesses closed for lack of customers. With no taxpayers filling the coffers, cities and school districts face bankruptcy. In New Orleans, Blacks, concentrated in public-sector jobs and already reeling from the storm and flood, were hit again by massive layoffs.

With no sure job waiting for them, few families had the resources to simply go back and take a chance on finding new employment. The Bureau of Labor Statistics found in October that 500,000 of the 800,000 people evacuated had yet to return home. According to Jared Bernstein, an economist at Washington, D.C.'s Economic Policy Institute, the average unemployment rate for evacuees is 24.5 percent—10.5 percent for those who've been able to return, but 33.4 percent for those who haven't.

What did New Orleans residents need to go back? Within a few weeks of the disaster, the People's Hurricane Relief Fund (PHRF) came up with some simple demands. The Federal government, it said, should provide funds to enable families to reunite and make public the lists of evacuees maintained by FEMA and the Red Cross to help people find each other. Next, disaster victims needed the same kind of immediate relief the World Trade Center fund provided in New York City. Finally, to enable people to restart economic life, the PHRF demanded public works jobs at union

wages. It called for putting community residents on the boards planning the rebuilding and making their discussions public.

Steven Pitts, an economist at the University of California in Berkeley, points out that "the fundamental question in reconstruction is the role of the displaced residents, both in planning the rebuilding itself and in the support given them by the government."

What actually took place, however, was far from this community-based vision. As the floodwaters receded, a host of wealthy contractors invaded the waterlogged boulevards. Federal agencies signed no-bid contracts, guaranteeing that what little money they were willing to spend on reconstruction would become a source of private gain for the politically connected. Dispersed residents got no help in returning to rebuild their homes and lives. When they tried to go back, they were treated as threats to law and order—impediments to potential gentrification.

The Gulf Coast became instead a playground for advocates of free-market nostrums. The Davis-Bacon Act's protection for workers' wages was suspended—reinstated only after massive protest organized by the AFL-CIO and many community groups in the region. Affirmative action, which might have diverted a small percentage of those no-bid contracts to locally owned firms, was abolished. The meager budget a Republican Congress was willing to divert from the Iraq war became a justification for cuts to food stamps and student loans.

In this vast enterprise zone, sacrificing the welfare of workers and the poor was just one more incentive to attract corporate investment.

Contractors did come, sometimes bringing their workforce with them. Many migrants were also drawn to Mississippi and Louisiana on their own, by the word-of-mouth network that passes along news of any area where employers are hiring and asking few questions about legal status. Employers wanted workers, but workers without families, who needed no schools or community services. They wanted workers who could be housed in homeless shelters or packed into trailers like sardines.

Bill Chandler, political director in Mississippi for the hotel union UNITE HERE and president of the Mississippi Immigrant Rights Alliance, describes the conditions for migrant workers: "We've found instance after instance of workers sleeping outside or in tents," he says, "or in abandoned trailers or even school buses. There's no enforcement of any health standards, no safety gear and no immunizations for people who can easily get tetanus from cuts or punctures. Migrants work from sunup to sundown without any benefits, and sometimes even without paychecks."

Inspectors for the U.S. Department of Labor's Wage and Hour Division wait in their offices for workers to complain. In Jackson, Mississippi, the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement is on the floor above the inspectors, and the detention center for deportees is in the basement. As one might imagine, the Wage and Hour office doesn't get much walk-in traffic from immigrants, many of whom lack immigration documents. Instead, labor and immigrant rights groups are the ones who gather complaints and demand enforcement.

The biggest contractors—Halliburton, and its subsidiary KBR, BE&K (a construction giant with a history of recruiting strikebreakers in labor disputes) and others—disclaim responsibility. They hire subcontractors, who hire other subcontractors, who hire labor recruiters, who employ the workers. According to Chandler, while the original FEMA contract might pay \$35 for the removal of each

cubic yard of debris, the subcontractor who actually does the work probably gets \$10. Layers of middlemen absorb the rest. Subcontractors seek to underbid each other by pushing wages as low as possible. A family seeking to return to the area, needing a living wage, can't make it on \$5-\$9 an hour.

This is the dark side of the neoliberal American Dream. The net result is the casualization of the workforce throughout the hurricane-affected area. Temporary jobs instead of permanent ones. Jobs for mobile, single men, rather than for families. No protection for wages. Hiring through contractors and temporary agencies, instead of a long-term commitment from an employer.

Immigration bills currently in Congress would reinforce this system. Most proposals, from that of President Bush to the bipartisan Kennedy/McCain bill to the new measures put forward by Sens. Chuck Hagel and Arlen Specter all rest on establishing huge new guest worker programs. They would allow companies to recruit 300,000-400,000 workers a year outside the U.S., and bring them in to work under temporary visas. Employers would undoubtedly make the same promises of good wages and conditions heard on the Gulf Coast. But the economic pressure of competing layers of contractors, recruiters and labor agencies would exert the same constant downward pressure. In the wake of Katrina, the contractors now in the Gulf would have had a more systematic way to recruit the same kind of contingent workforce, with the active assistance of the Federal government.

Under these immigration reform proposals, the Department of Labor, with the same lack of political will to enforce worker protections it displays at present, would have a new charge. Together with the Social Security Administration, these agencies would be the immigration police, poring through employment records for those lacking guest worker visas. Inspectors might indeed leave that office in Jackson, but only to find and deport the undocumented. Those workers without papers, meanwhile, would be even more vulnerable than they are today. Their employers would have new leverage to demand unpaid overtime or impose bad conditions.

If one of these bills is enacted, job competition at the bottom of the workforce will grow more intense. And the likelihood of an immigration reform package passing with more enforcement provisions, expanded guest worker programs, and no worker protections is high, according to most policy watchers.

In the hurricane-affected areas, fears generated by competition are already apparent. Politicians like Nagin, using racial fears to win votes, and columnists like Navarette, seeking to incite racial hysteria among readers, both see gains to be made from increased division.

As immigration changes the demographics of the South's population, its communities have a good record of reaching across racial lines. "Every immigrant rights bill in Mississippi has been introduced by African-American legislators," Chandler says. In the state's poultry and meatpacking plants, longtime Black workers and a new wave of immigrants have found themselves on the same side in union organizing efforts. Hurricane relief is a key test of those bonds and the desire to achieve common ground.

This year the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) made two important contributions to this effort. The CBC-sponsored HR 4197 addresses hurricane recovery and poverty, authorizing funds for housing and new Section 8 vouchers, increased health care and extended unemployment and temporary assistance to needy families. It provides money to help returning residents rebuild their

homes or seek new ones, and for schools to help relocated students. The bill reinstates Davis-Bacon wage requirements, creates apprenticeship programs to develop good jobs, and requires the President to present a plan for eradicating poverty.

For Pitts, this moves in the right direction. "You have to assure there's a floor under wages," he suggests. "Both immigrants and African Americans need this. To ensure people can return, the government has to recognize the need for two kinds of income—wages from decent jobs, and money to cover the cost of relocation. Immigrants need a living wage too, as well as the right to organize and the ability to move freely, so they're not tied to an employer or contractor."

The CBC also supported another bill this spring, by Houston Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee. The Save America Comprehensive Immigration Act of 2005, HR 2092, provides a way for currently undocumented workers to gain permanent resident status and enforces migrants' rights in the workplace. Unlike every other immigration proposal in Congress, it has no guest worker program and doesn't call for greater enforcement of employer sanctions. It would take the fees paid by people applying for legal status and use them to provide job creation and training programs in communities with high levels of unemployment. Jackson Lee's bill has served as a rallying point for those community and labor activists who see Kennedy/McCain as dangerous, while providing a positive program for at least part of a progressive immigration platform.

The key to finding common ground is fighting for jobs for everyone. Whether Black, white, Asian or Latino, native-born or immigrant—no one can live without income. Yet this basis for an alliance of mutual interest has largely fallen off the liberal agenda. Even unions, the bastion of support for the Humphrey-Hawkins Full Employment Act, a proposal in the 1970s that the federal government provide jobs to eradicate unemployment, pay only lip service to the idea today. In the Democratic Party, free market ideologues ridicule the idea that the government should guarantee employment, as it did in the New Deal programs of the 1930s. Instead, both parties propose to pile guest worker programs and increased enforcement of employer sanctions on top of job competition. This is an explosive mixture in which no one has the right to a job, and everyone shares only increased insecurity.

Unemployment and racism in the U.S. economic system pit communities of color against each other, and against working-class white communities. Competition produces lower labor costs and higher profits. It's no accident that the guestworker programs in Congress are pushed by the Essential Worker Immigration Coalition, which includes 38 of the country's largest industrial and business associations.

But racial division is a powerful political weapon as well, helping to maintain a conservative Republican majority in Congress and the White House. By the same token, for working communities, overcoming racial division creates new possibilities for winning political power. In the early 1980s a Black/Latino alliance defeated the Chicago political machine and elected Harold Washington mayor. In the spring of 2005 the same strategy elected Antonio Villaraigosa mayor of Los Angeles, where division between Blacks and Latinos was used to keep conservatives in power for decades. The rebuilding of Biloxi, Gulfport and New Orleans can forge a similar political coalition on the Gulf Coast, too. But to accomplish that, working class communities will have to reject the use of immigration as a new dividing line to keep them apart.

Guantanamo on the Mississippi

by Jordan Flaherty

The continuing debacle of our criminal justice system here in New Orleans inspires in me a sense of indignation I thought was lost to cynicism long ago. Ursula Price, a staff investigator for the indigent defense organization A Fighting Chance, has met with several thousand hurricane survivors who were imprisoned at the time of the hurricane, and her stories chill me “I grew up in small town Mississippi,” she tells me. “We had the Klan marching down our main street, but I’ve never seen anything like this.”

Safe Streets, Strong Communities, a New Orleans-based criminal justice reform coalition that Price also works with, has just released a report based on more than a hundred recent interviews with prisoners who have been locked up since pre-Katrina and are currently spread across thirteen prisons and hundreds of miles. They found the average number of days people had been locked up without a trial was 385 days. One person had been locked up for 1,289 days. None of them have been convicted of any crime.

“I’ve been working in the system for the while, I do capital cases and I’ve seen the worst that the criminal justice system has to offer,” Price told me. “But even I am shocked that there has been so much disregard for the value of these peoples lives, especially people who have not been proved to have done anything wrong.” As lawyers, advocates, and former prisoners stressed to me in interviews over the last couple of weeks, arrest is not the same as conviction. According to a pre-Katrina report from the Metropolitan Crime Commission, 65% of those arrested in New Orleans are eventually released without ever having been charged with any crime.

Samuel Nicholas (his friends call him Nick) was imprisoned in Orleans Parish Prison (OPP) on a misdemeanor charge, and was due to be released August 31. Instead, after a harrowing journey of several months, he was released February 1. Nick told me he still shudders when he thinks of those days in OPP.

“We heard boats leaving, and one of the guys said ‘hey man, all the deputies gone,’ Nick relates. “We took it upon ourselves to try to survive. They left us in the gym for two days with nothing. Some of those guys stayed in a cell for or five days. People were hollering, ‘get me out, I don’t want to drown, I don’t want to die,’ we were locked in with no ventilation, no water, nothing to eat. Its just the grace of god that a lot of us survived.”

Benny Flowers, a friend of Nick’s from the same Central City neighborhood, was on a work release program, and locked in a different building in the sprawling OPP complex. In his building there were, by his count, about 30 incarcerated youth, some as young as 14 years old. “I don’t know why they left the children like that. Locked up, no food, no water. Why would you do that? They couldn’t swim, most of them were scared to get into the water. We were on work release, so we didn’t have much time left. We weren’t trying to escape, we weren’t worried about ourselves, we were worried about the children. The guards abandoned us, so we had to do it for ourselves. We made sure everyone was secured and taken care of. The deputies didn’t do nothing. It was inmates taking care of inmates, old inmates taking care of young inmates. We had to do it for ourselves.”

Benny Hitchens, another former inmate, was imprisoned for unpaid parking tickets. “They put us in a gym, about 200 of us, and they gave us three trash bags, two for defecation and one for urination. That

was all we had for 200 people for two days.”

State Department of Corrections officers eventually brought them, and thousands of other inmates, to Hunts Prison, in rural Louisiana, where evacuees were kept in a field, day and night, with no shelter and little or no food and water. “They didn’t do us no kind of justice,” Flowers told me. “We woke up early in the morning with the dew all over us, then in the afternoon we were burning up in the summer sun. There were about 5,000 of us in three yards.”

Nick was taken from Hunts prison to Oakdale prison. “At Oakdale they had us on lockdown 23 hours, on Friday and Saturday it was 24 hours. We hadn’t even been convicted yet. Why did we have to be treated bad? Twenty-three and one ain’t nothing nice, especially when you aint been convicted of a crime yet. But here in New Orleans you’re guilty ‘til you’re proven innocent. Its just the opposite of how its supposed to be.”

From reports that Price received, some prisoners had it worse than Oakdale. “Many prisoners were sent to Jena prison, which had been previously shut down due to the abusiveness of the staff there. I have no idea why they thought it was acceptable to reopen it with the same staff. People were beaten, an entire room of men was forced to strip and jump up and down and make sexual gestures towards one another. I cannot describe to you the terror that the young men we spoke to conveyed to us.”

According to the report from Safe Streets Strong Communities, the incarcerated people they interviewed described their attorney’s as “passive,” “not interested,” and “absent.” Interviewers were told that “attorneys acted as functionaries for the court rather than advocates for the poor people they represented....the customs of the criminal court excused – and often encouraged – poor policing and wrongful arrests. The Orleans Indigent Defender Program acted as a cog in this system rather than a check on its dysfunction.”

Pre-Katrina, the New Orleans public defender system was already dangerously overloaded, with 42 attorneys and six investigators. Today, New Orleans has 6 public defenders, and one investigator. And these defenders are not necessarily full-time, nor committed to their clients. One of those attorneys is known to spend his days in court working on crossword puzzles instead of talking to his clients. All of these attorneys are allowed to take an unlimited number of additional cases for pay. In most cases, these attorneys have been reported to do a much more vigorous job on behalf of their paid clients.

“We have a system that was broken before Katrina,” Price tells me, “that was then torn apart, and is waiting to be rebuilt. Four thousand people are still in prison, waiting for this to be repaired. There’s a young man, I speak to his mother every day, who has been in the hole since the storm, and is being abused daily. This boy is 19 years old, and not very big, and he has no lawyer. His mother doesn’t know what to do, and without her son having council, I don’t know what to tell her.”

Pre-hurricane, according to the Safe Streets report, some detainees were brought to a magistrate court shortly after being arrested, “where a public defender was appointed ‘solely for the purposes of this hearing.’ The assigned attorney did not do even the most cursory interview about the arrestee’s ties to the community, charges, or any other information relevant to setting a bond. Other interviewees were brought to a room where they faced a judge on a video screen. These individuals uniformly reported there was no defense lawyer present.”

The report continues, “after appointment, (defense attorneys) by and large did not visit the crime

scene, did not interview witnesses, did not check out alibis, did not procure expert assistance, did not review evidence, did not know the facts of the case, did not do any legal research, and did not otherwise prepare for trial...with few exceptions, attorneys with the Orleans Indigent Defender program never met with their clients to discuss their case. Appointed council did not take calls from the jail, did not respond to letters or other written correspondence, and generally did not take calls or make appointments with family members...(defenders) frequently did not know the names of their clients.”

“This ain’t just started, its been going on,” Nick tells me. “I want to talk about it, but at the same time it hurts to talk about it. Someone’s gotta start talking about it. It’s not the judge, its not the lawyers, it’s the criminal justice system. Everybody who goes to jail isn’t guilty. You got guys who were drunk in public, treated like they committed murder.”

I asked Price what has to happen to fix this system. “First, we establish who was left behind, collect their stories and substantiate them. Next, we’re going to organize among the inmates and former inmates to change the system. The inmates are going to have a voice in what happens in our criminal justice system. If you ask anyone living in New Orleans, the police, the justice system, may be the single most influential element in poor communities. Its what breaks up families, its what keeps people poor.”

How can people from around the US help? “Education, health care, mental health. All these issues that exist in the larger community, exist among the prisoners, and no one is serving them. We need psychiatrists, doctors, teachers, we need all kinds of help,” Price says.

“One thing I can’t forget is those children,” Benny Flowers tells me. “Why would they leave those children behind? I’m trying to forget it, but I can’t forget it”

Sitting across the table from Benny, Nick is resolute. “I’m making this interview so that things get better,” he tells me. “The prison system, the judicial system, the police. We got to make a change, and we all got to come together as a community to make this change. I want to stop all this harassment and brutality.”

