



## A Katrina Reader

Readings by & for Anti-Racist Educators and Organizers

### Legacies: Racism and Resistance in New Orleans Before and After Katrina

## "They Left Us Here To Die"

### Wade in the Water

---

**Organization:**

Community Organizing Collective

**Author:**

Walidah Imarisha

**Date Published:**

01/01/2005

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 dead yard out front.  
She means this spark of hope  
soggy  
sputtering  
but burning out  
enuf space

to catch a breath.

Reprinted from *Community Organizing Collective Newsletter*, Winter 2005

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

---

<b>Organization:</b> Common Ground Collective	<b>Author:</b> Malik Rahim	<b>Date Published:</b> 09/01/2005
--	-------------------------------	--------------------------------------

*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.*

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.

Reprinted with permission from the *San Francisco Bayview*

## Displaced New Orleans Community Demands Action, Accountability and Initiates A People's Hurricane Fund

[Printer-friendly version](#) • [Email this article to a friend](#)

**Organization:**

Peoples Hurricane Relief Fund and Oversight Coalition

**Author:**

Muhammad Curtis and Becky Belcore

**Date Published:**

09/04/2005

**Not until the fifth day** of the federal government's inept and inadequate emergency response to the New Orleans' disaster did George Bush even acknowledge it was 'unacceptable.'

'Unacceptable' doesn't begin to describe the depth of the neglect, racism and classism shown to the people of New Orleans. The government's actions and inactions were criminal. New Orleans, a city whose population is almost 70% percent black, 40% illiterate, and many are poor, was left day after day to drown, to starve and to die of disease and thirst.

**The people of New Orleans 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 like the French Quarter and the Garden District. 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.

**Community Labor United (CLU)**, a coalition of the progressive organizations throughout New

Orleans, has brought community members together for eight years to discuss socio-economic issues. We have been communicating with people from The Quality Education as a Civil Right Campaign, the Algebra Project, the Young People's Project and the Louisiana Research Institute for Community Empowerment. We are preparing a press release and framing document that will be out as a draft later today for comments.

### **Here is what we are calling for:**

We are calling for all New Orleanians remaining in the city to be evacuated immediately. We are calling for information about where every evacuee was taken. We are calling for black and progressive leadership to come together to meet in Baton Rouge to initiate the formation of a Community Oversight Committee of evacuees from all the sites. This committee will demand to oversee FEMA, the Red Cross and other organizations collecting resources on behalf of our people. We are calling for volunteers to enter the shelters where our people are and to assist parents with housing, food, water, health care and access to aid.

We are calling for teachers and educators to carve out some time to come to evacuation sites and teach our children. We are calling for city schools and universities near evacuation sites to open their doors for our children to go to school. We are calling for health care workers and mental health workers to come to evacuation sites to volunteer. We are calling for lawyers to investigate the wrongful death of those who died, to protect the land of the displaced, to investigate whether the levees broke due to natural and other related matters. We are calling for evacuees from our community to actively participate in the rebuilding of New Orleans. We are calling for the addresses of all the relevant list serves and press contacts to send our information. We are in the process of setting up a central command post in Jackson, MS, where we will have phone lines, fax, email and a web page to centralize information. We will need volunteers to staff this office.

**We have set up a People's Hurricane Fund** that will be directed and administered by New Orleanian evacuees. The Vanguard Public Foundation has agreed to accept donations on behalf of this fund. The Vanguard Public Foundation has a long history of social justice activism and also has the staff capacity to manage this level of effort.

Danny Glover, who was one of the original conveners of the first national meeting of the Quality Education as a Civil Right Campaign (QECR) at Howard University in March, 2005 and serves as the Honorary Chairperson of the QECR Coordinating Committee. Mr. Glover also is the co-chair of the Board of Directors of the Vanguard Public Foundation.

### **Tax-exempt donations can be made out to:**

The People's Hurricane Fund c/o Vanguard Public Foundation  
383 Rhode Island St, Ste 301  
San Francisco, CA 94103

(Editor: For more info on Peoples Hurricane Relief Fund, see both [www.peopleshurricane.org](http://www.peopleshurricane.org) and [www.peoplesorganizing.org](http://www.peoplesorganizing.org).)

