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Katrina Disaster

New Orleans - Urban Catastrophe

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Most residents of metro New Orleans were unaware of the potential destruction of Katrina until Saturday August 28, less than 48 hours before it struck. In New Orleans violent tropical storms are routine and hurricanes are a seasonal reminder of the power of "mother nature." As a resident of the city I have often been faced with a choice of whether or not to evacuate, always judging whether this would be the fabled "big one."

Hurricane Katrina was the most awesome disaster that residents of Louisiana have ever seen. But the deadly results of Katrina were as much a produce of human callousness as an act of nature.

The world watched as people were herded into the Superdome stopping for searches only to find themselves in a wrenched and unsanitary place without food, water, or proper medical care. Those in areas of high flooding fled to their rooftops begging rescue helicopters to airlift them to safety. Many died trapped in their attics or waiting to be rescued. Meanwhile hundreds of police were dispatched to protect property from looters.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/busesIV.jpg>]

At least half the city is at or below sea level including the Central Business District and much of the housing stock of the city. Under normal conditions massive drainage pumps drain rainwater from the city. But even under "normal" conditions, poor areas of the city routinely face minor flooding.

As Hurricane Katrina promises to be the new textbook case for urban "natural" disasters, social dislocation, and (lack of) urban planning, it is important to begin to examine the social dimension of the failed policies that contributed to such a massive disaster.

Misguided Priorities

New Orleans is a city "underdeveloped" by capitalism. Social services are chronically underfunded, while working people depend on low wage service jobs and send their kids to dysfunctional public schools.

Despite its once massive port, a seventy mile petro-chemical corridor and historical significance, the city has, like third- world Caribbean islands, depended on scraps of the tourism industry for its sustenance.

So it may be no surprise that in the leadup to Katrina flood Louisiana hurricane preparedness was woefully under-funded by President Bush and Congress.

Bush and Congress ignored those who explained that the critical infrastructure that would prevent New Orleans from becoming inundated with flood waters in the event of a levy break. In a 2003 interview of Bill Moyers' NOW, scientist Daniel Zwerdling noted the cutting of Hurricane funding to pay for the war in Iraq.

According to columnist Sidney Blumenthal, "FEMA warned that a hurricane striking New Orleans was one of the three most likely disasters in the U.S. But the Bush administration cut New Orleans flood control funding by 44 percent to pay for the Iraq war."

Congress did authorize \$10.5 billion dollars for Gulf Coast aid, but Florida received \$16 billion when hurricanes hit in 2004. Contrast this amount with the \$162 billion Congress appropriated for the first year of the Iraq war.

At the time of the hurricane, almost half of the Louisiana National Guard was deployed outside the state. Some, like the 3,000 members of the 256th Infantry Brigade were reportedly with critical high water equipment, in Iraq.

The race and class dynamics of a planned catastrophe

The poverty and blackness of those bearing the brunt of the hurricane is obvious to anyone watching CNN. The plight of these victims underscores the existing race and class inequalities in New Orleans but our case also provides a lens in which to understand another facet of the racism that is ever-present in the United States.

Poor people were the most ill prepared for a hurricane. [Malik Rahim](#), Green Party candidate and former Black Panther explains: "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."

[https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/malik_rahim.jpg]

Malik Rahim

The poorest people were without transportation, food, or resources, but no hurricane preparedness plan-and none of the doomsday exercises of federal, state, and local agencies made any provisions for their evacuation. Disaster planning officials know that 112,000 people in New Orleans are without any private form of transportation. In 2003 the Times Picayune produced a five part series that predicted that this segment would likely face death in the event of a category 5 hurricane.

It isn't enough to order an evacuation without having policies in place to carry an evacuation out. City and public school buses flooded while residents were stuck in the city with no way out.

In fact many institutions that once provided evacuation (like the dormitories of the University of New Orleans) now expected to fend for themselves, an unforeseen logical extension of privatization and neoliberal ideology and a continuation of white supremacy.

In an unscripted NBC benefit concert, rapper Kanye West explains: "George Bush doesn't care about black people," ...[America was set up] "to help the poor, the black people, the less well-off as slow as possible." Tulane Hospital (a private hospital) was evacuated by well before Charity Hospital, the region's trauma hospital and the hospital, whose patients are poor, overwhelmingly black. Tenet paid private contractors to evacuate at least one of their hospitals.

Katrina was not the first hurricane, nor the first major flooding disaster to hit Louisiana. During Hurricane Betsy Lower Ninth Ward, an area almost entirely under the poverty line and 99% black, was intentionally flooded to "save" the wealthy white uptown neighborhoods.

Institutional policies favor ruling class interests, but the flipside of these policies is for purveyors of ruling class ideology- including many working class whites to blame the victims hit hardest: poor African Americans, which, in turn, sharpens existing race and class inequalities. According to Malik Rahim, white vigilante gangs were patrolling Algiers, "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.”