Other Resources for information and action:

Reconstruction Watch - <http://www.reconstructionwatch.org>

New Orleans Network - <http://www.neworleansnetwork.org>

Families and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children -
<http://www.fflic.org>

A Fighting Chance - <http://www.a-fighting-chance.org/>

Peoples Hurricane Relief Fund - <http://www.communitylaborunited.net>

Justice for New Orleans - <http://www.justiceforneworleans.org/>

Common Ground - <http://www.commongroundrelief.org>

Four Directions Solidarity Network - <http://www.eswn.org/>

Color Of Change - <http://www.colorofchange.org>

Black Commentator - <http://www.blackcommentator.com>

Comprehensive website for information and action related to prisoners in New Orleans: <http://www.criticalresistance.org/katrina/>

Jordan Flaherty is a union organizer and editor of Left Turn Magazine. He can be reached at neworleans (at) leftturn.org. He is not planning on moving out of New Orleans. All his articles on hurricane Katrina and New Orleans are at <http://www.leftturn.org/Articles/SpecialCollections/jordanonkatrina.aspx>

Bush, lies and videotape

by CC Campbell-Rock

The videotape showing that President George W. Bush knew about Hurricane Katrina the day before the storm hit, yet neglected to send help immediately, lends credence to law professor William Quigley's belief that "They left us here to die."

At press time, President Bush was headed to the Gulf Coast again. According to a recent television interview with former FEMA Director Michael Brown, Bush has visited the area numerous times since the hurricane.

During an Aug. 27 meeting recorded in a videotape acquired by the Associated Press, Bush not only asked no questions, he automatically assured everyone that federal assets would be on the ground during and after the deadliest storm to hit the U.S.

During congressional hearings into the administration's handling of the disaster, Michael Brown couldn't remember if the president was present for that meeting or when the White House learned of the life-threatening nature of the hurricane. Meanwhile, the press reported that the White House wasn't aware of the hurricane's potential deadly impact until late Monday evening, after the hurricane slammed into the Gulf Coast.

Four days after the storm, and with little federal aid in sight, Bush said, "I don't think anybody anticipated the breach of the levees." However, the AP reported, "Transcripts and video show there was plenty of talk about that possibility – and Bush was worried too."

On Bill Maher's HBO series "Real Time," Brown said, "I'm glad the truth is finally coming out." He later characterized the president's laid back reaction to the impending disaster as "overconfident" in FEMA's capabilities.

Critics of the administration say finger-pointing and laying blame doesn't erase concern for the 2,000 people still missing or the dead man found in an attic this week or the 400-500 bodies that remain unclaimed and unburied or the 120 houses being demolished in New Orleans, which guarantee that more than 100 evacuees are now officially homeless.

Voting rights denied

Katrina evacuees are now facing another challenge. Unlike Iraqis living in America during last year's Iraqi election, Katrina evacuees in 44 American cities will not have satellite voting polls at which to cast ballots. In order to vote for the next mayor of New Orleans, evacuees must apply for an absentee ballot by March 22 and get information on who is running on their own, without the glossy flyers that they usually receive in the mail.

Without explanation, Judge Ivan Lemelle, the only African American federal district judge for the eastern district of Louisiana, dismissed a lawsuit that would have placed satellite voting polls in cities where evacuees live.

Attorney Tracie Washington said, “Once again, this is further evidence that African Americans have a lesser standing in this country than whites or the foreigners who we’re trying to get to run our ports. There is no reason for the judge to have denied ACORN’s request for out-of-state satellite voting.

“Everybody we sued, from the governor to the Registrar of Voters, said it was feasible. When the judge asked them if they could use extra time, they said, ‘That’s fine,’ and still the judge didn’t do it. We now have to try desperately to get people to the polls in New Orleans. It’s just disheartening that Lemelle did not rule in our favor.”

Judge Lemelle told the San Francisco Bay View, “I can’t legally discuss a case that is in litigation. I did rule, however, that my decision did not preclude anyone from challenging this decision or taking other actions.”

“Despite strong evidence demonstrating that the vast majority of people displaced are living outside of Louisiana, the court opted against the establishment of satellite voting centers. The court’s failure to act will prevent over 12,000 displaced New Orleanians from voting absentee,” said Damon Hewitt, associate counsel for the NAACP Legal Defense Fund.

“We’re living in a country willing to bend over backwards to create the illusion of democracy in a country thousands of miles away, yet it could not see fit to create a one time exception to unduly burdensome regulations to allow the Katrina Diaspora to cast a meaningful ballot,” Hewitt said, referring to last year’s Iraqi election.

Nearly 26,000 people registered to vote in five U.S. metropolitan areas with heavy Iraqi populations: Detroit, Chicago, Nashville, Los Angeles and Washington,” according to an Associated Press story in January 2005. Iraqis were also allowed to vote in Australia, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Iran, Jordan, Netherlands, Sweden, Syria, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates and the United Kingdom.

Katrina after-math fraught with racism

Ron Chisom, a native New Orleanian, civil rights leader, and co-founder of the People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond, is currently living in Fresno, Texas. The People’s Institute conducts anti-racism workshops for organizations and corporations. Chisom was the leading plaintiff in a voting rights lawsuit that resulted in retired Justice Revius Ortique becoming the first African American on the Louisiana State Supreme Court.

“Of course we should have the right to vote. New Orleans is not going to be what it’s supposed to be unless we have total involvement. If African Americans were allowed to easily vote, that would give African Americans too much leverage to maintain an African American in that position (mayor’s office),” Chisom said.

“We really have to educate all of our folks. They must understand the power dynamics. We are powerful people, but we’re not being treated that way, and we don’t treat ourselves that way. We have to do some organizing, writing campaigns, networking and put it out in media as to what’s going on.”

“With Katrina, we saw every aspect of racism – language, culture, individual and institutional racism. For example, the language used by media – ‘African Americans were looting while whites were getting what they needed.’ That was linguistic racism,” he explained.

“There was a positive side to Katrina,” Chisom added. “We saw people helping and getting help.”

Chisom remains positive, however, even while mourning the passage of his mother, Evelyn Theresa Comeaux, 84. “Mama died from Katrina. They took her out in a helicopter and we couldn’t find her for two weeks. She stopped eating and taking her medicine.”

Doing something about it

New Orleanians have until Wednesday, March 22, to request an absentee ballot to vote in the April 22 election. “We never intended to put everything into the court’s hands,” Hewitt continued. “We’re going to educate people on how to cast absentee ballots and how to vote in Louisiana.” Hewitt and others are setting up “Katrina Vote Centers” in cities with high concentrations of hurricane victims.

A hotline number will be released soon and a Voting Symposium held Friday, March 24, at Southern University in Baton Rouge.

“We need to put some heat in the street and be willing to fight like hell to get a little heaven,” said Rev. Lennox Yearwood, a Louisiana native and founder of the Hip Hop Caucus.

Speaking during a public conference call sponsored by backbonecampaign.org., and broadcast on Vashon.com radio, Yearwood said, “If they can leave citizens to die in the streets and evict people, while by the Stafford Act people can be housed for 18 months – if you look back on this moment in history and allow this moment to pass without saying enough is enough, then you will have missed it. The people must rise up and stand together.”

To that end, the Hip Hop Caucus has organized the Katrina March in Washington, D.C., for Tuesday, March 14.

“This is a march to demand housing for victims of Hurricane Katrina and a moratorium on evictions. This is a march to save lives,” organizers explained on the Hip Hop Caucus affiliated KatrinaMarch.org. “Trailers in New Orleans Now” and “Pass H.R. 4197.”

Rainbow Push Coalition will host a “Right to Return and Rebuild” March on Saturday, April 1, in New Orleans. Rev. Jesse L. Jackson, the organization’s founder, and Bill Cosby, Marc Morial and Rev. Al Sharpton will participate.

Also, the online petition, “Take Action against the Inaction,” co-sponsored by the directors of www.KatrinaAction.org and www.ColorofChange.org, invites everyone to let their voices be heard.

Additionally, the NAACP has asked U.S. Attorney General Alberto Gonzales to review Louisiana’s plan for elections in New Orleans next month to ensure that African American voters displaced by Hurricane Katrina “will have a fair opportunity to vote in the upcoming elections,” said Bruce S. Gordon, president and CEO.

CC Campbell-Rock, a native New Orleanian, veteran journalist and Katrina evacuee, is now the editor of the Bay View. Email her at campbellrock@sfbayview.com.

The People's Hurricane Relief Fund & Oversight Coalition

The People's Declaration: Survivors Assembly Demands

Identified by survivors on December 9, 2005

We demand that the local, state and federal government make conditions possible for our immediate return. This includes the following:

The Nagin Administration must make temporary housing such as apartments, hotel rooms, trailers and public housing developments available for us while we rebuild our homes.

The government must put an end to price gouging, stop all evictions and make rents affordable.

Local residents must take the lead in rebuilding our communities and must be hired to do the rebuilding work.

There must be immediate debt relief for debt associated with this disaster.

Quality public education and childcare must be provided for our children.

Quality affordable health care and access to free prescriptions must be provided.

The government must immediately clean up air, water and soil to make it safe and healthy for people to return home.

We demand that the government provide funds for all families to be reunited and that the databases of FEMA, Red Cross and any organizations tracking our people be made public.

We demand accountability for and oversight of the over \$50 billion of FEMA funds and the money raised by other organizations, foundations and funds in our name.

We demand representation on all boards that are making decisions about relief and reconstruction. We also demand that those most affected by Hurricane Katrina be part of every stage of the planning process.

We demand that no commercial Mardi Gras takes place until the suffering of the people is lifted.

We are calling for survivors and supporters to participate in a Martin Luther King Jr. Weekend 2006 conference and demonstration to make these demands heard!

The People's Hurricane Relief Fund & Oversight Coalition

Developing a "People's Reconstruction Plan": Field Work Project to Begin March 20th A major initiative of the Peoples Hurricane Relief Fund and Oversight Coalition (PHRF/OC)

The People's Hurricane Relief Fund and Oversight Coalition (PHRF/OC), announces the launch of a major initiative to develop a "Peoples Reconstruction Plan". The plan grows from the mission of the Reconstruction Work Group of the PHRF, which is to create a socially and environmentally just New Orleans and Gulf Coast Region. Our process differs from officially-sponsored planning commissions because we are committed to social, economic and environmental development, self-determination, and equitable planning that prioritizes the collective social and economic needs of the people, not corporate profits.

We hold city, state and federal government, as well as the armed forces—both private and public—responsible for the enormous and preventable loss of life, health, well-being and property in the aftermath of the storms and demand immediate and just reparation.

Drafting of the Plan will be aided by various professionals and technical experts, but its vision and design is being drawn from a broad cross-section of Hurricane Survivors, including renters, home owners, low-income residents, women, youth, the elderly, the disabled and others most affected by Katrina.

The Peoples Reconstruction Plan— a comprehensive and inclusive vision for reconstructing New Orleans— will serve as a mandate to guide the Peoples Reconstruction Movement and serve as a political platform for that movement.

PHRF/OC is starting this initiative with a Field Work Project in New Orleans that will commence the week of Monday, March 20th. The Field Work Project will include a week of coordinated community outreach, consultation, visioning, and technical and policy conducted by a cross section of Hurricane Survivors, various technical professionals, college students, and volunteers.

The Field Work Project in New Orleans is the first step in what will be a National Field Work Organizing Campaign to develop the "Peoples Reconstruction Plan" that reflects the needs and aspirations of all those people forced to disperse from their homes. The National Field Work Campaign will commence in April and be carried out by Survivors and the numerous coalition members and supporters of PHRF/OC in cities throughout country. The National Field Work campaign is designed to proceed throughout the summer of 2006 and will end with the release of a Summary Reconstruction Plan in the fall of 2006.

For more information regarding this initiative and how you and your organization can support it, please contact Kali Akuno at kaliaw@sbcglobal.net or (510) 455-0065 or (510) 593-3956.

Community and Resistance

Jordan Flaherty

Left Turn Magazine; November 26, 2005

A couple months before New Orleans flooded, I remember walking through my neighborhood on a beautiful weekend afternoon and hearing music.

I followed the sound a couple blocks, to where about thirty people, all of them Black, followed a few musicians through the streets. They were mourning the death of a loved one, New Orleans-style. Most folks were wearing custom t-shirts with a picture of the deceased. Next to the photo were the words "sunrise" along with the date of his birth, and "sunset," above the date of his (recent) death -- he was 20. Also on the shirt were the words, "No More Drama."

On the back, the shirts were individualized, with the relation of the wearer to the deceased. One woman's shirt said "momma." A few teenagers had shirts that said "cuz." A small child's shirt said "daddy."

Despite their loss, they were dancing through the streets. When the band finished their final song, everyone danced their hearts out. I don't know what else to say, except that's how we do it in New Orleans, and the image of those people mourning through celebration sticks with me as I see New Orleans today, struggling with so much loss and tragedy.

Cornel West, who has visited New Orleans often, said shortly after the city was flooded, "New Orleans has always been a city that lived on the edge, with Elysian Fields and cemeteries and the quest for paradise. When you live so close to death, behind the levees, you live more intensely, sexually, gastronomically, psychologically. Louis Armstrong came out of that unbelievable cultural breakthrough unprecedented in the history of American civilization. The rural blues, the urban jazz. It is the tragicomic lyricism that gives you the courage to get through the darkest storm. Charlie Parker would have killed somebody if he had not blown his horn. The history of black people in America is one of unbelievable resilience in the face of crushing white supremacist powers."

More than anywhere else in the US, New Orleans is a city where people live in one neighborhood their whole lives, where generations live in the same community. According to a recent census, of all US cities, New Orleans ranked second in the percentage of its population born in the state, at 83 percent. (Santa Ana, Calif., was first; Las Vegas last.) 54 percent of the residents of the Lower Ninth Ward had been in their homes for 10 years or more, far above the national average.

All of this is to say that New Orleans is not just a tourist stop. New Orleans is a unique culture, one that is resilient, and with a history of community and resistance. And, despite everything, resistance continues.

The People's Hurricane Fund has been doing direct outreach and organizing in cities across the US for their People's Tribunal and March for Justice, scheduled for December 8-10 in Jackson, Mississippi and New Orleans. They have organized communication centers in Jackson and New Orleans with plans for centers in Houston, Baton Rouge and Atlanta.

On a national level, organizations such as colorofchange.org have mobilized thousands of people to pressure politicians, and the Congressional Black Congress has worked to keep this issue alive, both through legislation, and through joining protests, as Georgia Congresswoman Cynthia McKinney did by showing up for a march from New Orleans to Gretna a few weeks ago.

Meanwhile, just days after DC organizers announced plans for a protest at FEMA headquarters, FEMA officials announced that they were pushing back the date after which they would stop paying for hotels for Gulf Coast evacuees from December 1 to December 15. Continued pressure from across the US caused them to move the date again, to January 7.

Here in New Orleans, volunteers with the Common Ground Collective have set up neighborhood distribution centers with food and supplies, have served hundreds of people in their free health clinic, setup a media center complete with a community radio station, and embarked on a project to rehabilitate houses in the Ninth Ward. This week, hundreds of volunteers have arrived to continue this work, most of them staying on mattresses on the floors of warehouses and houses, sometimes thirty or more to a room.

Any convergence of hundreds of mostly young and white activists in a overwhelmingly Black community is bound to bring skepticism and controversy, and Common Ground has received criticisms from some local organizers. However, Common Ground in many ways represents a big step forward for the global justice movement. Rather than coming in, leading a protest, and leaving, activists were invited by Malik Rahim, a longtime community organizer, and have followed through and done real work in communities. They have been true to their commitments, and have shown by example that people with a vision of radical change and social justice can put FEMA or Red Cross to shame.

Finally, yesterday saw a major legal victory in the struggle for housing.

According to the statement from the New Orleans Grassroots Legal Network, lawyers representing a range of organizations, "brought suit against the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, FEMA, Orleans Parish, and Jefferson Parish on behalf of the People's Hurricane Relief Fund, UNITE-HERE Local 50-2, SEIU Local 21, ACORN New Orleans, and individual tenants being victimized by landlords post-Hurricane Katrina. Because of the immense pressure that has been placed on the government and the landlords by the people, Plaintiffs were able to achieve the following result from this lawsuit:

- (1) All evictions in Orleans and Jefferson Parishes are immediately stayed -- meaning, all eviction proceedings in Orleans and Jefferson Parishes stop immediately against residents who are not in the area and whose whereabouts are unknown to landlords.
- (2) Under the judge's order, FEMA is required, upon request, to provide to the Orleans and Jefferson Parishes, current contact information for the tenants who landlords are seeking to evict. Upon this contact information being provided by FEMA, the Parishes have to provide written notice of eviction to the tenants at the tenants' most current addresses. Tenants then have at least 45

days from the date of the mailing of the notice respond to the eviction action.

"This victory means that displaced people have an almost two-month reprieve from having to face loss of their personal property and their homes. This victory also means that for the first time FEMA has finally agreed to provide information to protect survivors. This is huge.

"But overall, this case is just another step that the Grassroots Legal Network has taken to bring recognition that people who have suffered the worst impact by the natural and government disaster of Hurricane Katrina have a right to return to their homes. This victory also provides an opportunity for political and social rights activists to organize with grassroots people to assert pressure on those in power to respect their humanity."

All of this leaves me feeling, for the first time in a while, that all of this fighting really does mean something, and New Orleans lives on.