[Printer-friendly version](#) • [Email this article to a friend](#)

## **Dear Incite! Friends & Supporters, plus letter from Shana Griffin**

---

<b>Organization:</b> INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence	<b>Author:</b> Nada Elia, Shana Griffin	<b>Date Published:</b> 09/11/2005
---	--	--------------------------------------

To: [INCITE! mailing list]  
From: incite\_nationalATyahooDOTcom

Date: Sun, 11 Sep 2005

Dear INCITE! Friends & Supporters:

INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence is stunned by the catastrophe and tragic loss in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. In New Orleans and in many other communities along the Gulf, people are experiencing unimaginable devastating conditions. We are especially alarmed for the people who have the fewest resources, who were unable to evacuate New Orleans because of poverty, who were -- and in some cases still are --- trapped without food, water, and medical attention. Because of racism and classism, these people are also overwhelming folks of color, and because of sexism, they are overwhelmingly 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 who were unable to leave the city. 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.

As you know, the Historic Treme Community in New Orleans recently hosted INCITE!'s Color of Violence III conference this past March. Treme is the first free community established by Black people in the U.S. and is currently home to hundreds of Black women and their families, many of whom are poor. We are deeply hurting for the families and communities that graciously hosted us and who are now facing profoundly tragic circumstances.

We have heard word from most of the sistas who are part of the New Orleans INCITE! chapter, many of whom were able to evacuate. We also received word that one of the COV·3 volunteers had a mother and sister trapped on the 8th floor of New Orleans City Hall at some point - we sincerely hope that they have reached relative safety at this time. An early letter from Shana Griffin, member of the New Orleans INCITE! chapter and the national INCITE! steering committee, is below. Our hearts and prayers go out to them and we want to provide them with as much support and as many resources as we can so that they can mourn this horrible loss, re-connect with those that are missing, and, eventually, rebuild the rich and vital communities that have been devastated. Our thoughts and prayers are also with INCITE! chapters, members, COV III participants and supporters in other areas affected by the hurricane in the Gulf States. Many of you have thoughtfully written and asked how you can help. At this time, we are asking for donations from our supporters so that we can send money to our New Orleans chapter members who will use it to help people who need it most. We have not given up on our sisters and brothers in New Orleans and other places that have been hit. We are dedicated to pooling our resources and using those resources to continue to organize plans for survival, safety, and justice in New Orleans. Please organize fundraisers in your hometowns and communities and send your donations to the [address below].

Nada Elia

(Nada Elia is a member of INCITE!'s national steering committee and will be organizing the donations to make sure the resources get to New Orleans.) Please make checks out to INCITE and put "New Orleans" in the memo line. Thank you very, very much for your generous support.

\*\*\*\*\*

That said, we'd like to take this opportunity to express our deep outrage at the federal government's shamefully slow and pathetic response to this disaster. It is clear that the lack of rapid and effective response is based on a racist assessment of the value of the 150,000 mostly Black and poor people - a disproportionate number of whom are women -left behind in New Orleans. Further, INCITE! lays the blame of this disaster squarely at the feet of the U.S. government and particularly with George W. Bush for the following reasons:

### 1. GLOBAL WARMING

The Bush Administration's willful denial of the existence of global warming has kept this country from taking seriously global warming IS dangerous consequences, one of which is an increase in the severity of hurricanes. Hurricane Katrina, for example, began as a relatively small hurricane off south Florida, but it was intensified to a level five hurricane -- the highest level a hurricane can reach -- because of the unusually blistering sea surface temperatures in the Gulf of Mexico caused in large part by global warming. (Ross Gelbspan, *The Boston Globe*, 8/30/05) However, the Bush Administration, leveraged by the coal and oil industries, relegated global warming to a myth rather than the emergency environmental crisis that it is. Because the impact of Hurricane Katrina had an exceedingly disproportionate impact of devastation on people of color, Bush's failure at addressing global warming is a catastrophic example of environmental racism.

### 2. WAR ON IRAQ & TAX CUTS FOR THE WEALTHY

Bush's illegal, imperialist, and racist war on and occupation of Iraq - ironically, to enable consumption of more oil, aggravating global warming - as well as tax cuts to wealthy Americans, directly pulled resources away from levee construction and emergency management in New Orleans, as well as from programs and entitlements which could have provided much needed support to poor people and communities in New Orleans. In 2003, as hurricane activity in the area increased and the levees continued to subside, federal funding was specifically redirected away from addressing these problems because of spending pressures of the war on Iraq. In early 2004, as the cost of the war on Iraq soared, President Bush proposed spending less than 20 percent of what was needed for Lake Pontchartrain, according to a Feb. 16, 2004 article in *New Orleans CityBusiness*. At least nine articles in the *Times-Picayune* from 2004 and 2005 specifically cite the cost of the war on Iraq as a reason for the lack of hurricane- and flood-control dollars. (Will Bunch, Editor & Publisher, 8/30/05) The lack of resources to prepare for a disaster like Hurricane Katrina is a tragic example of how imperialism not only devastates communities of color abroad, but also communities of color here at home. This criminal neglect on the part of the government is responsible for thousands more deaths than the 9/11 attacks -- deaths that could have been prevented with adequate funding.