Blaming Victims

Both FEMA chief Don Brown and the dominant media spin indicate that the high death toll is "going to be attributable a lot to people who did not heed the advance warnings." Brown's comments suggest that hundreds of thousands foolishly “choose” not to evacuate, but the reality is that tens of thousands of New Orleanians did not have the means to comply with an evacuation order.

Reporters and rightwing internet trolls filled news outlets and message boards with racialized stories of looting, while tens of thousands of the city begged for help. The lawlessness of looting, full of drama and intrigue of savage black people provided a narrative that shifted focus away from the thousands still stuck in the horror and the political decisions that kept them in that hell. Officials comforted tense onlookers with a promise of order: they would use troops to protect stores from looting. But by doing so, they shifted scarce resources away from the search, rescue, and evacuation of residents whose lives they deemed less important.

As convoys of National Guard reinforcements finally rolled into New Orleans, Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco used the occasion to warn looters and assure the ruling class that troops were under her orders to "shoot and kill" if needed to restore order. "These troops are battle-tested. They have M-16s and are locked and loaded," she said. "These troops know how to shoot and kill and I expect they will."

Lackluster Response

The response from Federal agencies was too little too late. While the United States has a history of dropping humanitarian relief to famine and disaster affected areas, media reported that supplies were being diverted because helicopters could not land, or because of a report of hostile gunfire.

If the United States is capable of sending planes that can withstand enemy fire to drop bombs in Iraq, certainly they are capable of air dropping supplies into a US city.

On NPR's [All Things Considered](#) Homeland Security Czar Michael Chertoff dismissed an NPR field reporter's claim that 2,000 or more were at Convention Center without food or water and in unsanitary conditions.

Subsequent reports verify that 15,000-20,000 were at the convention center in deplorable conditions including dead bodies. The Convention Center was on dry ground and would have been accessible by military transport ground vehicles or helicopters.

Mayor Ray Nagin blasted the slow response: “They're not here. It's too doggone late. Now get off your asses and do something, and let's fix the biggest goddamn crisis in the history of this country.”

An elected official from Jefferson Parish (New Orleans suburbs) suggested that if New Orleans were to secede from the United States perhaps foreign aid would be more timely. On the evening of September 2, 2005 frustrated FOX News reporters called attention to the policies that continued to trap refugees at the convention center.

Environmental Trigger

Looking at this disaster one cannot ignore the ecological component. New Orleans, like many major cities, was built in a place that posed danger, but environmental problems of global warming and coastal erosion have exacerbated the precariousness of the city.

Marshes and wetlands help to slow a hurricane's effect as it approaches the city. But erosion has diminished the size and ability of the coastal marsh and swamp to absorb the hurricane's force. Coastal erosion has two important causes.

One is that the once rich river silt that built the delta is now being directed to deep waters off the continental shelf to allow for easy river navigation. The second is salt water intrusion from canals built for oil and natural gas drilling and pipeline needs.

Global warming has contributed to a deadly hurricane season that is not yet over. Ross Gelbspan, columnist for the Boston Globe, explains that global warming "generates longer droughts, more-intense downpours, more-frequent heat waves, and more-severe storms." While Katrina began "as a relatively small hurricane that glanced off south Florida, it was supercharged with extraordinary intensity by the relatively blistering sea surface temperatures in the Gulf of Mexico."

Conclusion

The Bush administration fiddled while New Orleans flooded. The administration and Congress failed to provide basic preventative infrastructure and failed to have a rescue plan in place, choosing instead tax cuts for the rich and war spending in Iraq. This is the last in a line of Bush failures, and is seen so by a growing segment of the population as a "war at home" on poor and Black people.

Many hurricane refugees rightly feel abandoned. But the ruling class abandoned New Orleans long before Katrina hit. Racism, environmental disregard and capitalist deference to "the market" for social planning have long been the hallmarks of New Orleans.

Eventually public money will begin to trickle into the state. Hotels, casinos, chain stores and "Disneyfied" developments will compete for the sorely needed money and serve to reinforce a system that was unable to respond to peoples' needs before, during, and immediately after the hurricane.

But New Orleans can be rebuilt with a different ethos, one with environmentally sustainable planning, a vast transportation infrastructure upgrade, including public evacuation plans, a bolstered public works system, creation of stable union jobs, new public schools, a renewed investment in the public healthcare system, and cultivation of participatory neighborhood councils as incubators for a new, participatory, and radical democracy among the working class, poor, and oppressed.

And the people of the United States can help with an alternative vision. First we should demand that troops deployed in Iraq return to the United States, and we should link this return to a change in national priorities focused on focusing on the needs of working and oppressed people, beginning with rebuilding the infrastructure of New Orleans and the US Gulf South.

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