Jordan Flaherty is a union organizer and an editor of Left Turn Magazine. This is his eleventh article from New Orleans. You can contact Jordan at NewOrleans@leftturn.org. Jordan's previous articles from New Orleans are at <http://www.leftturn.org/articles/SpecialCollections/katrina.aspx>

HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS IN U.S. GOVERNMENT TREATMENT OF KATRINA VICTIMS

What happened to the New Orleans staff of the People's Institute For Survival and Beyond after Katrina destroyed their office and they were forced to leave caused Meiklejohn Civil Liberties Institute and the People's Institute to submit a Report to the UN Human Rights Committee on human rights violations by the U.S. Government. The Committee enforces the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), a treaty ratified by the U.S. under the first Pres. Bush.

The U.S. Government's lack of any enforceable evacuation plan put New Orleans residents in harm's way, according to Daniel A. Buford, Regional Consultant for the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond. This contributed to a mounting death toll of numerous poor people. And the refusal of FEMA to adequately care for the dead in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina is an affront to human dignity, and causes terror for bereaved family members.

"We have made a list of fifteen actions that violate the U.S. Constitution 'general welfare' clause, the right to human dignity in UN Charter Art. 55 and the Covenant; the Government's duty not to discriminate under two other ratified treaties: the Convention on Elimination of Racial Discrimination, and the duty not to use degrading treatment under the Convention Against Torture," Ann Fagan Ginger reported. "The facts come from the New Orleans Institute staff and from coverage in Democracy Now, NPR, Broncaccio's NOW, and many emails from the region."

15 TYPES OF HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

1. Failing to continue funding work on old levees.
2. Failing to make a workable comprehensive emergency plan.
3. Deploying many National Guard troops from Gulf states to Iraq, leaving too few to serve locally.
4. Putting an incompetent head of FEMA in charge of U.S. relief work.
5. Ordering thousands of untrained government employees to the area to focus on "looters" from poor and African American communities, to flood their regions to save upscale areas, and to round them up and send them to massive coliseums.
6. Ordering citizens to evacuate by car, when thousands had no cars.
7. Imposing martial law and sending police/military to treat victims as prisoners, not displaced persons suffering severe emotional and spiritual trauma, and answering their questions by telling them to "check that with ..." some agency that could not be reached.
8. Failing to retrieve dead bodies, even when pointed out.
9. Announcing checks, rather than cash, would be sent to victim families surviving in shelters with no access to banks and bank accounts.
10. Sending people to coliseums with thousands of others, without toilets, water, food, air conditioning, blankets, or trained social workers.
11. Ordering citizens to get into buses, without being told the destination and forbidden to get off sooner.
12. Failure to immediately send available buses equipped with water, food, supplies to disaster areas.
13. Immediately announcing contracts with large, white-owned corporations not based in the Gulf to rebuild, with no local input or guarantee of jobs to locals.
14. Making threats to the media when they tried to take photos of some areas or actions by officers, and confiscation of cameras and photos.

15. Failing to carry out the mandates of the Government's 9/11 Commission, which, according to the Republican chair of that Commission, former New Jersey Governor Thomas Kean, and the Democrat vice-chair Lee Hamilton, former Indiana Congress member, would have helped deal with the confusion that followed Katrina.

Note: On Sept. 13, Pres. Bush made a brief admission that mistakes had been made, took responsibility for them, and removed the head of FEMA from heading the post-Katrina efforts.

Judge Claudia Morcom of the Wayne County Circuit Court in Michigan will present this report, and reports of other human rights violations by the U.S. since 9/11, to the UN Human Rights Committee on Oct. 24 in Geneva when many U.S. NonGovernmental Organizations will also be heard.

Note: Provisions of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights allegedly violated in Government dealings with some victims of Katrina:

Preamble, Articles 2.1, 3, 4.1, 6.1, 7, 9.1, 10.1, 12.1, 17, 23.1, 24.1, 26

**STATEMENT OF:
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PREPARED FOR THE
HEARINGS OF THE UNITED NATIONS SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR
ON EXTREME POVERTY
DR. ARJUN SENGUPTA
ON THE AFTERMATH OF HURRICANE KATRINA
NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA
OCTOBER 27, 2005**

We are writing to express our concern, as human rights advocates and scholars, about the extensive and alarming human rights implications of United States federal, state and local government policy and activities before, during, and after Hurricane Katrina. The inadequate response of government officials at all levels reflects the impact of “globalization in miniature” on the poor and other vulnerable and subordinated groups. The panoply of human rights implicated in the aftermath of this disaster includes classic civil and political rights, as well as so-called “second generation” rights (e.g. the rights to food, housing and education, the right to work for a decent wage, and the right to enjoy the unique cultural legacy of the region.)

The United States of America, as a member of the United Nations; a state party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD); and as a signatory to the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), has a legal and moral obligation to address and correct the numerous human rights violations occurring in the Gulf Coast region and elsewhere in the country. In addition, the international community has elaborated the Pinheiro Principles on the Treatment of Internally-Displaced Persons, which should be a guide to the rights of the millions displaced by the hurricane.

The situation in the Gulf Coast of the United States is a telling illustration of the indivisibility and interdependence of economic, social, and cultural rights and civil and political rights. Poor people in the United States, as in other parts of the world, do not experience human rights violations in neatly divided categories. Their experience of poverty and the denial of other economic, social, and cultural rights is intimately related to race, class, age, and disability discrimination and other civil and political rights violations.

Violations of the Right to Life: Failures of Disaster Planning and Response
Pre-disaster Planning

The federal government’s pre-planning and post-disaster response was characterized by appalling indifference and incompetence, resulting in the deaths, injury, and misery of thousands of poor, working and middle class, and elderly in the region. According to one source, there was only one Federal

Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) official in New Orleans on the day before the storm, Marty J. Bahamonde. However, according to the testimony of disgraced former director of FEMA, Michael D. Brown, there were a dozen agency employees in New Orleans in addition to an emergency response team. According to Bahahomde, senior FEMA officials told him that a FEMA medical team, 360,000 ready-to-eat meals, and fifteen water trucks, were all being sent before the storm hit. Instead, he found that the medical team did not arrive until the day after the storm, there were only 40,000 meals, and only five water trucks. Bahahomde also testified to Congress that he e-mailed FEMA headquarters about the failure of New Orleans levees on August 29th as the situation worsened, but U.S. Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff claimed that he did not learn of the break until August 30th.

On August 31, Bahamonde e-mailed Brown directly, stating: "I know you know, the situation is past critical ... [h]otels are kicking people out, thousands gathering in the streets with no food or water." He received a response from Brown's aide hours later stating Brown needed to find a restaurant because "[i]t is very important that time is allowed for Mr. Brown to eat dinner."

Levee Security

A basic duty of government is the protection of life. Yet there is no commitment to fund the construction of a levee system that will fully protect the city of New Orleans. Budget cuts that deprived the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers of scientific expertise, likely contributed to the levee failure. Further, the push to privatize government functions has exacerbated the problem. Among other things, duties previously handled by the Corps of Engineers (i.e. soil boring and testing) are now conducted by private contractors. International oversight is needed to ensure that the United States government meets its obligation to provide a safe and secure environment for the people of the region.

Discrimination Based on Race and Class

Hurricane Katrina exposed the dirty little secret of poverty amidst plenty in America. The United States has the largest gap between rich and poor in the industrialized world, and that gap is growing. Media attention to the catastrophe also re-asserted the continuing legacy of slavery and racial discrimination in the United States, which is integrally linked with poverty.

Reports from poor and middle-class people who were trapped in overcrowded shelters, in their homes, nursing homes, or hospitals during the disaster, revealed extensive and pervasive incidents of racial and class discrimination. Many of those left behind were poor, African-American, elderly, or disabled. Little or no provision was made for the many people in the area who did not own cars. Many were herded into overcrowded "shelters" with no or inadequate provision for food, water, sanitation, security or medical assistance. Those who tried to obtain basic needs such as food or water from nearby stores were often identified as "looters" if they were Black, but as "victims" or "survivors" if they were not. Police and other security officials were accused of arbitrarily arresting persons of color.

We urge the United Nations to monitor closely the racial dynamics of the repopulation of the area. Before Katrina, New Orleans, Louisiana, for example, had a population of 475,000 that was approximately two-thirds African American. Current estimates indicate that the city will soon consist only of about 350,000 residents, only 35% to 40% of whom will be African American. A large segment of the Black population in New Orleans was living in neighborhoods that, according to U.S. Housing and Urban Development Secretary Alphonso Jackson, "should not be rebuilt," while there is no proposal to abandon predominantly white neighborhoods that were similarly inundated. Prominent U.S. civil rights advocate Rev. Jesse Jackson responded by arguing that "displaced persons have a right to return home" and accused the housing secretary of promoting the gentrification of one of America's historic

cities, rather than rebuilding appropriate low-cost housing. Some local officials publicly celebrated the displacement poor Blacks from public housing and schools.

Discrimination Based on Age and Disability

The aftermath of Katrina also revealed significant and continuing discrimination against the elderly and disabled. Federal, state, and local officials made little or no provision for the special needs of this population. Elderly and sick individuals, especially those in hospitals or nursing homes serving poor communities, were literally abandoned for days with no food, water, or the electric power necessary to keep respirators, surgical equipment, or dialysis machines running. Many of those unable to get out of their homes perished.

The Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals reported that exacerbated medical conditions (i.e., heart problems, diabetes, kidney disease, etc.) accounted for many deaths or contributed to the number of drownings. In addition, the report highlighted that age was a key factor in the demographic attributes of those who died.

Those who were elderly were often unable to travel without assistance and suffered from medical problems that increased the risk of drowning, suffocation, or heat exhaustion. About 60% of the identified deceased persons were sixty-one years of age or older. In St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana, for example, the age and impaired health of the victims, rather than their location, was more pertinent to their inability to survive.

Lack of Democratic Accountability/Rights of Internally-Displaced Persons:

The right to choose governmental representatives and to participate in important official decisions affecting human lives are well-recognized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the ICCPR, the ICESCR and CEDAW.

The enormous population shifts created by the aftermath of Katrina threatens to disenfranchise tens of thousands of evacuees, many of whom lack the resources to return. Commissions of private citizens have been set up by local and state officials and tasked to develop plans for the future of the region, with no accountability to the electorate. Thus, the debate over such vital issues as the size of the city, whether to rebuild in certain areas, and how to spend federal funds, is largely confined to business elites. Although elections throughout Louisiana have been postponed, consensus has not been reached on how to conduct them without disenfranchising residents—especially the poor. There are more than 299,000 registered voters in Orleans Parish alone who have been displaced by Katrina.

Efforts to hold citywide elections in New Orleans were hindered when state officials were denied access to federal records that disclosed where displaced voters now live. While FEMA claims that the records are protected by federal privacy laws, the government has an obligation to guarantee the right political participation.

In addition, international monitoring is needed of any *de jure* or *de facto* changes in voting rights resulting from Hurricane Katrina. Under the 1965 Voting Rights Act, Orleans Parish is required to submit any voting changes in election laws to a pre-clearance review of any changes to ensure that they do not diminish minority voting representation.

Democratic accountability has also been undermined by the suspension of federal contracting rules for the clean-up and rebuilding of areas damaged by Hurricane Katrina, an effort that will cost well over \$100 billion. A no-bid contracting process that comprises millions of dollars is ripe for abuse, cronyism, and corruption also undermines the right to work for a decent wage and other rights of access to economic justice.

Impact of Privatization of Public Resources on Education

There is a danger that this disaster will be used to further undermine the right to free public education in Louisiana. Approximately 372,000 children were displaced by Hurricane Katrina.

One method now being promoted to address the educational needs of displaced school-aged children is the use of vouchers for religious and private schools. Such voucher systems threaten to divert badly needed public funds from school systems already in crisis, relegating many poor children, particularly children of color, to a dying system. The Bush administration proposed spending \$488 million on religious and private school vouchers. Under this program, public schools would be ineligible to receive the proposed voucher funds. A key concern is that such a program would allow federal dollars to go to schools that are not accountable under prohibitions on discrimination in hiring and other civil rights laws.

Violations of the Rights of Workers: Waivers of Labor Laws

Days after the disaster, U.S. President Bush issued a Proclamation suspending the 1931 Davis-Bacon Act in the areas affected by Hurricane Katrina. The Act sets a minimum pay scale for workers on federal contracts, requiring employers to pay the prevailing or average wage in the region. Bush argued that suspending employer pay requirements would give businesses greater flexibility to rebuild and recover following the hurricane. However, this action was rescinded after provoking outrage from advocates of workers' rights. International monitoring of labor standards is necessary to protect the rights of workers to a living wage and safe working conditions as rebuilding efforts continue.

Rights against racial, gender, and disability discrimination against workers are also in jeopardy. The U.S. Department of Labor has waived the requirement that a company hired by the government with more than fifty employees for a contract greater than \$50,000 must develop an affirmative action plan. A memorandum detailing of this plan was issued on September 9th. All new federal contractors would no longer be obligated to create a plan to hire minorities, women, Vietnam veterans, and disabled people on Katrina-related projects. The suspension would last for three months with the possibility of extension. The DOL website states that the goal of the waiver is to "reduce the burden of paperwork on government contractors and so encourage more companies to jump into assisting with rebuilding from the storm damage."

Violations of the Right to Housing/Shelter

Hurricanes Katrina and Rita displaced 1.5 million residents of the Gulf Coast region and destroyed hundreds of thousands of housing units. Yet the federal response has been slow, confused, and inadequate. There is a real danger that the people housed in shelters will join the already growing homeless population. There is increasing concern about mismanagement, cronyism and corruption preventing evacuees from being adequately housed. One report indicated that more than 9,000 mobile homes and campers that are meant for persons displaced by Hurricane Katrina are parked and unused at government staging areas. In addition, while many mobile homes go unused, others are being used to house persons other than evacuees.

Louisiana has a "gouging" statute that prevents retailers from drastically increasing prices during a state of emergency. However, according to the Attorney General's office, the statute does not address rents and home sales. Reports now indicate that astronomical prices are now being charged for homes and rental apartments in areas relatively less affected by the flooding, thereby pricing poor, working-class, and even middle-class returning residents out of the market. On Thursday, Oct. 20, Gov. Blanco of Louisiana lifted an emergency ban on property owners' ability to evict tenants who have been unable to return to their homes.

Although displaced families were promised stipends from FEMA to cover three months of rental expenses, these stipends were often inadequate to cover high rental and utility costs. This problem is further exacerbated by the fact that many evacuees no longer have jobs.

Treatment of Undocumented and Migrant Workers

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) estimates that 24,000 lawful permanent residents, 72,000 legal temporary residents, and an estimated 20,000 to 35,000 undocumented immigrants have been affected by Katrina. Beyond facing the problems as victims of disaster, these immigrants must deal with issues relating to loss of identification, immigration papers, and barriers that render many non-citizens ineligible for federal assistance.

Undocumented immigrants are not barred from receiving short-term, in-kind disaster assistance and in the aftermath of Katrina, both White House officials and President Fox of Mexico urged victims to seek assistance regardless of immigration status, with the assurance that they would not be subjected to pressure or persecution. Despite such assurances, the DHS announced that immigrants have no immunity from deportation when trying to receive federal aid and some disaster victims have been placed in deportation proceedings as a result.

At the same time, undocumented workers are being employed in the hazardous clean-up effort, while many former city residents complain that they are being excluded. This has created tension between African-Americans and Latinos.

International monitoring is necessary to protect the rights of both migrant and native-born residents of the region in order to avoid pitting groups seeking to survive -- under the pressures of globalization -- against one another.

Criminal Justice: Maltreatment of Prisoners

There are numerous allegations of abuse of inmates evacuated from flooded prisons in the wake Katrina. According to the New York Times, "complaints include accusations that some guards left prisoners locked in their cells while floodwaters rose to their necks, and that others engaged in regular beatings and other abuse."

Moreover, hundreds of detainees, who were arrested for minor offenses in the aftermath of the storm such as sleeping in public, begging and public intoxication, are still awaiting their initial hearing before a judge. Even if such offenses were to be proven convictions usually require only 10 days of jail time. Many of these detainees, however have been waiting for a judge to determine whether or not their innocence or guilt in clear violation of rights against arbitrary detention. In addition, the Louisiana state attorney general, the district attorney, and the department of corrections have argued that the court should delay releasing those who served their time until they can demonstrate that they have a place to go once released. However, under Louisiana law, there is no requirement that an ex-offender must make such a showing.

Targeting of the Poor: Proposed Reductions in Federal Programs

While the federal costs for rebuilding the Gulf Coast are estimated at \$200 billion, conservative leaders are now pushing for spending cuts in programs for the poor using Hurricane relief as an excuse.

One such spending cut would be in Medicaid, the basic health insurance program for low-income individuals. The Bush Administration argues instead that evacuees would benefit from "modest changes in existing state programs." Thus those already impoverished will be forced to bear the cost of the disaster.

Conclusion

We hope that all of these concerns will be raised as part of the Special Rapporteur's analysis of the impact of Hurricane Katrina on the poor in the Gulf Coast region of the United States. Thank you for considering these remarks.