### 3. STATE-SPONSORED VIOLENCE

It is unconscionable that, while thousands of people are suffering from horrible and deadly circumstances, the media continues to harp on the so-called looting in New Orleans. The constant media coverage of so-called "criminal behavior" instead of the outrageous and criminal lack of response from the federal government is racist and disgraceful.

Though we are also very distressed about reports of violence- including sexual and physical violence against women and children - in the area caused largely by widespread chaos and desperation, we condemn the current mass militarization of the area. There have been numerous accounts of vicious police brutality experienced by men and women who have survived untold horrors only to be subjected to abuse by the law enforcement officials sent to "save" them. Thousands of soldiers from the U.S. Marines and Army are currently in New Orleans to enforce evacuation orders and bring about "law and order." In response to violence in the area, Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco shockingly remarked, "I have one message for these hoodlums. These troops know how to shoot and kill, and they are more than willing to do so if necessary." Besides the fact that it is against the law for federal troops to engage in domestic law enforcement, a militarized response is another piece of a racist pattern of de-humanizing poor people of color. Instead of seeing poor Black people driven desperate by the appallingly weak and unacceptably slow response of the federal government, the media and the government frame these primary victims as criminals or blame them for bringing the circumstances on themselves by "disobeying" mandatory evacuation orders when they had no means to comply.

We demand that there be no further criminalization of survivors of the hurricane as rescue,

recovery, and rebuilding efforts go forward. We are particularly concerned about the creation of temporary accommodations -- expected to serve as "home" to evacuees for up to six months which are akin to detention facilities, surrounded by barbed wire, in isolated parts of Utah, Oklahoma and other areas, from which inhabitants will be prohibited from leaving without a "pass" and in which they will be housed in gender segregated housing and prohibited from preparing their own meals. The prison-like conditions of such facilities have been justified by the soldiers guarding them as follows "do you know what kind of people we have coming here?"

We are also concerned about the adequate provision of medication, supplies, and child care to women with disabilities, HIV/AIDS, as well as mothers and elderly women. We are calling for support for survivor-led, women of color driven formations within evacuation facilities and for their demands. We are also calling for support of . women's individual and collective efforts to ensure their safety from physical and sexual violence within evacuation facilities while submitting that the existence of such violence is no justification for violent repression of evacuee communities.

We call for support and safety of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender survivors of the hurricane, and for respect for the integrity of their families and of their needs in evacuation facilities. We are also deeply concerned for immigrant, and particularly undocumented women, who fear seeking assistance for fear of adverse immigration consequences and deportation. We call for efforts to connect incarcerated women, men, and children with their families, many of whom do not know the location of those dear to them, and for authorities to ensure conditions of confinement that meet international human rights standards. We are asking for charges against those who took food, water, and supplies in an effort to survive be immediately dropped. Finally, we are calling for support of domestic violence survivors who were displaced from shelters, support systems, and places of safety by the storm and may be at greater risk of violence from their abusers under current circumstances.

We demand an organized, rapid, and just response to save the survivors of Hurricane Katrina. We demand a comprehensive plan that is respectful of the value of the people who have been abandoned and responsive to their actual needs for survival and safety. We want immediate action operating from a vision of justice and hope.

We have pulled together a number of analyses of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath, information about critical organizing and mobilization of poor people and people of color, letters from sistas from INCITE!, and other ways to help. Please contact us if you have questions, concerns, or resources. Our e-mail is [incite\\_national@yahoo.com](mailto:incite_national@yahoo.com) and our phone number is 484.932.3166.

In Solidarity,  
 INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence  
 \*\*\*\*\*

Peace sisters,

Tears are rolling down my face as I write this e-mail; my family is safe. My son evacuated with my mother and sister on Saturday night. My partner and I left on Sunday morning before the mayor declared a mandatory evacuation out of the city.