Boat People **by Eric Tang**

Maybe it was a window of just a day or two, but as the very first news reports of broken levees and massive flooding came in, there was a moment when it was yet unclear who, exactly, the overwhelming victims of Katrina were to be.

But within this brief moment, there were those who could perhaps anticipate what was to come—those who knew a thing or two about New Orleans, and could glimpse the fast approaching horizon. Perhaps they went online and Googled the words “race” and “Katrina,” just to see if their worst predictions were being confirmed on the Web.

At the time, they would have found exactly zero news links that placed race front and center in the discussion of the disaster. By August 31, almost 48-hours after Katrina hit New Orleans, even the centrist-punditry of the highly-trafficked online Slate questioned why their colleagues “demurred from mentioning two topics that must have occurred to every sentient viewer: race and class.” But in the first few hours of the event, an impromptu Internet search yielded an unexpected report—that of hundreds of Vietnamese Americans, most of them elderly, who were stranded in a church in the Versailles section of New Orleans. The area is home to approximately 10,000 Vietnamese residents, virtually all of them once refugees of war who were abandoned by U.S. forces in the wake of the North Vietnamese victory of 1975. Now, they were holed up in Lavang church, finding themselves again seeking refuge—this time from a different sort of abandonment. Although the flood waters had risen to over 10 feet, Father Vien Thi Nguyen discovered that a phone line in a neighboring residential house was working. Several calls were placed to state emergency services, but no firm commitment was made for the group’s rescue. With the health of survivors deteriorating, and many feeling as if they could not hold on, Father Nguyen then contacted anyone and everyone he knew who could possibly send for help, including concerned community members who were quick to post the story online. The priest’s message: “We’re stuck. We can’t hold out much longer. Get us out.”

Model Minority Resurfacing?

Before long, Katrina would take its place as one of the worst ecological and racial catastrophes in U.S. history. Under the most tragic circumstances, the Black poor—who at the time comprised 67 percent of New Orleans—took center stage in the national media. And here the corporate media pulled no punches, working feverishly to promulgate all of the core “underclass” tropes: Poor Blacks, unable to do anything for themselves, laying blame on a government rescue (read: hand-out) that never arrived; Armed and dangerous thugs looting and preying on their very own.

Yet, as the facts surrounding FEMA’s astounding failure began to surface, it took more than “tales from the underclass” to deflect sole blame from the powerful. So the spinmeisters began to “go positive” by telling stories of the people who did get out—and who did so without the least bit of government assistance.

It took three very long days, but all those stranded at Lavang Church were eventually rescued. As the entire city was evacuated by the National Guard, and as the corpses were slowly recovered, it seemed that the Vietnamese community had suffered relatively few fatalities. To date, the number of

Vietnamese confirmed fatalities remains a mystery, with unofficial reports ranging from one to dozens. (Recovery officials have yet to offer a race and ethnic breakdown of the body count).

Local and national presses were thus quick to enlist the Vietnamese as symbols of survival amid despair, running stories of the peculiar virtues of the Vietnamese—their uncanny ability to “get out” by drawing upon a combination of ethnic solidarity, war-tested survival skills and their trusted shrimping boats. Such reporting soon eclipsed that of the abandonment experienced by those in Versailles. The headlines and articles insisted on more optimistic themes: “We will rebuild;” “We never expected anything from government;” “We’ve been through worse.” Thus, from Katrina’s toxic flood waters resurfaced the model minority, a much-needed elixir for those unable to stomach the hard truths coming from the regions’ hardest hit Black communities.

A Precarious Living

But the truth about the over 35,000 Vietnamese residents who live in the impacted areas is that they will most likely never return to the communities they once knew. Beyond New Orleans and its surrounding communities, the Vietnamese have also been uprooted from Gulf Port, Louisiana; Bayou Labatre, Alabama; and Biloxi, Mississippi. Fifteen thousand of these displaced residents had relocated to Houston alone, a city that is home to one of the largest Vietnamese ethnic enclaves in the United States. They leave behind, perhaps forever, the shrimping industry that has been an economic backbone for the community for nearly three decades, employing up to 15 percent of the adult Vietnamese working population. Now, shrimping has all but vanished, literally overnight, due to the ecological and infrastructural devastation wrought by Katrina.

An additional 45 percent of the Vietnamese population in the New Orleans area was employed by the area’s hotels and casinos. With redevelopment plans for the tourism industry still uncertain, there’s little to suggest that the Vietnamese will return seamlessly to their previous positions.

Unlike Chinatowns, Koreatowns, or even the “Little Saigons” of Southern California and Houston, the Vietnamese communities of the impacted gulf areas, particularly in the more rural Bayou Labatre and Biloxi, do not conform to the spectacle of ethnic entrepreneurship expected from an Asian immigrant enclave. Thus, hope-filled assurances of Vietnamese residents rebuilding anew are cut short by the fact that much of the business property was never theirs to begin with.

Finally, there is a large segment of the affected Vietnamese population that consist of the working-poor and property-less, those whose poverty and welfare participation rates in places such as Biloxi and Bayou Labatre have rivaled that of any other race or ethnic group in the region. Over 19 percent of the population of Mississippi lives in poverty, making it the poorest state in the nation. And Biloxi—home to approximately 2,000 Vietnamese—is among the poorest of the poor. Katrina was something of a final death blow for the community. “There are very few options [left] for the residents of East Biloxi,” said Alejandro Rosales of Oxfam America who was sent to the region to assess the damage. “They are in limbo. They don’t know what to expect, or what to plan for.” With hundreds of Vietnamese families from East Biloxi having relocated to Houston, the chances of their return home seem slim. “All the evacuees who are now in Houston want to go back home. They all want to rebuild. But everyone’s return is just not realistic,” remarks Huy Bui whose group, the National Association of Vietnamese American Services Agencies (NAVASA), is leading a national effort to resettle or return displaced Vietnamese families. “They’re not all going back. But people haven’t accepted this reality yet.”

An L.A. Retrospective

Given these circumstances, model minority talk is irrelevant. But, as the Korean American community learned 13 years ago during the civil unrest in Los Angeles, the economic and political reality of an Asian community is less important than the ideological representations that community can be enlisted to serve. Back in 1992, after Los Angeles burned following the acquittal of four white officers who were caught on tape savagely beating a black man, the elder President Bush tried to argue that the devastation was not about the “great cause of racial equality,” but merely the opportunism of desperate looters. But for such a depoliticizing move to effectively take hold, Bush and his fellow conservative leaders needed to support their claims with counter narratives and images—representations of hard-working people protecting private property, thus overshadowing the case against white supremacy.

And none served so impressively as the image of the well-armed Korean merchant who was protecting his store from looting and destruction at the hands of ultra-violent Black youth. In what seemed like countless media images, the Korean merchant was portrayed as upholding the spirit of entrepreneurship amid chaos and lawlessness.

It would take the courageous efforts of those in the Korean-American community, particularly its activists and its artists, to counter these representations, and to call for a more complex reading of the situation. Indeed, what the Korean-American community sorrowfully refers to as its Sai-I-Gu was not only about the destruction and loss of property, but of the deep racial segregation of Los Angeles, of purposeful neglect on the part of the National Guard to prevent the destruction, and most importantly, of an attempt to bridge future unity between Blacks and Korean Americans.

Shifting Winds

Stories of Vietnamese up-by-the-boot straps self-sufficiency in the wake of Katrina could easily have served to ease the pressure on FEMA, bolstering the agency’s rationale that the role of the federal government is merely supplemental to that of the states. And that, in turn, the states’ role is supplemental to that of individual responsibility. Considering the intractable conservative line that has dominated Vietnamese-American politics for the past 30 years, the community was poised to serve such a role. Since 1975, as the first wave of Vietnamese refugees arrived to the United States, consisting primarily of the erstwhile “elites”—those who worked alongside the U.S. command in Saigon and were selected for immediate evacuation—Vietnamese-American politics has been characterized by an abiding loyalty to U.S. government, a no-nonsense anti-communism and a deep distrust for those who seek to shift the community toward socially progressive trends. Though first-wavers arrived penniless and struggled to overcome the heartbreaking resettlement process, and even as second and third waves of refugees from the more impoverished and rural areas of Vietnam began to outnumber them during the late ’80s and ’90s, the political conservatism of the first arrivals has rarely been tested.

But then on September 29, 2005, only a month into the Katrina aftermath, a surprising thing occurred. Several community leaders came together for a Congressional briefing on the hurricane’s impact on Vietnamese Americans of the gulf. In the process, they sent a clear message to U.S. lawmakers that the community would not so easily march in lock-step with the Bush administration or any other political power broker promoting personal responsibility over government accountability. In an article appearing in the October 2005 issue of *Pacific Citizen*, Tram Nguyen of Boat People SOS—a Houston-based Vietnamese service agency that co-convened the Congressional briefing along with

NAVASA—stated: “Because there wasn’t the initial outcry for help, the government thinks that we can handle it from here out. The first two to three weeks [after Katrina], we handled everything on our own, but to be honest, without the proper funding our annex office will close at the end of October.” Recognizing that federal government has no long-term plan in place for the displaced, NAVASA, Boat People SOS and the National Congress of Vietnamese Americans have issued a three-phase plan for returning the displaced to their hometowns. According to Bui, the first two phases include immediate relief over the next year, requiring government assistance for housing, income, food and employment. The last phase calls for government to take responsibility in rebuilding people’s homes or permanently relocating families.

A Hand’s Off Approach

Driving through Biloxi, Chuong Bui paused to stare at a concrete staircase that once led up to an apartment building that no longer stands. The image of stairs leading nowhere stays etched in his mind, reminding him of the hurricane’s sheer devastating power. Bui 26, is part of the Viet Bay Area Katrina Relief fund, a group of mostly young Vietnamese American activists from California’s Bay Area who have organized relief efforts, including two relief contingents to the gulf. For Bui and his fellow travelers, the disaster simply “strikes too close to home,” echoing the hardships and isolation that his own family felt upon their original refugee resettlement in the United States over 25 years ago. Having just returned from a relief contingent, Bui’s main concern is for the poorer and more rural areas of Mississippi and Alabama. What’s more, according to Bui, FEMA and the Red Cross are only now delivering direct relief. “Nobody’s thinking about the long-term. Our goal was to go down there so we could do some assessment that nobody else was doing.”

Picking up the slack while at the same time calling for greater long-term public accountability is also a theme being sounded among the Vietnamese community leaders of Houston, some of whom have shouldered the bulk of the initial resettlement work with minimal help from the Feds. “The first month [of resettlement] was terrible. The federal government’s response was not positive,” says Anh-Lan Nguyen, chair of Houston’s Vietnamese Culture and Science Association, one of the community groups delivering front-line support to the evacuees. “Most of the people who needed the most help in the beginning from FEMA didn’t get it, especially those with LEP [limited English proficiency]. We had to fight for more assistance.” The looming fear is that the government will continue to assume a hands-off approach toward Vietnamese evacuees, leaving to Houston’s Vietnamese leaders the challenge of integrating the displaced.

“We’re maxed out,” says Nguyen, who these days is working with local officials to resettle displaced Vietnamese children into the Houston-area public schools. “We’re doing the best we can. But we can’t sustain it. Eventually [the federal government] has got to do more.”

Yet few signs point towards a comprehensive, long-term federal support plan for the Vietnamese, or any other racial or ethnic group for that matter. Moreover, an initial government count suggested that 99 percent of the evacuees sent to the Houston area were Blacks. That the 15,000 Vietnamese who wound up in the same city were not included in this count suggests that the feds may consider the Vietnamese migration a matter of personal networks and private sponsorship, residing outside the jurisdiction of government accountability. Nguyen even recalls how during the first days of the resettlement, several Vietnamese were turned away from Houston shelters: “You [Vietnamese] can take care of your people fine,” she recalls a stressed-out shelter director telling her.

“Yes, we’re very good at taking care of our own,” remarks Nguyen. “That’s our strength. And it’s now become our weakness.”

Getting Out

Still, the fact remains that many Vietnamese escaped when others did not. This alone, it seems, should reinforce some claims that the model minority is more than just myth. Take, for instance, the family of Nick Luong, a 13-year-old who along with his parents lost his home in Biloxi but saved their boat, using it to ride out Katrina and then as temporary shelter in the days following the storm. Nick’s story, reported by the Associated Press, represents that ineluctable spirit of survival so attractive to those seeking something to redeem from the disaster. At the same time, it can serve as an indirect shot against those who did not get out—those who, according to ex-FEMA chief Michael Brown, are responsible for their own deaths and losses because they simply “did not heed the evacuation warnings.” He added snidely, “When evacuation warnings go out, people should realize it’s for their own good.” But a closer look at the fate of those who escaped—particularly the vaunted shrimpers who apparently drew upon their seamanship to evade Katrina’s path—reveals that “getting out” is not all that it seems.

Anh Hoang, a shrimper from Louisiana, had spent over a month in a Broussard shelter when in October a UC Berkeley student film crew arrived to the gulf region to document the plight of Vietnamese survivors. During an interview, Hoang described to the filmmakers his life since Katrina: “Many people have homes to come back to because theirs are not badly damaged. I could not come back because mine was totally flooded, twice, not once. My boat was wrecked, my home was flooded. My property was gone, but I am still alive.”

Hoang’s home was damaged once during Katrina and again during Rita. He was a shrimper because when he came to the United States in 1981, there were no other opportunities available to him. Racism had locked him and other Vietnamese out of the formal labor market. Racial violence also followed him into the trade, as white shimpers, at times with the support of groups such as the Klan, terrorized Vietnamese competitors. But shrimping was all he could turn to. “I came to the U.S. alone,” says Hoang. “I started empty handed, and now I am empty handed again.”



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From the Ground Up: Race and the Left Response to Katrina
by Walidah Imarisha
from Left Turn Magazine #19

In the wake of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, thousands of progressives, radicals, anarchists, activists, hippies and college students — the majority of them white — have gone down south to aid in relief and rebuilding efforts, and white organizations across the country have dedicated time and resources. But in their rush to help, are they recreating the racist dynamics we have seen from the government?

Is the white left racist? Sakura Koné would answer this question, for the most part with a "no." "I've been impressed with the response of the white left, liberals, progressive and radicals who have joined us out here." Kone' works as the media coordinator for Common Ground Collective, Common Ground Relief and Rebuild Green, three different arms of a New Orleans grassroots organization started after the hurricanes to provide relief and focus on alternative energy/sustainable rebuilding. "They are not just coming down here and telling us what to do, but they are listening to what we have to say. They do it our way. They are not coming like missionaries. We welcome the white left to our communities here."

"Our church is full of white volunteers right now," Victoria Cintra of Mississippi Immigrant Rights Alliance (MIRA) says. "We have hundreds of volunteers from the North Carolina Baptist Men Disaster Relief. They were here before FEMA, before Red Cross, when no one was helping out, and they've committed to being here for two years."

Others, however, have had serious problems with white volunteers' behavior and attitude throughout the south. Curtis Muhammad, of Community Labor United and the People's Hurricane Relief Fund, would answer the question of whether the white left is racist with a qualified "yes." "Every white person who shows up has the disease called white supremacy, and if they don't confront it and work on it, they are going to continue to have it. That's just the reality of racism."

Tamika Middleton, southern regional coordinator for Critical Resistance — a national prison abolitionist organization with an office in New Orleans — applauds people's willingness to come down and do work, but wants white people coming to acknowledge the privilege inherent in that. "For a lot of people, people of color from New Orleans and the south, we're all trying to put our lives together. If we had the means, if we had the same privilege, we would be here too, we would be organizing and fighting for our community. It's important for people to realize the privilege they have and others don't have."

Au Hyunh, who is working in Vietnamese communities throughout the south, says that there are different cultural standards people are not aware of. "When I was at Common Ground, the volunteers would be really disrespectful. They are serving a historically disadvantaged community, but they're not bathing or showering and they're serving people food, and they don't see that. A lot of white activists are appropriating poor culture when they have a lot of class privilege."

White supremacy

Muhammad says that PHRF is working to counter that disease of white supremacy. "We are talking about doing trainings, we are asking some groups down here who specialize in this to help train volunteers about their white supremacy. Some of them are taking it and some are not. Some are

running around acting like slave masters."

Kone' says Common Ground provides that kind of orientation. "We tell them, 'Look, you're not from here, listen up, this is what's happening. This is what the community is about, this is the history of the community, this is what's been going on since Katrina. You've got a good heart, because you're here. You have to take the leadership from the community.'"

"White people are going to have to learn to obey and follow directions. They are not runaway slaves. They aren't now and they weren't during the Underground Railroad days. They can help us, feed us, house us, but they are not the slaves. They can't lead us," Muhammad finishes.

It's not just individuals who are having race issues. Organizations are also bringing their own assumptions and agenda to the table. "Some white organizations are trying. But white folks don't like to chastise themselves. The left does that too, it will not punish white people for their white supremacy, they won't hold white folks accountable and as long as they can do this stuff without punishment, they're going to keep doing it."