I spoke with Kerrie on Monday morning and received a text message from Isabel on yesterday. I e-mailed Janelle and Tara and haven't heard back. My cell phone is not working; I can only receive text messages. I'm in west Louisiana, near the Texas/LA border. I'm having a very difficult time

processing the devastation of the city, the displacement of my community, and the thousands of people who were unable to leave the city, many of whom are feared to be dead. I will update everyone with the whereabouts of Janelle and Tara, who I suspect made it out of the city.  
-shana

## Hurricane Katrina: The Black Nation's 9/11!

[Printer-friendly version](#) • [Email this article to a friend](#)

---

**Author:** Saladin Muhammad  
**Date Published:** 09/16/2005

The magnitude of the destruction and human suffering caused by Hurricane Katrina to the people and communities of the Gulf Coast region, while not the result of an act of "terror," is directly the result of a profit-driven system of capitalist exploitation reinforced by the national oppression of African American people in the U.S. South, a region where the majority of Black people live and where the conditions of oppression, poverty and underdevelopment are most concentrated. As anti-imperialists and progressives engage in work to build support for the Gulf Coast survivors, we must have an analysis and political context for properly understanding the reasons for this crisis and the contradictions surrounding its aftermath. The response to this human tragedy must be more than a humanitarian response in order to deal with the magnitude and complexity of issues, international political ramifications, the legal aspects, and the various levels of local, regional, national and international coalition and network building and mobilizing that must take place to build a powerful movement for social justice. There is much talk about how to define the main social impact of Katrina—whether it is mainly a major disaster for Black people or for working class and poor people in general. This attempt by the media to separate race from class when dealing with issues where those workers affected are majority African American is no accident. It seeks to divide the political character and content of the working class responses. Thus, it is important to define the race and class character of the crisis and to call on the larger working class to unite with its most oppressed section—the African American working class—which is also the predominant basis of an oppressed nation and nationality historically denied real democratic rights and subjugated by U.S. imperialism. The government's failure to correct this impending danger, known far in advance, that led to the continuously unfolding massive human tragedy, helps all to see the racist nature of the U.S. capitalist system and how the system of African American national oppression is in violation of human rights and guilty of crimes against humanity. The demand for self-determination is both a national democratic demand for African American people's power as well as a demand for working class and women's power. Thus, national, working class and gender democracy are essential pillars of the politics of a Black working-class-led African American liberation struggle. African American national oppression was definitely a major factor contributing to the magnitude of the disaster caused by Katrina. National oppression takes on more factors than race. It includes, among other factors, where people live and work—social and political territories and institutions—and has a working class character represented by the most exploited strata of the U.S. working class. Thus African American national oppression is at the deepest point of the intersection of race, class, and gender oppression and exploitation of the U.S. working class. As more than 90 percent of Black people throughout the U.S. are workers, African American national oppression places its primary emphasis on the exploitation and oppression of Black workers and their communities. More than two-thirds of New Orleans' inhabitants were African American. In the Lower Ninth Ward, a neighborhood that was one of the hardest hit, more than 98 percent were Black. The slow U.S. federal and state government responses to natural disasters like hurricanes Katrina and Floyd in North Carolina in September 1999, that greatly impacted predominately African American working class communities, made clear that the value of Black