Tamika Middleton says the white left has wasted a lot of time and energy focusing on debating whether the issues in the gulf are the result of class or race. "It's impossible to separate race from class, especially in the south, because historically, culturally, it is one and the same."

Untold stories

Many populations are just being ignored both by the mainstream and the white left. John Zippert is the director of program operations for the Federation of Southern Cooperatives in Alabama, and works primarily with poor black farmers, a population he says has been greatly overlooked by government, media and nonprofits alike. "Our experience is that the Department of Agriculture takes care of the largest farmers first, rather than the smallest and poorest, which is generally where black farmers are... So the government isn't there for people. We have gotten some assistance from organizations, but it's been limited."

Big corporations are getting huge contracts to do construction, and many of them are using immigrant labor to do so. MIRA says many people they work with — the majority of whom are Latino — are either not being paid the wages they were promised or not being paid at all, are working under unsafe conditions, and are not given any accommodations and forced to sleep in tents in the cold.

Workers are being recruited to the south to do this rebuilding work. When the job is done, they are fired and then arrested by the INS, often by the prompting of their former employers, according to Cintra. "That's sad and sick. They are rebuilding our coast and we are treating them like animals," she says.

In New Orleans East, the Mary Queen of Vietnam Roman Catholic Church is seeing first hand that the city's rebuilding plan is quite literally built on top of people of color. The church, which is in the heart of a thriving Vietnamese community and has served as a distribution center and gathering place for people coming back to the community, is serving 1500 people a week. It is also right in the middle of an area that the city wants to build an airport and business industrial complex on. "They are going to take our community away; they are going to dismiss us," says Father Luke, one of the priests at the church. "We come back here as an action to say to them that we are here, we are back here to rebuild

the community, to rebuild New Orleans."

History class

New Orleans and the south are what they are because of the input of people of color, and people have to be aware of the culture they are coming into. "Why do people aspire to come to New Orleans? The music, the culture, the food, and what is the origin of those? Black people!" Kone' intones.

All of the people interviewed for this article spoke of the history of slavery, immigration issues, labor rights, gentrification, police brutality, governmental misconduct, a history of neglect and racism, and the need for white organizations and individuals to understand that. It's vital that people understand the roots of the poverty and deprivation. "The problems that are happening now are not happening because of Katrina. They didn't just arrive; they didn't come out of smoke. These things are historical," says Middleton.

"You have the compounded issue of race and poverty together, a concentration of people who are poor and black and have been that way since slavery, even in the urban areas," Zippert explains.

"You can see the intersection of race, class and gender by who was left behind in New Orleans. Most of the images you saw of people who were left behind, who were stranded, are poor single black mothers. That's the fall out in a culture that is racist and patriarchal," Malcolm Woodland of the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement says.

Salvation army

While this is the largest fundraising effort in the history of the US, with hundreds of millions of dollars pouring into groups like the Red Cross and Salvation Army, people on the ground are skeptical as to how effective those organizations are.

Cintra summed up the sentiment when she said, "I wouldn't give a penny to Red Cross, and I would encourage others not to."

The problem is the way major non-profits have operated in communities of color globally, says Woodland. "The fact that people continue to give to organizations that have historically not operated in the best issues of people of African descent suggests that people aren't fully aware of the history of these organizations, and what they are doing now, and not aware of alternative methods of being able to give directly to the people affected."

Several people interviewed for this article talked of the ways in which the Red Cross gives preferential treatment to areas that are predominately white and was much slower to react in communities of color. Middleton says her biggest problem is the criminal background checks that keep out people who were formerly incarcerated, and that this is a race issue as well.

Hyunh spoke of the language and access barriers that aren't being addressed. Hyunh, an activist who moved just outside of New Orleans after Katrina, offered her services as a professionally licensed Vietnamese translator to both Red Cross and FEMA. "They both turned me down, they said they didn't need any interpreters." Hyunh went down to the south to see for herself, and found a complete lack of translation.

"The police were trying to evict a single Vietnamese mother living in a housing project in Biloxi. The entire projects were flooded. The police tried to arrest her for remaining there, but there was nowhere for her to go, and she didn't speak English. She couldn't even find out where the Red Cross shelter was," Hyunh explains.

Cintra said it is even worse than ignorance or benign neglect on Red Cross' part. "Red Cross is evicting people from shelters because of the color of their skin. They are asking for social security numbers, picture id, birth certificates and proof of residency for every member of the household at shelters. That's alienating a large group of people."

Middleton says the issue is really about giving funds to organizations that can build for the future. "Red Cross and other big non-profits create a different kind of problem. It's like, 'I'm going to deliver all this food to you, but not create sustainable options for you to grow food.' There is no long term plan; there are no ways for people to be part of rebuilding their communities."

The People's Hurricane Relief Fund (PHRF) was started to provide an apparatus for survivors, local grassroots organizations and displaced people to have control over funds coming in. "We demand resources to rebuild our community under our control," Muhammad says.

Leadership position

That's why it's important, organizers say, for people of color to have a leadership position in the relief and rebuilding efforts.

James Rucker, who helped found Color of Change (colorofchange.org) after Katrina as an online mobilization tool to enhance black people's political voice, says black people have to mobilize to lobby politicians and hold them accountable. Color of Change grew to over 10,000 members in the first month and had thousands of people sign different petitions.

Rucker says it's so important for organizations of color to speak up because it can push white organizations. "Race is just not a focal point for liberal white America... When groups like ours are out there, we can embolden other white organizations to talk about race more. They will do better than if there weren't any organizations of folks of color speaking in terms of race."

While Color of Change is working to build up political pressure, others feel the way to change lies in grassroots organizing.

Malcolm X Grassroots Movement (mxgm.org), a national black human rights organization, put out a call on Sept. 13, 2005 that framed the issue again in terms of race and class. It was a framing of the issue around race that had historical memory and was not often being articulated. The demands included a right of return, the right to organize, the right to an income, the right to living wages, the right to access, the right to education and health care, and the right to self-determination.

Woodland, one of the coordinators for MXGM's Katrina Relief program, says it's really about the black community relying on itself. "My inclination is not to worry about what white folks are doing, because they're going to do what they have done historically. Every once in a while they will surprise you and I'll take it as a surprise, but my concern has been with how folks in our community have really

stepped up, and I'm particularly proud of the response of black organizations."

Long term

It is not enough, though for organizations of color to lead the rebuilding efforts, but for those organizations to be made up of people most directly affected by the disaster. "Many of our black leadership, non-profits and all, are from the middle class. Our coalition said upfront, we are listening to the voices of the poor," Muhammad says.

MXGM says they are working to provide resources and training to displaced people. "Here in New York we're already seeing this develop so that people who have been displaced are beginning to say, 'Hold on, we don't need people to speak for us, we can speak for ourselves,'" Woodland explains.

Woodland hopes that other organizations will support those affected, as well to take the lead. "I think you will see MXGM move to the periphery in terms of being visible and really be a back up and provide support for those individuals as needed and requested," he finishes.

Most of the organizations interviewed are working on long term plans and goals that would empower the communities affected while furthering the rebuilding efforts.

Zipert says the Federation of Southern Cooperatives is encouraging people to use cooperatives and credit unions as tools poor people can use to rebuild. "We want to help people create worker owned cooperatives to do certain jobs created by the storm that went to Halliburton and these other companies. We can help poor people get the training and assistance to best deal with this post Katrina situation."

Common Ground wants to rehabilitate the 9th ward, which was the most heavily damaged section of New Orleans, "to show people and the powers that be that contrary to their observations, the 9th ward is salvageable," Koné asserts.

Everyone I spoke with agreed that if changes are going to happen, it will happen only by people on the ground pushing for those changes, and that as we move forward, race will continue to play an intricate part in the south, as it has since this country's inception.

"We all have to get on ground, roll up our sleeves and go to work. I do not believe FEMA or the American government...is capable of rebuilding our city; they have no intention of helping poor black people return. We are going to have to demand it," Muhammad declares.

Love Letter to Common Ground Clinic
Catherine Jones
Winter 2005

Hi Common Ground folks,

I hope all of you are doing really well. I would love to be at this discussion with all of you, but I can't. I decided to write y'all a note instead, so you could know what I'd say if I was around. (When I started this I thought it would be a paragraph or two, but I guess I had a lot on my mind J. I know it's a lot to read, but I really do hope you find the time.)

First, I hope you know that I'm saying what I'm saying out of respect and love, and from a place of complete amazement at what all of you have accomplished in the past few months. Common Ground has done some incredible work since the storm, and I think its potential is boundless. I continue to be awed by all the passion and energy and creativity and love I've seen from so many of you, and I can honestly say that my life is better from having had each one of you in it.

Some of you might not even know me, since I've been around so little in the past few weeks. I feel sad that I'm so disconnected to this space these days, and I feel like it's important for me to let y'all know why it's been happening. About a week before Thanksgiving I left Louisiana for the first time since the storm. I knew leaving would be a really intense experience for me, but I wasn't prepared for the major disability I would feel upon returning here. There were days when I got back where I could barely meet my minimum obligations, days when I would drive through so many neighborhoods I used to live in, or play in, or work in, and just cry. I had finally hit that wall of sadness so many of my friends and neighbors and family went through when the storm came, when I had been too busy working to let myself feel anything. I feel like this is still happening for me, and since so much of my usual support network has been scattered to the winds, I am dealing with this intense loss largely alone.

I'm not saying this so that people can feel sorry for me; I'm saying it because it's real, and not just for me but for most of us who are from New Orleans. We are still shell-shocked. I think sometimes people forget that we are still experiencing such deep sadness, that it cuts into our lives and that none of us is quite whole, yet.

The reason I'm saying this to y'all, though, is because some of the most severe culture shock I experienced upon returning to New Orleans was around coming back to this clinic. I feel like it's my responsibility to communicate this to you, not because how I think or feel really matters that much in the long run, but because if it's happening for me, and I share at least some aspects of culture and identity with many of you, I can only imagine what must be going on for people from this community who are trying to become more involved in the clinic. And, perhaps most importantly, because I believe in this work, and I believe in all of our ability to do it, and I want it to be as effective and as accountable as it can be.

When I came back to New Orleans, I was coming back from DC, where I'd been meeting with national leaders from the American Medical Student Association, and where the majority of my weekend was spent discussing how we can build a concrete strategy to end institutionalized racism in the healthcare system. Medical students, y'all! This is a group of extremely educated, primarily white people not only willing to give up a lot of the power they have, but actually totally invested in that process because they know how damaging racism can be to any attempt at providing competent healthcare. To come from a

meeting of medical students where so many folks were passionately talking about working against racism, to this clinic, another primarily white grouping of progressive healthcare providers, which barely has any significant collective consciousness of race or of its own privilege, was jarring. It compounded the sadness I already felt about returning to my destroyed city, and made it that much harder to come back.

I began working more with primarily local groups, like the People's Hurricane Relief Fund and Oversight Committee, which is consciously multiracial and African-American-led, and also spending more time working with the Latino Health Outreach Project, because I felt like a big part of our work in LHOP centered around building relationships with local Latino organizations in the city, which was really important to me. Working more with local folks helped me move toward balance in my own life, since everyone else was also dealing with how to grieve and work at the same time and I didn't feel like a slacker for not being able to put in 18-hour days like so many folks working at Common Ground. At the same time, I also became even more conscious than before of the disempowerment that can happen when a group of outsiders with power and resources enters into a community and begins implementing its vision without a whole lot of input from that community. In the end, it doesn't really matter if that group is "progressive:" disempowerment is still disempowerment.

I think this dynamic plays itself out in a number of ways at Common Ground. I want to focus on the ways we interact with the community, the ways we interact with local social justice organizers, and what we do with our resources. There are also some aspects to our internal structure that can have drastic effects on the larger New Orleans community and the effectiveness of our work. I could point to a whole lot of things and explain why I am concerned about them, but I think sometimes it's better to pose a series of questions and trust that a good conversation will come out of it. I hope that you take the following questions seriously and hold any answers you may find, even the uncomfortable ones. I hope that if any of these questions makes you feel uncomfortable, that you don't dismiss the question itself, but that you are able to sit with it, breathe, listen, pay attention.

How are community volunteers integrating into the clinic? Do community volunteers have a dedicated space where they can voice opinions and concerns about how things are going? Do they know about this space, come regularly, and speak out? If not, why not? If there is such a space, how (concretely) does the rest of the clinic take its suggestions into account? Do most of the community volunteers come regularly? How many are "one-timers" who don't come back? Do we follow up with people who don't come back to find out why they aren't coming back? What do we do with this information? How many out-of-town volunteers interact regularly with the community volunteers, besides saying Hi or Thank You? If not many, why not? How many out-of-town volunteers actively support the participation of community volunteers, by giving people rides, taking care of kids, telling folks about when meetings happen, encouraging them to take leadership in the running of the clinic, and helping them figure out concrete ways to do so? Do we trust community volunteers with money? If not, what does that say to them about us? How many community volunteers are members of the steering committee, or any workgroup?

How many local social justice organizations do we have good working relationships with? How much about the history and context of local social justice organizing do we know? How do we learn about local organizing, and how much energy do we put into finding out about locally-led efforts? Who are the groups we do know about and why do we know about those groups in particular? Do we include local organizers in projects they express interest in, or on which they have done significant amounts of work already? Do we communicate with local organizers about our work? Do we share resources with

local organizers, if we have resources and they need them? How might the following statements, uttered by Common Ground activists to or about local organizers, be interpreted by the local organizers?

“I’d love to work with New Orleans people, but they’re all so slow.”

“Nothing was going on in New Orleans before Common Ground.”

“They’re just jealous because we’re the only ones doing anything.”

(The following statement was said by a Common Ground person to a local African-American organizer who has a deep, strong history of organizing both locally and in national organizations) “If you join our project, you’ll be empowered.”

What does it mean that Common Ground activists can be assured of the truth of these statements, without a complete understanding of the pre-and post-hurricane political context in which their work is occurring? How might a grieving community member interpret a sign in front of the clinic that says, “Less tears more action?” What assumptions have Common Ground people made about local organizers and the work they are, or are not, doing? Can we point to any projects where we’ve supported the leadership of local people, on their own terms? If not, why not? When we say things like, “nothing else is going on” or “the community isn’t ready,” what evidence are we using to back up those statements? What concrete ways do we have of making sure we listen to local leaders who are also fighting for justice here, in their home?

Do you know how we are spending our money? If so, why? If not, why not? How much of our money goes directly into the community itself (not to Common Ground projects or to Common Ground volunteers who didn’t live in the community before the storm)? What does it mean that the clinic is paying rent for out-of-town volunteers and not reimbursing people for the cost of gas if they drive from their residence to work at the clinic? How did we choose which of these things to prioritize? Which clinic volunteers benefit from this arrangement? Under this arrangement, who may face barriers to being able to work here? What does this say about who we invest in and why?

Remember when I said I felt like a slacker because I suddenly became less capable of working the insane hours so many folks at the clinic put in? What do you think about that? What does it mean that the people who spend the most time at the clinic are also the ones who hold the most power? And that almost all of those very same people do not have significant roots in New Orleans? Do we accept that things have to be this way? What does it mean that the culture of the clinic celebrates intense work, almost to the point of burnout? Who benefits from this culture? Can we ever expect that level of work from people who have roots, and lives, and family here; who are still grieving a vast tragedy, and who don’t have an intact home to go back to one day? What does this say about where power will eventually lie in the clinic, and what does that say about the eventual purpose of the clinic? Do all of us understand how decisions are made in the clinic, and where power lies within the clinic? If not, why not? How do we arrive at a collective sense of what we are accountable to, as a group of people working together?

Ok.

That was a lot of questions. I hope they start some kind of conversation, or at least some process of internal, or within-the-clinic, reflection. I also hope that if these questions have brought up uncomfortable feelings, or anger, or defensiveness, for people, that people are able to hold those feelings and not dismiss the questions because of their reactions. I know for me sometimes that can be really hard to do, especially when I feel really invested in something. I guess that investment itself, more than anything else, is what I’m questioning. Because ultimately this work is not about you, or me, or any one of us. It’s about building a world where all of the structures that keep people down don’t exist anymore, and where any human being among us has the power to decide, for real, how they will live their own

life. Right? And for that to even begin happen in a legitimate way, we need to own up to our role in that whole process. How we help it along, and how we stand in its way. And that really, until that happens, all the work and the time and the busy-ness and the bustling around and feeling burned-out and going to meetings and being important, all of that doesn't make a difference ultimately, because it isn't honest.

I want to stress again that I'm not saying all of this because I'm dying to point out a billion negative things about what I still think is a completely incredible spot of brightness in this sad, sad world. I'm not saying it because I really want to type four pages (!!) in the middle of the night that I'm not sure anyone will ever even read. I'm saying it because even after everything I am not even close to writing off Common Ground. Even after everything, I am also learning that after two weeks of not being around, I miss you all. I miss your energy, and the five thousand projects all going on at one time, and the ways I've learned to think about health and healing from so many of you. I miss the food and the neighbors and the levee and everyone's random attempts to implement a system for us to start cleaning up after ourselves. More even than that, though, I'm saying this because I know not only that we have work to do, but that each one of us has the potential to do it. And to shine! From what I've seen of each of your hearts, and all of your passion, and all the incredible beauty every single one of you has put into the world, I know this. Above anything else, see, this is a love letter.

And so all I ask of you is this: Please, for the sake of this work, just take a deep breath and look around. Please just start there. I think our future might depend on this one small step.

With solidarity and my whole entire heart,

Catherine

PS—I'm not one to drop bombs without having some way to follow up. Starting next week I'm planning on working at the clinic on Monday mornings, and being around for LHOP meetings on Tuesday afternoons, and community workgroup meetings on Thursday mornings. I'd love to talk to any of you around those times, and you can also call me at 504-250-6655. xoxoxo

Solidarity not Charity: Racism in Katrina Relief Work

By Molly McClure

I recently spent three weeks working at the Common Ground Relief Clinic in New Orleans, an all-volunteer run free healthcare project that opened a week after the hurricane. The following are some thoughts I had about the difference between solidarity and charity, specifically reflecting on the role of folks like me--- white activists from out of town--- in Katrina relief work.

As many people have said, the mess of Katrina was caused by a storm of racism and poverty more than wind and water. Katrina was about the racism of war that took money away from fixing the levees and other much-needed disaster preparations and went instead to the killing of poor people of color in Iraq and around the world. Katrina was about the racism of US-led capitalism that accelerates global warming, bringing bigger hurricanes and tsunamis and other “natural disasters” which always disproportionately affect the poor. Katrina was about the legacy of slavery, which meant that many white New Orleanians had the economic resources to evacuate, such as a car or other means to escape the storm and subsequent flooding, while many Black New Orleanians did not. Katrina was about the racism of FEMA and the Bush administration in their murderously slow response (you know it would have looked different in Connecticut!). And Katrina was about the racism of the police chief of Gretna, who, with the support of his predominantly white town, turned Black survivors away at gunpoint as they tried to cross the Crescent City Bridge to safety because he “didn’t want Gretna to turn into the Superdome.”

Like most of you, I’m guessing, I was outraged and heartbroken by what I saw, and I wanted to go down and see if there was some way I could support the people of the Gulf Coast in their efforts to deal with this mess. When I got there I saw and heard devastating things, stories of loss my ears are still full of, images of destruction that cut into the meat of my heart. I also saw and heard many, many inspiring things--- stories of resistance and hope, of survival and vision. I met incredible people who fed me red beans and rice on Mondays and told me about their families and their lives, who shared with me some of what New Orleans meant to them, people who through their stories helped me understand the depth and breadth of this atrocity.

(By the way, I’d really encourage folks to seek out these first-hand stories, and prioritize reading information and analysis about Katrina written by survivors and long-time residents of the Gulf Coast, for example “New Orleans and Women of Color: Connecting the Personal and Political” by Janelle L. White, which is available online).

I was also inspired by how many folks from outside New Orleans had gone down to volunteer, had seen what was happening and were appalled, and found a way to go down and support in any way they could. I met incredibly committed activists, folks with skills and energy and immense creativity and huge hearts.

And while it was moving to see how many people came down to volunteer, with that also came one of the unexpected heartbreaks for me of being in the Gulf Coast post-Katrina: the racism that white activists like myself brought along with us, even as we came intending to stand in solidarity with the people of New Orleans. And although there are many many stories I want to tell, this is what I feel a really deep need to write about, and I see this as part of an ongoing conversation. (Note: for this article, I’ll be using the People’s Institute definition of racism, which is race prejudice plus power, and using it interchangeably with “white supremacy,” meaning the system of wealth, power, and privilege which keeps racism in place).

First, I want to say that I’m not approaching this conversation as if I’ve got it all figured out, because I have a ton of work to do and make plenty of mistakes, including the ones I’m about to discuss. And I want to say that while I will be speaking from my own perspective, there have been many people of color whose analysis and experiences have helped me develop the antiracist framework I’m using to think about this situation. I just want to put that out because I think it’s important to recognize whose labor and experiences have helped inform what I am saying, and how I’m saying it.

So having said all that, I want to talk a little about the ways that we white folks, no matter how well-intentioned, bring our white privilege and our racism with us wherever we go, and how this really hijacks solidarity projects and imperils our capacity to be true allies. Despite the fact that what happened in New Orleans was understood

by the majority of whites even slightly left of center to have its roots in racism, it does not seem that this awareness has translated into us wrestling any more seriously with white supremacy, even as many of us mobilize to support the communities of the Gulf Coast.

One example I want to give is about the looter/finder distinction made by mainstream media outlets in describing stranded New Orleanians carrying food. Do folks remember seeing that? The captions of pictures said white people “found” stuff, and Black people “looted” stuff, though the images were identical except for race. Lots of us forwarded an email around about this, and were justifiably outraged at the blatant criminalizing of Black survivors in the media. People I know wrote letters to the editors of newspapers, sent scathing emails, and called in to radio shows to protest that and other racist portrayals of Katrina survivors.

The question I want to ask is how many of us white folks make these kind of looter/finder assumptions about people’s behavior all the time, in our heads? How many of us make these kinds of racialized good guy/bad guy distinctions when we’re walking down the street in our hometowns, standing at a bus stop late at night, interacting with new people in our activist spaces, talking to co-workers at our jobs, seeing patients in the clinic?

While the media portrayals were egregious and telling, I think the insidious, often unconscious prejudice that we’ve learned by living in a racist culture is also incredibly dangerous. The People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond calls this “internalized racial superiority,” and that’s what I saw playing out so dramatically among many white solidarity workers who came to New Orleans, even though many of us were there because we felt a deep desire to take action against what was clearly a race-based hate crime.

So I have some questions for white folks thinking about going down, questions I am still asking myself: first of all, why you? Why are you going? Could our resources and energy be better used supporting survivor organizing at home or fundraising, rather than spent traveling to the South? Are we committed to doing support work that may not feel as “exciting” as going down ourselves? How did it come to be that we are able to travel to and around New Orleans, while many survivors still can’t go home? What are we bringing with us, what will we take back? What has been the role of white people and white institutions in the destruction and reshaping of communities of color in the US, in the history of New Orleans? When we go down, are we expecting to be thanked, to be welcomed, what is our real motivation for going? What will be the long-term impact of our work on the Gulf Coast communities with whom we’re supposedly standing in solidarity? How are we going to be accountable to what we saw and heard and did when we come back, and to whom do we feel accountable? How are we going to make meaningful connections to the same kind of injustices back home? Do we know about the issues facing poor communities and communities of color in our hometown, and are we as motivated, as committed to dealing with those issues where we live, which could bear a striking resemblance to what’s going on in New Orleans? Are we seeing survivors of Katrina as “worthy” poor, deserving of resources and relief work, without recognizing that the poverty back home is equally a result of systemic racism, and equally crucial to address?

In the three weeks I was working in New Orleans, I spent most of my time at the Common Ground Clinic, where most of the volunteers and healthcare providers are white. (Though the call to create Common Ground was put out by Malik Rahim, a Black activist and organizer who never evacuated New Orleans, the people with the resources and time to respond first to that call were overwhelmingly white, class-privileged folks, who continue to be numerically the majority). While I was there, I heard comments like “this is so cool that New Orleans is going to have a free clinic now!” or other statements suggesting that we, the white saviors, had come to bring capital a ACTIVISM to the region, which before we got there was presumably some kind of political wasteland. Now, I definitely didn’t do my homework like I should have before I got there, but I was pretty sure that the city had had a vibrant history of resistance and organizing from the time of the slave revolts on, and I had recently learned about the Saint Thomas Clinic and other local healthcare justice projects. The fact that the town was so intensely depopulated may have made it possible for an inexperienced out-of-towner to mistake the absence of people with the absence of organizing. But I know there was more to it than that---racism fosters in white people an easy, unconscious arrogance, an inability to see past ourselves, the capacity to be “blinded by the white.” Mixed up in this also, I think, is the classist assumption that poor folks aren’t politically conscious or organized, or that they only “become” so when outside organizers arrive.

Another example of these racist assumptions could be seen when folks expressed the valid concern that the community wasn’t involved enough in running the health center, even though flyers were put up around the

surrounding Algiers neighborhood inviting residents to volunteer and become a part of the clinic. I've been part of this dynamic in the past--- wondering why "they" don't come to "our" meeting or event, without understanding how alienating the white culture of our project or organization might be to people of color, from the language, timing, and structure of our meetings to the way we dress (especially in places like Common Ground, which, when I was there, had a predominantly punk/hippie subcultural scene going on). When there has been a lack of community involvement in other neighborhood projects of which I've been a part, it's usually because the project began or evolved without a concerted effort to connect in a respectful, non-tokenizing way with people in the neighborhood to see what they were working on already, what their priorities were, what strategies they'd tried before, how we might support their work before starting a brand spanking new project with us in leadership.

In the case of the clinic in particular, it was an immediate disaster relief project that needed to happen, and I see it as a fantastic example of the capacity of the left to effectively mobilize in an emergency when the state infrastructure failed. But now that the clinic is a more permanent fixture, there will be some real wrestling with power and privilege in the months ahead, if it is to reach the stated goal of transitioning to community control, and if it is to have a role that is less about service provision and more about rebuilding infrastructure and offering resources in a way that supports community self-determination.

Another example I want to offer is a hand-painted sign at the clinic that said, "Less Tears More Action!" I never found out who painted this, but I'm guessing it was a white person from out of town, like me. And no matter who created the sign, I wondered what the impact of that statement was (for the day it was up) on the people who came to the clinic, who were mourning immeasurable losses and experiencing worlds of grief that we as outsiders would never be able to fully comprehend. Yet we felt entitled to offer brightly-painted suggestions about it being time to quit whining and move on, and presumably we were to be the role models of what kind of "action" folks should take.

One day at the clinic, Kimberley Richards and Bridget Lehane, organizers from The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, came to meet with us about the possibility of doing an antiracism training for volunteers at the clinic. Kimberley pointed out that like it or not, we--- mostly white healthcare providers and activists in a hurricane-ravaged poor Black town--- stood to profit off our time in New Orleans, either socially through gaining "activist points" or professionally by writing papers or books about our experience. She asked us how were we going to be accountable to that fact, how we were going to make sure that the people most affected by this tragedy would also stand to gain and not be profited off, as they so often were by the organizations and institutions that were supposedly serving them.

The difference between charity and solidarity felt huge that day and as we discussed whether or not we could--- more truthful to say whether or not we *would*--- close the clinic in order to participate in their two and a half day training, called the "Undoing Racism Workshop." I realized that solidarity felt easier when I thought about it in terms of us simply offering a crucial resource to the community --- providing free, accessible healthcare and free medications in a place and time when that was a dire, dire necessity. And that's incredibly important.

But the challenge of real solidarity is that it requires us to take a critical look at the bigger picture of Katrina, the context, and to see how we fit in. Solidarity means looking at how power and privilege play out in our own lives, and obligates us to consider our role in relation to the state and system that helped engineer this disaster. To be in solidarity we would need to understand how our class and race privilege impact why we were the ones able to offer the healthcare resources in the first place, and be real about whether the clinic serves to challenge or reinforce that inequality. Solidarity requires us to seriously grapple with our racial prejudice, and recognize how it affects the work we do in the clinic and how we interact with the community. To really be in solidarity, we would need to more fully examine and drastically overhaul the assumptions and biases in how we deliver healthcare, we would have to acknowledge and deal with the white culture of the project and how that affected our patients and which providers felt welcome in the clinic, and we would need to see and wrestle with the fact that our presence in New Orleans was profoundly changing the class and race dynamics of the intensely depopulated neighborhood and town. We would have to be willing to look at and be accountable to the ways in which we might actually stand to gain more in the long term from our "solidarity work" in the clinic than the community who we were supposedly serving.

At this point I still have more questions than answers about what being in solidarity really means. But I know solidarity's a hell of a lot less comfortable than charity, and involves me not just going to someone else's decimated town and helping out for a little while or even a long while and then going home and doing a reportback, or writing a reflection piece, though that could be part of it. Real solidarity means keeping up the conversation about race and class in the US with other white folks, and working diligently to break down the racism in mainstream white communities---where institutional power currently resides---as well as challenging racism in the white left. Real solidarity requires me to go on an ongoing, difficult journey to reckon with my own stuff, and my family's stuff--- to recognize and challenge our collusion in the system of white supremacy. My experience in New Orleans makes me ask myself what I'm doing right now, right here, to support the self-determination of communities of color and of low-income people, what I'm doing right now to support a revolutionary transformation of systems of power in this country. It makes me ask myself what I'm doing right now, right here, to help root out the racism in my own heart and the heart of communities I'm a part of, so that I can struggle in true solidarity with communities most affected by injustice as they lead the movement for radical social change.

Molly McClure does sexual health and racial justice work in Philadelphia, and is excited to hear your comments, questions and discussion: genderific@hotmail.com. This writing happened with a lot of support, feedback, and insightful conversation for which I'm incredibly grateful.

**What I Wish I Knew:
My Own Goals for Anti-Racist Practice
by Catherine Jones**

These are some principles that I've developed for myself so that I can stay focused on actually doing anti-racist work, rather than thinking and talking about it a whole lot. These all come straight from lessons I've learned from my experience of doing the work. I'm not saying that any of these statements is The Answer; this whole list of stuff is more a reflection of where I'm at right now in my ongoing struggle to figure it all out. Maybe it'll work for you, and maybe it really won't. My main point in all of this is, if you want to do anti-racist work, do it. Don't wait until you feel like you're the perfect anti-racist. There's a whole big movement out there that needs you!

Do your homework. There IS stuff going on in your community. Find out what it is and how you can support the work.

Don't expect people or organizations of color to tell you how to be in solidarity with them, but be willing to modify or toss out any of your ideas if they think there's a better way for you to support them. Have a very rough plan that you can be flexible with and that's based on an authentic and accountable understanding--not just your own thoughts--of where people and organizations of color can use your support.

Be conscious about how you prioritize your work- spend a significant chunk of your time doing the stuff that really is unsexy and be conscious about what you do and don't commit your time to. If going to 8 workshops a week has you feeling too exhausted to do childcare at a meeting for low-income women of color, you may want to re-evaluate.

Build accountable relationships with other white anti-racists who can both support you and call you on your shit when it's necessary.

Take care of yourself but be real about it. Figure out the things that rejuvenate you and do them; take breaks when you need them, but don't use the excuse of "self-care" to get out of doing the work. Set realistic boundaries for yourself and stick to them.

Give Practical Support!!!! What are your resources that you can share with organizations of color? Maybe you can provide food or childcare or translation at meetings, maybe you can help phonebank for specific events, maybe you can volunteer to work at the front desk, give people rides, find out where a group can get donated computer equipment, or throw a fundraising party at your house. There are tons of ways for white folks to give necessary behind-the-scenes support to organizations of color. Figure out--don't assume you know--what people need, and find a way to help out.

Don't abandon the work if it makes you feel "uncomfortable." This is a pretty common feeling when white folks are actually working with people of color. Acknowledge that you feel this way, try and figure out why, get support from other white anti-racists who you respect, and keep going. Most of us have been there.

Don't wait for people to come to you out of the blue 'cause they won't. Be proactive about letting organizations and allies know who you are and what you do. Figure out when it's appropriate to get involved, and do it.

If the majority of your anti-racist work consists of educating other white folks on anti-racism, make sure to spend a lot of time focusing on ways the participants in your training or workshop can plug into racial justice struggles that are going on in their community. Work on developing tools for identifying existing struggles and developing a group's capacity to support those struggles in a practical, not just an ideological, way.

Make sure not to confuse anti-racist group dynamics with anti-racist work. And don't give up on one just because you're practicing the other.

Do authentic and accountable leadership development with emerging white anti-racists, especially around doing the work. Talk to newer white anti-racists about their work, what they've learned, and what's been challenging. Help them to build the practical skills they need. Be there for them.

Give props to white folks who are doing practical, behind-the-scenes anti-racist work in your community.

Find role models of your own, white folks who are doing anti-racist work in a variety of capacities. Seek out these folks in your own community. They're there.

Be willing to do what's needed. Maybe you really want to be working with some amazing and popular organization of color that doesn't actually have a whole lot of opportunities for you to plug in, while another organization down the street is doing less high-profile work but really needs some folks to help them with fundraising. Take the opportunity to be of use.

Take criticism from people of color for what it is--a gift.

If you have political disagreements with a person or organization of color that you're doing political work with, think critically about what your issues are and where they're coming from. Don't abandon your principles simply because a person of color may have a different take on a certain idea, but don't be afraid to challenge some of your deeply-held beliefs if you find that they don't hold up when you look at them with an anti-racist framework. Be open to criticism, even criticism of your politics, if it comes from an anti-racist perspective.

You're gonna make mistakes. You're gonna feel embarrassed when you do. This is not a reason to stop doing the work! In my experience, if people know that you're a generally accountable person who shows up and kicks ass when you're needed, they won't take it nearly as hard if you say or do the wrong thing every now and then. But learn from your mistake, don't make it again, and do what you can to smooth things over in a principled way.