and working class life is subordinate to capitalist property and profits. The racist economic, social and political policies and practices of the U.S. government and capitalist system shape society's attitudes about the reasons for the historical oppression of African Americans. They seek to isolate, criminalize and scapegoat African Americans as social pariahs holding back the progress of society. The characterization of the Black working class in this way is a part of the continuous ideological shaping of white supremacy that gives white workers a sense of being part of another working class, different from that of the Black working class. This often leads many white workers to act against their class interests, discouraging them from uniting with the Black working class in struggling to seek common, equal and socially transformative resolutions to their class issues. However, on the ground in New Orleans, the working class regardless of race forged a level of unity as survivors, led by the African American working class that the system wants to hide. The media's different descriptions of acts of desperation and survival by Blacks and whites in obtaining food and supplies following Katrina--"looting" versus "finders"--is an example. The police and National Guard were ordered to stop looking for survivors and to stop "lawlessness." Bush's statements about getting tough on "looters," along with that of Louisiana Gov. Kathleen Blanco when she said, "These troops are battle-tested--have M-16s that are locked and loaded--know how to shoot and kill and I expect they will," made clear that New Orleans and the Gulf Coast were becoming areas of military occupation. White supremacists like David Duke and others have utilized this disaster and repressive racist climate to promote hatred for African Americans and Latinos and have encouraged the formation of racist vigilante bands roaming areas of New Orleans, attacking Black and Brown people. The refusal by thousands of mainly Black people to leave their homes was initially described by the media as the main problem related to the slow evacuation efforts--blaming the victims. Nothing was initially mentioned about the low wages, level of poverty and high rates of unemployment preventing people from leaving. After it took almost a week for the government evacuation effort to begin, leaving people to fend for themselves without electricity, food and water, it became shamefully clear and impossible for the media to hide that the government had made no provisions for a major evacuation. The acts of heroism by the people themselves in rescuing their neighbors, although not emphasized by the media, could be seen throughout the coverage. These acts by the people have no doubt reduced the numbers expected to die resulting from the slow "emergency" rescue response of the government. The so-called "looting" and "lawlessness" must be addressed and placed in proper context. When it became clear that there was no emergency evacuation plan in place--people waiting up to a week before any major evacuation effort began--people were forced to take desperate actions for survival, both until they got "rescued" and for their uncertain future as refugees with no resources and sources of income. TVs, appliances, etc., become a form of capital and a means for trade during a crisis. Some survivors were forced to "steal" cars and buses to get their families out of the areas. Should this be considered a crime? NO! Also, when people are oppressed, neglected and left to die, they often engage in spontaneous acts of rebellion, striking out against those who control wealth and power. This is why the term "racism" without the context of national oppression and imperialism is grossly inadequate in describing the scope and depth of the impact of the U.S. oppression of African American people. It often fails to point out the impact that African American national oppression has on influencing the standard of living and social conditions of the general working class, regardless of race, especially in areas where Black workers make up a majority or large minority of the population. U.S. imperialism on the domestic front Not only did the U.S. federal and state government place the working class of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast in impending danger, including failing to develop a planned emergency response to the crisis, it has also refused the aid of other countries like Cuba and Venezuela, which have offered to send hundreds of doctors, tons of medical supplies and fuel to help the people in the Gulf Coast region. U.S. imperialism has thus decided that it has the sole right to decide whether the majority African American and working class people and communities in the Gulf Coast region have the human and political right to survive or not. This is clearly an international human rights question where the demand for self-determination must be applied as part of the resolution. Though food, water and transportation trickled in, the government made sure the oil industry was taken care of fast. Over 10 major refineries were knocked out of commission in the Gulf region, but many of them were back operating within the week. Bush

released federal oil reserves, but oil companies jacked up gas prices to a criminal level anyhow. Environmental safeguards were loosened for gasoline producers to allow more pollution. All this while the four largest oil companies made profits of nearly \$100 billion over the last 18 months. Why isn't this labeled as corporate "lawlessness"? Many of the African American working class majority of New Orleans and parts of the Gulf Coast have been "evacuated" to other cities several hundred, and in some cases thousands, of miles away from their communities. More than 1,800 children are still separated from their families almost two weeks after the flood. Many feel that their communities will never be restored and that they won't be returned home. They have good reason to feel this way, as some majority African American communities have already begun to experience gentrification--the moving of Black and poor people out of the inner cities and replacing them with more affluent and predominantly middle and upper class whites. Many reports have warned that profit-driven development along the coast had done away with millions of acres of wetlands that buffered coastal communities from storms. Thus, this disaster and the racist and capitalist circumstances surrounding its occurrence and aftermath raise the issue of "ethnic cleansing." The media in some of the cities receiving the "evacuees" are describing them as "the worst of New Orleans' now-notorious lawlessness: looters, carjackers and rapists." This sounds like the racist labels placed on working class and poor immigrants and refugees from throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, who have been forced to leave their countries and come to the U.S. for economic and political reasons. Many African Americans experienced these labels when they were forced to migrate out of the South in the first half of the 20th century. Many African Americans in particular will experience problems related to the loss of identification documents in the flood, and fall into a similar status as undocumented and immigrant workers who come from Latin America and the Caribbean. Their residential and citizenship status will be challenged, in most cases, when it comes time to get disaster relief subsistence. The racist nature of U.S. capitalism often makes this reality of being a refugee and undocumented worker within one's "own" country a unique reality for African Americans and other oppressed nationalities, especially during times of natural and social crises. We should expect the U.S. to use this disaster to increase restrictions on forced economic immigration. It is therefore important that African Americans and Latinos unite in challenging the refusal of survivors' assistance on the basis of the lack of documentation or citizenship status. It is also important to point out that countries in Latin America have offered aid to all, without regard for citizenship status or nationality, even though the U.S. seeks to overthrow their governments. Forging unity between African Americans, Latinos and working class ethnic-groups throughout the U.S. and especially within the Gulf Coast region in responding to this disaster is, an important part of a larger and more difficult and absolutely essential process of building U.S. multinational working class unity and international solidarity against U.S. imperialism. The future of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast in terms of the reconstruction of the historical communities, but at a higher quality of social conditions and standard of living will be decided by the U.S. corporate class, the white power structure, unless there is an organized and combined African American and working class struggle led by the African American working class majority in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. Such a struggle must take the popular form of a combined struggle for African American self-determination and workers' power, and must have an international component. Emphasizing the majority African American working class character of the Katrina-U.S. imperialist disaster is important to exposing its unmistakably racist character.' Katrina disaster exposes impact of unjust U.S. war and occupation against Iraq The Katrina disaster exposes how U.S. imperialist war in Iraq and throughout the Middle East) including billions of dollars of support for Israel's occupation of Palestine, is directly connected to the human tragedy in the Gulf Coast region. Vital resources, which had been allocated by the Bush administration to fix the substandard levees in New Orleans and the erosion of marshlands along the coast that caused the region to experience such enormous flooding and massive loss of lives, were cut and shifted to the war budget. Both Republican and Democratic administrations have consciously refused to adequately maintain or strengthen the levees that protect New Orleans. Hurricane and flood control has received the steepest federal funding reductions in New Orleans history down 44.2 percent since 2001. The emergency management chief for Jefferson Parish, La., told The Times-Picayune in June 2004: "It appears that the money has been moved in the President's

budget to handle homeland security and the war in Iraq. and I suppose that is the price we pay.11 Requests for an additional \$250 million for Army Corps of Engineers levee work in the delta went unmet. There are close to 15,000 National Guard from the Gulf Coast region in Afghanistan and Iraq fighting unjust wars. Their equipment, including generators, water purification systems and other needed life support and disaster preparedness supplies were overseas as well. Precious hours and days were lost as the bureaucratic machinery slowly moved equipment from other parts of the country that could have helped save lives of the thousands who were expected to die. As was the case during every war engaged in by this country, African Americans and working people were sent to fight, kill and die to bring about so-called "freedom II while they and their communities are denied freedom from hunger, imminent dangers, racial violence, gender oppression and state repression. As was also the case during the Vietnam and Korean wars, the U.S. tried to conceal the racist treatment of African Americans on the home front. In both of these wars, the racist treatment of African Americans in the U.S. led to rebellions in the military and drew many former veterans into the civil rights and African American liberation movement when they returned home. Now the U.S. military has the audacity to start recruiting at the Gulf Coast Survivors evacuation shelters in various parts of the country. This is outrageous, as it was the U.S. war in Iraq that was responsible for diverting funds away from repairing the levees in New Orleans. It is important that this connection be raised and exposed to help African Americans better understand the more immediate relationship to the wars abroad and the national and working class oppression of African Americans in the U.S. This will not only serve to strengthen the current U.S. anti-war movement, it will strengthen the U.S. and international anti-imperialist movement. Lessons from North Carolina's Hurricane Floyd [Also see:<http://www.labornotes.org/archives/19991119911199a.html>] The coalitions and movement that develops to aid the survivors of this disaster must understand the magnitude and how it differs from other disasters throughout U.S. history. When one analyzes the conditions and responses to Hurricane Floyd, labeled the 11Flood of the Century, n that impacted 30 counties in Eastern North Carolina in September 1999, we see at least one major difference that defines how people's aid must be organized. With Floyd, the evacuation of thousands of survivors to far-away cities and states did not occur. People were moved and went on their own to neighboring towns and communities, thus making it easier to build a survivors! organization and movement in the area made up of representatives of the various towns and communities that were impacted. There was a decision to define people as survivors and not "victims" as one way of helping to empower them and to discourage a "victim's consciousness, II which made many feel they had no right to challenge the abuses of FEMA and the state. There was the need to establish a survivors' slogan. "Social Justice, Not Charity, II to promote that aid is a human right. The largest camp housing Floyd survivors was set up on a toxic waste dump, which had not been inspected ahead of time and was located behind a women's prison. Survivors felt they had no right to complain and also feared that if they did, they would be put out of the FEMA camp with no place else to go. The Survivors organization was not a "support" or emergency "relief" organization per se, even though it participated in "relief" activities and worked in food and clothing distribution centers set up by community forces and supporters. Survivors' committees were organized in 15 sites throughout eastern North Carolina and a survivors' summit was organized to bring survivor communities together to hammer out a survivors' manifesto of demands to serve as their program for recovery and reconstruction. The state of North Carolina had established a Floyd Relief Fund that had several hundred million dollars of federal money and private "donations." The survivors' organization demanded that the fund address key needs and ensure that the cutoff period did not leave survivors to fall through the cracks. There was a demand that Floyd Survivors have input in decisions about use of the Floyd Relief Fund. An advisory committee was appointed by the governor that included one representative of the Survivors organization. The majority were company, banker and state and local government management heads. There was no national and international pressure around the demand that Floyd Survivors control the Relief Fund. This is needed for Katrina Survivors. The Survivors organization and support coalitions in the areas organized reconstruction brigades of people who came in from other cities to help repair and rebuild damaged homes. Progressive lawyers and legal clinics were set up to deal with the massive insurance fraud, and with real estate speculators who were trying to get people to sell