Build authentic and good personal, as well as political, relationships with people of color.

Don't be a shrinking violet. Sometimes white folks think they're being anti-racist if they go to a meeting and don't do or say anything at all. You can step up to the plate without dominating. Just make sure the stuff you're stepping up to do is appropriate. (If you're not sure what's appropriate or not, start out by volunteering to do behind-the-scenes support work that someone else won't have to take a whole lot of time to show you how to do. As your relationship with the organization progresses you'll get a feel for how much leadership or visibility they want you to take.)

This is my motto--say less, think less, do more. Remember that you're not a whole lot of use to the movement if you're sitting in a workshop. Put your knowledge to use. The struggle needs you!

(...and Don't Talk Too Much At The Meeting. Really.)

feedback, rants, insight, or arbitrary observations can be addressed to [cjones14 at tulane.edu](mailto:cjones14@tulane.edu)

**Ten Things to Remember:
Anti-Racist Strategies for White Student Radicals
by Chris Dixon**

After many years as a white student radical (in high school and then college), I'm reconsidering my experience. I made a lot of mistakes and was blind in many ways, particularly as a white person. What follows are some lessons that I am learning, some strategies for reflecting on, interrogating, and disrupting racism in our lives.

1. Transforming the world means challenging and changing institutions and *ourselves*. Systems of oppression are ingrained in both and, accordingly, must be confronted in both. More than once an activist of color or an actively anti-racist white person has confronted me: "Why are you always rushing off to do solidarity actions with people in other parts of the world when you don't even make time to deal with your own shit?" They're right. As white student activists, we are in fact notorious for protesting injustices across the globe, yet neglecting to confront systems of oppression on our campuses, in our communities, and in ourselves. Being an effective student activist means making priorities, and at times we must prioritize slower-paced, not-so-flashy work over dramatic actions that offer immediate gratification. Being an effective *white* student activist means prioritizing daily dismantlement of white privilege--creating and participating in forums for whites to grapple with racism, allying with struggles that people of color are engaged in, constantly remaining open to our own mistakes and feedback from others.
2. Predominantly white activist organizations are built within society as it is and, as a result, are plagued by racism and other forms of oppression. We can minimize or deny this reality ("we're all radicals here, not racists") or we can work to confront it head-on. Confronting it requires not only openly challenging the dynamics of privilege in our groups, but also creating structures and forums for addressing oppression. For instance, two experienced activists I know often point out that, sadly, Kinko's has a better sexual harassment policy than most activist groups. Workers are accountable for their actions and victims have some means of redress. With all of our imaginative alternatives to capitalist and hierarchical social arrangements, I have no doubt that we can construct even more egalitarian and comprehensive ways of dealing with sexism, racism, and other oppressive forces in our organizations. And we must start now.
3. We absolutely should not be "getting" people of color to join "our" organizations. This is not just superficial; it's tokenistic, insulting, and counterproductive. Yet this is the band-aid that white activists are often quick to apply when accused of racist organizing. Mobilizing for the WTO protests, for example, I had one white organizer reassure me that we didn't need to concern ourselves with racism, but with "better outreach." In his view, the dynamics, priorities, leadership, and organizing style, among other important features of our group, were obviously beyond critical scrutiny. But they shouldn't be. We must always look at our organizations and ourselves first. Whose voices are heard? Whose priorities are adopted? Whose knowledge is valued? The answers to these questions define a group more than how comprehensive its outreach is. Consequently, instead of looking to "recruit" in order to simply increase diversity, we, as white activists, need to turn inward, working to make truly anti-racist, anti-oppressive organizations.
4. We have much to learn from the leadership of activists of color. As student organizers Amanda Klonsky and Daraka Larimore-Hall write, "Only through accepting the leadership of those who experience racism in their daily lives, can white students identify their role in building an anti-racist movement." Following the lead of people of color is also one active step toward toppling conventional racial hierarchies; and it challenges us, as white folks (particularly men), to step back from aggressively directing everything with an overwhelming sense of entitlement. Too often white students covet and

grasp leadership positions in large campus activist groups and coalitions. As in every other sector of our society, myths of "merit" cloak these racial dynamics, but in reality existing student leaders aren't necessarily the "best" leaders; rather, they're frequently people who have enjoyed lifelong access to leadership skills and positions--largely white, middle-class men. We need to strengthen the practice of following the lead of activists of color. We'll be rewarded with, among other things, good training working as authentic allies rather than patronizing "friends"; for being an ally means giving assistance *when and as* asked.

5. As white activists, we need to shut up and *listen* to people of color, especially when they offer criticism. We have to override initial defensive impulses and keep our mouths tightly shut, except perhaps to ask clarifying questions. No matter how well-intentioned and conscientious we are, notice how much space we (specifically white men) occupy with our daily, self-important jabber. Notice how we assume that we're entitled to it. When people of color intervene in that space to offer something, particularly something about how we can be better activists and better people, that is a very special gift. Indeed, we need to recognize such moments for what they are: precious opportunities for us to become more effective anti-racists. Remember to graciously listen and apply lessons learned.
6. White guilt always gets in the way. Anarcha-feminist Carol Ehrlich explains, "Guilt leads to inaction. Only action, to re-invent the everyday and make it something else, will change social relations." In other words, guilt doesn't help anyone, and it frequently just inspires navel-gazing. The people who experience the brunt of white supremacy could care less whether we, as white activists, feel guilty. Guilt doesn't change police brutality and occupation, nor does it alter a history of colonialism, genocide, and slavery. No, what we really have to offer is our daily commitment and actions to resist racism. And action isn't just protesting. It includes any number of ways that we challenge the world and ourselves. Pushing each other to seriously consider racism *is* action, as are grappling with privilege and acting as allies. Only through action, and the mistakes we make and the lessons we learn, can we find ways to work in true solidarity.
7. "Radical" doesn't necessarily mean getting arrested, engaging in police confrontations, or taking to the streets. These kinds of actions are important, but they're not the be-all and end-all of effective activism. Indeed, exclusively focusing on them ignores crucial questions of privilege and overlooks the diverse, radical ways that people resist oppression every day. In the wake of the WTO protests, for instance, many white activists are heavily focused on direct action. Yet in the words of anti-capitalist organizer Helen Luu, "the emphasis on this method alone often works to exclude people of colour because what is not being taken into account is the relationship between the racist (in)justice system and people of colour." Moreover, this emphasis can exclude the very radical demands, tactics, and kinds of organizing used by communities of color--struggling for police accountability, occupying ancestral lands, and challenging multinational polluters, among many others. All too frequently "radicalism" is defined almost solely by white, middle-class men. We can do better, though; and I mean *we* in the sense of all of us who struggle in diverse ways to go to the root--to dismantle power and privilege, and fundamentally transform our society.
8. Radical rhetoric, whether it's Marxist, anarchist, Situationist, or some dialect of activistspeak, can be profoundly alienating and can uphold white privilege. More than once, I've seen white radicals (myself included) take refuge in our own ostensibly libratory rhetorical and analytical tools: Marxists ignoring "divisive" issues of cultural identity and autonomy; anarchists assuming that, since their groups have "no hierarchy," they don't need to worry about insuring space for the voices of folks who are traditionally marginalized; Situationist-inspired militants collapsing diverse systems of privilege and oppression into obscure generalizations; radical animal rights activists claiming that they obviously know better than communities of color. And this is unfortunately nothing new. While all of these analytical tools have value, like most tools, they can be used to uphold oppression even as they profess to resist it. Stay wary.

9. We simply cannot limit our anti-oppression work to the struggle against white supremacy. Systems of oppression and privilege intertwine and operate in extremely complex ways throughout our society. Racism, patriarchy, classism, heterosexism, able-ism, ageism, and others compound and extend into all spheres of our lives. Our activism often takes the form of focusing on one outgrowth at a time--combating prison construction, opposing corporate exploitation of low-wage workers, challenging devastating US foreign policies. Yet we have to continually integrate a holistic understanding of oppression and how it operates--in these instances, how state repression, capitalism, and imperialism rest on oppression and privilege. Otherwise, despite all of our so-called radicalism, we risk becoming dangerously myopic single-issue activists. "Watch these mono-issue people," warns veteran activist Bernice Johnson Reagon. "They ain't gonna do you no good." Whatever our chosen focuses as activists, we must work both to recognize diverse forms of oppression and to challenge them--in our society, our organizations, and ourselves.
10. We need to do all of this anti-racist, anti-oppressive work out of respect for ourselves as well as others. White supremacy is *our* problem as white people. We benefit from it and are therefore obligated to challenge it. This is no simplistic politics of guilt, though. People of color undeniably suffer the most from racism, but we are desensitized and scarred in the process. Struggling to become authentically anti-racist radicals and to fundamentally change our racist society, then, means reclaiming our essential humanity while forging transformative bonds of solidarity. In the end, we'll be freer for it.

SOLIDARITY WORK YOU CAN DO BACK HOME

Sharon Martinas

March 2006

(Note: This suggestion list is adapted from The Peoples Hurricane Relief Fund and Oversight Coalition 'Volunteer Handbook,' March 2006, p. 18.)

Why Solidarity Work At Home is So Important

Hurricane Katrina and the deadly negligence demonstrated by the U.S. government before, during and after the storm, opened up the eyes of millions of people in the United States to the violence that comes from racism, class exploitation, colonialism and imperialism. But the corporate media soon shut its eyes; and the federal, state and local governments closed their wallets to all the people most affected by the Hurricane.

If you have already traveled to New Orleans or the Gulf Coast to work in solidarity with communities and organizations devastated by the hurricane, you may have already felt that this work has transformed your life. Now is the best time to figure out how to share that experience with people in your community and/or your college back home.

Why is Solidarity Work As Important At Home As It Is In New Orleans and The Gulf Coast?

*** To build a grassroots social justice movement that is centered in the visions, demands and leadership of those most affected by Katrina -- African Americans, Native Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans and poor whites-- will require creating a broad-based united front movement that involves thousands of people, both in the U.S. and internationally.

Only a huge, organized and powerful movement can force the U.S. government to begin to meet its responsibilities. As Frederick Douglass once said, 'Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never has and it never will.' Each one of us has an important role to play in building this movement.

*** The deadly horrors of racism, class exploitation, gender oppression and police/military violence that Katrina exposed is not limited to the Southland. Every institution, community, school, university, work place, city and state in the United States is a potential Katrina. Solidarity activists are in a good position to 'connect the dots' for our folks back home.

If we were horrified by the government policies that made thousands of Black New Orleanians homeless, what are we doing to support the fight for housing for homeless folks in our home town? If the plight of Latino workers going without protective gear or even minimum wages in New Orleans enraged us, how are we supporting the struggles of immigrant workers for living wages, unions and healthy working conditions on our college campuses? If the knowledge that thousands of children were separated from their parents during Katrina made us sick to our stomachs, how can we use that anguish to support the fight to reunite families torn apart by the Prison Industrial Complex in our home states?

*** The struggle for the right of return, self-determination and the right to rebuild New Orleans and the Gulf Coast with racial, national, class, gender and environmental justice will not be over tomorrow. It may take decades. Solidarity activists will need to be in this work for the long haul, and we will need to pass on our passion to the next group of activists coming up. The work is difficult but perhaps the most fulfilling work we will ever do. Now is a good time to start!

Some Ideas for Doing Solidarity Work in Your College and/or Your

Community

1. Fundraising

Common Ground, Peoples Hurricane Relief Fund, evacuee councils in your community, and all the grassroots organizations mentioned in this reader need your support. Building a movement to ensure the right of return of New Orleanians to their homes takes money as well as people power.

2. Sharing Your Experiences and Resources

Your friends back home will want to hear about your time in New Orleans. Organize a 'report back.' Share your experiences in the context of the government's criminal neglect, and highlight the resistance struggles of the residents and organizations in New Orleans. Pass on articles in this reader that you have found useful. Use the report back for fund raising and for recruiting new volunteers. Do some local research so you can 'connect the dots' between Katrina in New Orleans and Katrina at home. (Be sure to pass around a sign up sheet to get everyone's phone number and email for follow-up.)

3. Campus Anti-Racist Political Education

a) Ask your professors to assign Katrina readings for their classes that prioritize the voices of those most affected by the hurricane. A good start is Michael Eric Dyson, *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster*. (Cambridge, Mass: Basic Civitas Books, a member of the Perseus Book Group, 2006).

b) Form a 'Katrina special studies' group through a sympathetic professor. Invite students who went with you to New Orleans, and who came to your report back, as well as friends in your campus organization or other networks. A beginning activity might be to read and discuss the materials on all the websites mentioned in 'Some Grassroots Organizing Resources in New Orleans.' Focus on those organizations which clearly come from and work with those most affected by the Hurricane.

c) Organize a People's Institute for Survival and Beyond (PISAB – see Resource List) 'Katrina Teach In' for your campus. The People's Institute's life transforming 'Undoing Racism Workshop' lays the basis for this teach in. Presentations by campus and community leaders 'connect the dots' between the racism exposed through Katrina, the institutional racism at home, and the U.S. government's human rights violations of international law. The goals of the Teach In are to create a nationwide dialogue about the human rights violations revealed through the government's deadly actions; and demands for investigations and corrective actions by the government.

For more info, see The People's Institute website www.pisab.org. Click the 'Hosting a Workshop' button on the home page.

4. White Solidarity Activists' Self and Group Reflection

a) For starters, read and discuss the essays in this reader in this section called 'Solidarity and Accountability: An Anti- Racist Approach.'

b) If you decide to continue working together in a solidarity group, use these articles as a basis for reflection in planning, implementing and evaluating your group's solidarity work.

c) If you and your group are new to solidarity work, dialogue with antiracist elders in your community or through emails, to get feedback on the problems and challenges you face in your work. It is true that there are no blueprints for doing solidarity work as a white activist; it is also true that reflective experience is the best teacher. And sharing anti-racist experience helps to build an anti-racist solidarity movement.

d) Before you decide to take any action as a campus group, check out what racial justice work is already happening on your campus that your group could support. (Remember that the best way to begin your research is to practice Active Listening!)

5. Taking Anti-Racist Political Action

(From People's Hurricane Relief Fund. See PHRF documents in this reader or their web: www.communitylaborunited.net)

- a) Support the People's demands for Reconstruction and Justice developed by the Katrina Survivors' Councils.
- b) Campaign in your community for the right to vote of people from New Orleans. Currently, at least 70% of African American New Orleanians are disenfranchised. Demand satellite voting in every city and state.
- c) Seek out established Katrina solidarity committees in your community and work with them and/or support their efforts.
- d) Carefully read and critique all government reconstruction plans for New Orleans. If the plan (such as the deceptive 'greenspace' plan for the Lower Ninth Ward) would deprive African American residents, home owners and renters of public or private housing, their right to return to their homes; or deny residents their right to a livelihood and schools for their children, reject the plan!!
- e) Pressure Congress to build levees to protect the people of New Orleans against Level 5 hurricanes.
- f) Pressure Congress to hold the Federal government accountable for their negligence and human rights violations. Support the International Tribunal (see PHRC website for more on the Tribunal).

SOME GRASSROOTS ORGANIZING RESOURCES IN NEW ORLEANS

Compiled by Sharon Martinas

March 2006

(Note: This small alphabetical list does not include cultural or religious organizations, nor is it a comprehensive listing of organizing resources in New Orleans. Rather, it's just a 'starter list.' Unless otherwise stated, the descriptions of organizations come from their web sites.)

ACORN <http://www.acorn.org>

ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now) is a national community organization of low and moderate income families, working together since 1970 for social justice and stronger communities. It has 175,000 member families in 850 neighborhood chapters in 75 cities. Its campaigns work for better housing, school, neighborhood safety, health care and job conditions.

In the aftermath of Katrina, ACORN organized a Katrina Survivors Association which uses public pressure, direct action and dialogue with elected officials to win a voice for survivors, and resources for survival and for rebuilding. ACORN has rallied in DC and organized home rebuilding in New Orleans.

A FIGHTING CHANCE <http://www.a-fighting-chance.org>

A Fighting Chance, founded in 2001, works on behalf of poor defendants facing the death penalty in Louisiana by providing high quality investigation for their defense. They investigate cases of convicted prisoners; support attorneys needing qualified investigators for poor defendants; and train investigators.

After Katrina hit, they investigated the situation of several thousand hurricane survivors who were imprisoned at the time of the hurricane, and who are now locked up in 13 Louisiana prisons. Their report has been released by Safe Streets, Strong Communities, a New Orleans based criminal justice reform coalition.

Ursula Price, a Fighting Chance staffer, said of her experience investigating, "I grew up in small town Mississippi. We had the Klan marching down our main street. But still, I've never seen anything like this." (See essay in this reader by Jordan Flaherty, 'Guantanamo on the Mississippi,' March, 2006. Left Turn.)

BLACK COMMENTATOR <Http://www.blackcommentator.com>

The Black Commentator is an on line journal whose core audience is African Americans and their allies in the struggle for social and economic justice. Their focus is commentary, analysis and investigation, elements of political dialogue that are absolutely essential to the creation of movements for social change. Without regular forums for advocacy and debate, a people are at the mercy of their adversaries. The Black Commentator is published every Thursday.