their homes for little or nothing to get desperately needed money. Volunteer doctors and medical people set up screening and emergency support clinics that wrote prescriptions for medicine, and college students and educators set up schools and day care in the camp areas. A people's transportation service was set up to take people to work, to look for work and to shop for clothes and other items. There were discussions about setting up survivor worker-run businesses to help create employment, but they never materialized. The postal workers' union local led by a member of Black Workers For Justice that was part of the survivors' support organization brought mail transfer forms and workers to assist survivors in getting their mail rerouted. The scope of this work was based on the number of progressive groups and level of participation of the Survivors who were drawn into this social justice work. This is a main reason why it's very important to build a broad network tying together activist groups with allies. It is very important to draw the trade unions into this movement, the Gulf Coast wide coalition and national support network. They should be encouraged to contribute directly to a Survivors and people-driven support coalition in the region, not to the Red Cross or government agencies. The identity of the working class efforts will not be projected by the contributions made to these agencies. It is important that workers see that trade unions have a broader concern and commitment to the needs of the working class and not just to their immediate members. The employers will certainly ask the workers where the unions were during the disaster when they try to organize. Trade unions can play an important role in supporting those evacuated to their cities, especially outside of the South. The unions can help in adopting families and shelters in their areas. They must also play a leading role in helping to combat the racist attempts by the media, white supremacists, the religious right and others to alienate and scapegoat Survivors evacuated to their cities by educating their members and getting them actively involved in support efforts. Distribution centers were designated by FEMA and state crisis agencies. The Black Workers For Justice set up a distribution center at its Workers Center in Rocky Mount, N.C., but had to struggle to demand it be recognized as an official center so that it could receive food and supplies from distribution warehouses that were set up in the area by FEMA. Most of the FEMA-designated distribution centers were the big white area churches, some Black churches, YMCAs and Opportunities Industrialization Centers. The white paternalistic and missionary character of a major portion of the establishment-designated "formal" relief effort was overwhelming. Disaster relief efforts must be carried out as a political struggle. Yes, it's important that organizing be done around the humanitarian aspects of this crisis and recovery. It must not try and substitute for the obligation that the U.S. government has to fully address the problems. A "full" recovery requires some political and economic changes and pressure by a mass movement. We learned that during times of disaster, the state and federal government declarations of a "state of emergency" allow local governmental powers to be suspended or placed under the direct demand of the state government. During Floyd, survivors particularly from the Town of Princeville, the oldest historically Black town in North Carolina and some say in the U.S., were organized to demand that their City Council convene itself, even though the town had been destroyed. This was a struggle for self-determination within the context of the struggle for reconstruction. The Princeville City Council held weekly open meetings where activists organized transportation to take survivors by cars and church buses to have input into the decisions and town government struggle for reconstruction. Some towns attempted to weaken Black voting strength through their recovery plans. The city of Tarboro, N.C., established an ordinance prohibiting the construction of low-income housing in a political district where African Americans constituted a majority. The town was sued, along with mass actions, forcing it to change the ordinance and allow people to move back into the area with affordable, newly built housing. Building a Gulf Coast Survivors Justice and Reconstruction Movement The movement in the Gulf Coast region has major concerns that require the organization, politics and leadership of the African American liberation struggle as a central component to help unite a broad, multi-national, multi-racial and international campaign for social justice and reconstruction. The following areas need to be organized to establish a national and international capacity: 1. There must be efforts to unite the many relief and reconstruction efforts of the Gulf Coast Region into a regional coalition such as a Gulf Coast Survivors Justice and Reconstruction Movement. This will take time and education: It can begin by putting out joint statements, coordinating relief activities where possible, agreeing to related satellite offices such as proposed by the