CC CAMPBELL-ROCK <http://www.sfbayviewcom>

CC Cambell-Rock is Editor of the San Francisco Bay View. She is a native New Orleanian and a veteran journalist who has been the managing editor of three New Orleans-based newspapers and associate editor of a national magazine. For up to date coverage of what's happening in the aftermath of Katrina from a Black community perspective, check out her on line articles for the SF Bay View.

COLOR OF CHANGE <http://www.colorofchange.org>

The home page of ColorofChange.org says, 'Bush doesn't care. But we do. We will never let this happen again. Never. Let's all become the color of change.'

The 'take action' website was launched about a month after Katrina hit. Its African-American organizers asked readers to take a pledge, which says in part, "We, the undersigned, vow to step up in the aftermath of Katrina, to ensure that no one is left behind again....We commit to helping those who have been continually ignored gain a powerful political voice. We will insist that those who have been pushed to the margins become a priority in this country, and that the federal government take responsibility for people in crisis. We will hold the government, and ourselves, accountable. Together, we will be a powerful force for change."

COMMON GROUND COLLECTIVE: <http://www.commongroundrelief.org>

Common Ground Collective formed in the wake of Hurricane Katrina to provide short term relief for victims of hurricane disasters in the Gulf Coast region, and long-term support in rebuilding their communities affected in the New Orleans area. Common Ground is a community-initiated volunteer organization offering assistance, mutual aid and support. The work gives hope to communities by working with them, providing for their immediate needs and emphasizes people working together to rebuild their lives in sustainable ways.

CG projects include: distribution centers, free medical clinics, emergency home repair, legal and eviction defense work, media, a women's center, environmental testing and cleanup, and child care and construction cooperatives. CG has organized two major national volunteer efforts: the 'Roadtrip for Relief' in November, and a Spring Break mobilization March through April.

A sign on the Common Ground Clinic says, 'Solidarity not Charity.'

CRITICAL RESISTANCE: <http://www.criticalresistance.org/katrina>

Critical Resistance seeks to build an international movement to end the Prison Industrial Complex by challenging the belief that caging and controlling people makes us safe. CR believes that basic necessities such as food, shelter, and freedom are what really make communities secure. As such, CR's work is part of global struggles against inequality and powerlessness. The success of the movement requires that it reflect communities most affected by the PIC. Because CR works to abolish the PIC, they cannot support any work that extends its life or scope.

Critical Resistance's New Orleans office was destroyed by Katrina, and its members were scattered. While seeking to reorganize and rebuild, CR has focused on organizing to support the thousands of prisoners who were in prison but not convicted at the time Katrina hit, were jailed for the charge of 'looting,' or who have been arrested for 'curfew violations' when they tried to return to their homes. They have initiated an Amnesty Campaign for survivors of Hurricane Katrina. (See their website to sign the petition.)

**FAMILIES AND FRIENDS OF LOUISIANA'S INCARCERATED CHILDREN (FFLIC)
<http://www.fflic.org>**

FFLIC started in 2000 when a few families came together in Ms Earnestine Williams' home in Baton Rouge to share stories, fears and to support one another in advocating for their children who were really caught up in Louisiana's brutal and ineffective juvenile justice system...

FFLIC made their public debut in September, 2001 when they organized a 'Mock Jazz Funeral,' a march that adapted a New Orleans tradition to mourn the lost freedom and departing dreams of their children... The funeral's double meaning soon became clear. Parents wanted more than the reform that lawsuits had envisioned: they wanted the death of Tallulah Correctional Center for Youth (TCCY). FFLIC was born and the 'Close Tallulah Now!' Campaign became a reality...

FFLIC continued to pressure the legislature and in May 2003, the Juvenile Justice Reform Act, Act 1225, was passed to overhaul the juvenile justice system and close the Tallulah Correctional Center for Youth...

After Katrina hit, FFLIC went into action. "As a radical, people-of-color-led organization on the front lines of the disaster, FFLIC was everywhere at once: helping unite families in shelters, providing direct relief to prisoners and their families, and initiating Safe Streets/Strong Communities, a coalition dedicated to keeping the issues of poor people and those victimized by the prison industrial complex central in the reconstruction of New Orleans." (Description by Jordan Flaherty, in "Glossary for the Struggle for New Orleans," Left Turn. 1/29/06.)

FFLIC's new website states, "The fight for a transformed juvenile justice system must continue, but not in isolation. This disaster has illuminated for many that the racism and oppression which have fueled the juvenile and criminal justice systems in this state for years are the very same which abandoned people to die in our city after the storm hit."

JORDAN FLAHERTY <http://www.leftturn.org/articles/SpecialCollections/katrina.aspx>

Jordan Flaherty is a writer and organizer based in New Orleans, and is part of the editorial collective of Left Turn Magazine. He was in New Orleans when Hurricane Katrina hit the city, and has been writing and organizing in New Orleans since then, working with grassroots organizations for justice, human rights and the right of return. (To subscribe to Jordan's bi-weekly list serve, email neworleans@leftturn.org.)

FOUR DIRECTIONS SOLIDARITY NETWORK <http://www.eswn.org>

Four Directions was started in early October to help gain both short and long term storm relief for Native American communities in southern Louisiana, and to work in solidarity and respect for the pride of local communities, and the preservation of their cultures.

The Four Directions logo is four hands placed in the four sacred directions -- East, South, West and North. Each of the hands is a different color representing the four tribes of people across the earth. Four Directions seeks to bring together the four tribes in solidarity and service while honoring indigenous knowledge, sacred sites, and harmony with all life.

Their values are Grassroots Support, Solidarity-Based Mutual Aid, and Deep Respect for Culture. Their Principles of Solidarity and Respect include transparency, collaboration, respect, decision making, listen, communication, patience, cultural sensitivity, tribal voices and honor. (<http://www.eswn.org/aboutus.html>)

GRASSROOTS LEGAL NETWORK

(From People's Hurricane Relief Fund Website: www.communitylaborunited.net)

The Grassroots Legal Network is a legal work group created by the Mississippi Disaster Relief Coalition and the People's Hurricane Relief Fund and Oversight Coalition. It composed of attorneys, law firms and legal organizations that are committed to protecting the human and civil rights of survivors. (For more, please see 'www.katrinaontheground.com')

The network has affiliated with the Loyola Law Clinic, the Advancement Project, the People's Advocacy Center, New Orleans Legal Assistance, and community organizations to win important victories on behalf of the right of people to return home. They won a court order stopping evictions of absent tenants for 45 days, and another temporarily halting demolitions in the lower ninth ward. (See Jordan Flaherty's 'Glossary of the Struggle for New Orleans;' and <http://miami.indymedia.org/news.2005/11/2926.php>)

GULF COAST RECONSTRUCTION WATCH <http://www.reconstructionwatch.org>

Gulf Coast Reconstruction Watch is a new project to document and investigate the rebuilding of the Southern Gulf in the wake of Hurricane Katrina and Rita. Through original reporting, in-depth features, voices from community leaders, and other unique coverage, Watch aims to promote a more democratic and accountable reconstruction in the South. Gulf Coast Reconstruction Watch is a project of the Institute for Southern Studies, a non-profit research and education center, and the Institute's flagship magazine, 'Southern Exposure.'

On Feb. 28, 2006, Gulf Coast Reconstruction Watch published 'The Mardi Gras Index: The State of New Orleans by Numbers Six Months after Hurricane Katrina.'

INCITE!: WOMEN'S HEALTH CLINIC AND APOTHECARY

www.incite-national.org

Incite! Women of Color Against Violence is a national activist organization of radical feminists of color advancing a movement to end violence against women of color and their communities through direct action, critical dialogue and grassroots organizing.

Because of racism and classism, most of the people unable to evacuate New Orleans during Katrina were overwhelming folks of color; and because of sexism, women of color: low income and poor women, single mothers, pregnant women, women with disabilities, older women and women who are caregivers to family and community members... Women living at the intersections of systems of oppressions are paying the price for militarism, the abandonment of their communities, and ongoing racial and gender disparities in employment, income, and access to resources and supports...

Women of color have been on the front lines of struggles for survival in the days and months following Katrina. The New Orleans chapter of Incite! has proposed to create a Women's Health Clinic that, when it opens, will promote a holistic approach to health with an understanding that social realities affect physical health. It will provide health services; community based health education and prevention programs; and integrated health strategies such as herbal medicines.

JUSTICE FOR NEW ORLEANS **<http://www.justiceforneworleans.org>**

Justice for New Orleans, is an online education and action service of the Loyola Law clinic, whose director is the progressive lawyer Bill Quigley.

KATRINA INFORMATION NETWORK **<http://www.katrinaaction.org>**

Katrina Information Network is an on line information and action clearinghouse. KIN shares expert viewpoints and action from the communities that have been devastated by Katrina, with up-to-the minute news and analysis. Its motto is 'Real Relief. A Just Recovery. And Nothing Less.'

LATINO HEALTH OUTREACH PROJECT

The Latino Health Outreach Project (LHOP) began as a mobile clinic project of the Common Ground Health Center... Clinic volunteers who assessed the public health care infrastructure in New Orleans after Katrina, identified a lack of culturally competent, bilingual health care for the city's Latino residents and cleanup workers as a major problem. So they began setting up mobile clinics on sidewalks and parking lots in front of hotels where large numbers of workers were staying...In the first six weeks, they were offering two clinics per week for both Latino residents and day laborers and contract workers.

LHOP prioritizes recruitment of volunteers who either identify as Latino and/or speak Spanish fluently. They also prioritize building relationships with institutions in the Latino community, such as the Hispanic Apostolate, which has enabled LHOP to hold clinics in churches and apartment houses that serve low income Latino residents of New Orleans.

(For perspectives on this work, check out the blog of Catherine Jones, one of its organizers:
<http://floodlines.blogspot.com>)

MOMMA D (DIANE 'MOMMA D' FRENCHCOAT)

See www.communitylaborunited.net

Momma D is a New Orleans resident who stayed in her community during and after Katrina to take care of those residents who needed whatever assistance she could offer. She organized a group of young men called the 'Soul Patrol' to provide protection and support for community residents. Her story appears in a Times-Picayune article by Trymaine Lee, entitled 'Momma's Mission' - Sept. 18, 2005. The article is reprinted on The People's Hurricane Relief Fund website.

NEW ORLEANS HOUSING EMERGENCY ACTION TEAM (NO-HEAT)

"NO-HEAT is a housing justice coalition including members of Common Ground, People's Hurricane Relief Fund and the New Orleans antiwar group C3. NO-HEAT is dedicated to resisting the mass evictions of poor and working class people in New Orleans and fighting the illegal dismantling of public housing..." (Description by Jordan Flaherty in his article "Glossary for the Struggle in New Orleans." Left Turn Magazine, Jan 29, 2006.)

NEW ORLEANS INDYMEDIA <http://neworleansindymedia.org>

An on line community based news and opinion center, with lots of information about grassroots activities in New Orleans.

NEW ORLEANS NETWORK <http://neworleansnetwork.org>

The New Orleans Network was born in the aftermath of the storm when a group of displaced New Orleanians realized a crucial element of recovery is providing the community with a place to communicate, share information and organize ... They began as a project of the national League of Young Voters and the local League of Pissed Off Voters. They thank the Praxis Project, Mayfirst, SEIU, and Neighborhood Housing Services of New Orleans for their support.

PEOPLE'S HURRICANE RELIEF FUND AND OVERSIGHT COALITION

<http://www.communitylaborunited.net>

"The people of New Orleans (and the Gulf Coast) will not go quietly into the night, scattering across this country to become homeless in counties and other cities while federal relief funds are funneled into rebuilding casinos, hotels, chemical plants, and the wealthy white districts of New Orleans like the French Quarter and the Garden District." (Founding statement of the People's Hurricane Relief Fund and Oversight Coalition -- PHRF).

PHRF is working to build a People's movement - a movement of grassroots persons disproportionately impacted by Hurricane Katrina and the dehumanizing treatment they received from local, state, and federal officials.

PHRF defines 'grassroots' in relation to Hurricane Katrina as those members of the community who are (1) surviving families of people who perished; (2) surviving families of those still missing family members; (3) survivors of the Superdome and Convention Center; (4) survivors of those left on the interstates and the Crescent City Connection; (5) survivors of sexual and law enforcement violence; (6) homeowners in the upper and lower 9th ward; (7) renters who are being evicted; and (8) low income displaced people/survivors of the New Orleans and Gulf Coast region.

PHRF's central mission is to ensure that those most affected by the hurricane play a central role in decisions made about relief, return and reconstruction. PHRF fosters an organizing process that demands local, grassroots leadership with national and international support.

To facilitate this vision, PHRF has organized three conferences of survivors, allies, local and national community organizers; and they have organized their on-going work in work groups and caucuses: arts, culture & story collection; economic justice; education; environmental health & justice; finance & fund raising; health care; legal; media; reconstruction; safety, justice & accountability; volunteer coordination; national solidarity; and women's caucus.

(Editor's note: For a deeper understanding of the political vision and organizing philosophy of PHRF, it might be helpful to study the description of CLU --Community Labor United -- the 8 year old New Orleans coalition which helped to create PHRF in response to Hurricane Katrina. See 'CLU' on PHRF's website.)

PEOPLE'S INSTITUTE FOR SURVIVAL AND BEYOND <http://www.pisab.org>

The People's Institute was founded in 1980 by long-time community organizers Ron Chisom of New Orleans and Jim Dunn of Yellow Springs, Ohio. The People's Institute was created to develop more analytical, culturally-rooted and effective community organizers. Over the past 25 years, The People's Institute Undoing Racism/Community Organizing process has impacted the lives of nearly 100,000 people both nationally and internationally. Through this process, it has built a national collective of anti-racist, multicultural community organizers who do their work with an understanding of history, culture, and the impact of racism on communities. These anti-racist organizers build leadership in and accountability to the constituencies where they are organizing.

The People's Institute believes that effective community and institutional change happens when those who would make change understand how race and racism function as a barrier to community self determination and self sufficiency...

The People's Institute's nine core organizing principles are: (1) Undoing Racism (2) Learning from history (3) Sharing culture (4) Maintaining accountability to constituents (5) Developing leadership (6) Networking -- building a 'net' that works (7) Understanding Internalized Racial Oppression (internalized racial inferiority and internalized racial superiority) (8) Anti-racist gatekeeping (9) Undoing manifestations of institutional racism, including militarism as applied racism.

People's Institute's organizing programs include:

- ** Undoing Racism Workshops and Community Organizing Process;
- ** European Dissent (a group of white anti-racist organizers who 'dissent' from the racist institutions and values designed to benefit them);
- **The People's Institute Youth Agenda (which identifies and mentors young anti-racist organizers);
- ** Community Organizing Strategy Team, which assists community organizations to develop long term goals, strategies and relationships across racial and cultural lines; and to assess its community values and self-determined goals; and
- ** The Jim Dunn Center for Anti-Racist Community Organizing, a leadership school for anti-racist grassroots organizers.

The People's Institute's national office in New Orleans and the homes of many of its core trainers and organizers were destroyed by Katrina. Their post -Katrina organizing has included: bringing the case of the federal government's violation of Katrina survivors' human rights to the United Nations Human Rights Commission; creating 'The Partner with a Katrina Family Network,' facilitating 'Katrina Teach In's' for college campuses; and facilitating anti-racist workshops and caucuses for the hundreds of volunteers coming to work with Common Ground over Spring Break.

SAN FRANCISCO BAY VIEW www.sfbayview.com

The San Francisco Bay View is a national Black newspaper published in San Francisco. The Bay View is responsible for bringing the voice of Malik Rahim, ex-Black Panther and a co-founder of Common Ground Collective, to national attention in the first days after the flood hit New Orleans. Since that time, the Bay View's newspaper and website has been a path-breaking source of information on racism, repression and resistance in New Orleans. Veteran New Orleanian journalist CC Campbell-Rock is the editor and author of many of the articles on Katrina's impact and aftermath.

The BayView's mast head has a quote from Steve Biko, the Black South African freedom fighter who was murdered by the apartheid government, "The most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed."

UNITED HOUMA NATION <http://www.unitedhoumanation.org>

The Houma nation on the Louisiana coast was impacted by both Hurricane Katrina and Rita. Katrina left 1000 tribal citizens homeless in the lower Plaquemines, lower St. Bernard, and lower Jefferson parishes. Rita devastated the Houma Indian population in the lower bayou region of Lafourche and Terrebonne parishes. The Houma communities of Dulac, Grand Caillou, Montegut, Pointe-aux-Chene, and Isle de Jean Charles were inundated with 7 to 8 feet of water, affecting 4000 tribal citizens.

Since the U.S. government does not recognize the Houma nation as a 'federal tribe,' the nation is not eligible for any federal relief, no matter how scarce that may already be. So the Houma nation requested support from both indigenous and non-indigenous volunteers and donors. For volunteers unfamiliar with Houma history, culture, values and governance, please check their website and contact them for current volunteer needs.