Community Labor United for Jackson, Ms., Lake Charles, La., Baton Rouge, La., and Houston, Texas. 2. Gulf Coast Survivors Justice and Reconstruction Councils should be formed among groupings of Gulf Coast evacuees in the various cities throughout the country with elected representatives to a Gulf Coast Survivors Reconstruction Assembly that would decide demands and direction for the movement. 3. The Gulf Coast Survivors Justice and Reconstruction Movement would help to organize and reconnect the dispersed masses from the region into a representative body that acts somewhat as their provisional government to deal with questions regarding the future of their communities, the blatant neglect of the U.S. government in dealing with the national and international campaign, and particulars related to the reconstruction and redress of the Gulf Coast Survivors and their communities. 4. The Survivors Justice and Reconstruction Movement needs to have a Gulf Coast Survivors Support Network connecting supporters, technical resources, fund-raising and allies throughout the country and internationally. Gulf Coast Survivors and supporters must act now! It is very important that activity begin immediately to set the political tone of the movement. Otherwise, the tone will be set and dominated by the U.S. government and corporate media, who don't want the struggle to go beyond disaster relief and "recovery." The U.S. spin doctors have already begun their work. There is an attempt to place major blame on the local government of New Orleans. The firing of the FEMA director seeks to give the impression that the "wrong" man was in charge. A Gulf Coast Survivors Justice and Reconstruction Petition to the UN should be launched to get Survivors throughout the country to sign. This will begin political intervention among Survivors throughout the country. This could also help in the process of organizing Survivor Councils. Press conferences and rallies could be organized. A Right of Return Committee should be organized and headed by a prominent African American activist figure to begin promoting a campaign for the right of a speedy return of the Gulf Coast Survivors to their communities. This committee could have regional coordinators and should be formed and publicly announced immediately. A UN Petition and Right of Return Committee and campaign would give the Gulf Coast Survivors movement an immediate focus and sense of movement beyond emergency relief. Some of the demands that must be included in this movement include: \* The right to return of the people of the Gulf Coast region; \* Open up area military bases for no-cost temporary housing to begin moving survivors back into the region; \* Extended unemployment and emergency financial relief based on a living wage for all Katrina Survivors until they are returned to their homes and jobs; \* A People's Referendum on all decisions affecting the politic and residential issues of the Gulf Coast Survivors; \* Establish a public workers' program funded by the federal government and the big corporations to rebuild New Orleans and the affected Gulf Coast region; \* Employ the survivors at a living wage as required by the Davis-Bacon Act to work on cleanup and reconstruction of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, with the right to organize unions; \* That major contracts for cleanup and reconstruction of New Orleans Slack and working class communities be allocated to Black contractors; \* That the U.S. immediately allow other countries to provide aid to the survivors; \* That the United Nations conduct an investigation into the circumstances surrounding the Katrina disaster to determine if the U.S. is guilty of human rights violations; \* That everyone suffering property damage and destruction, dislocation, death and illness, including emotional and psychological, receive reparations from the U.S. government as victims of a racist act of placing Black majority cities and communities in imminent danger; \* Issue a massive bankruptcy executive order for Gulf Coast Survivors forgiving all debt of property lost or destroyed by the disaster; \* That the U.S. government take immediate steps to protect people from price-gouging at the gas pumps and profiteering by the big oil companies, including the release of additional oil from the U.S. Strategic Oil Reserve; \* Amnesty for all Survivors charged with "crimes of survival" such as "looting," taking vehicles, etc., and acts of self-defense against vigilantes and police brutality; \* End wars and occupations in the Middle East, bring the troops home now; \* Cut the U.S. military budget and reallocate finances to deal with state and local programs to address social and environmental needs that threaten the lives, safety, health and communities of African American and other working class ethnic populations; \* The immediate impeachment of George Bush for his role in the U.S. government in placing people's lives in imminent danger and thereby committing crimes against humanity. The political movement must be organized nationally. The progressive organizations of every political tendency and humanitarian expression should be able to support

this movement. However, it is very important and politically necessary to give it its proper anti-imperialist character, that it be led by a national Black united front, in terms of shaping and putting forward its main political demands and representing it at the national and international levels. We must be careful while insuring the presence, politics and leadership of the African – American working class and liberation movement forces, not to narrow the scope and content of the struggle to try and fit a particular ideological perspective. The African American liberation movement forces must help to build a mass movement and work inside of it to try to influence it in a more conscious anti-imperialist direction. There will be multiple responses from progressive forces representing various classes, ideological, political and religious tendencies and social movements. Many will be small groups seeking foundation grants to help in their efforts. They must be careful not to allow competition for funding to create tensions among them. Differences among the progressive forces should be struggled around in a non-antagonistic manner. Instead of abstract and sectarian polemics and arguments at mass meetings, there must be an effort to out-organize opportunist elements who see using this disaster to win favor and reposition themselves with the Democratic and Republican parties or with sections of the corporate class by promoting their image as big contributors to the Katrina Survivors. We must also discourage efforts to create sole dependence on cult-of-the-personality "saviors," political or religious or liberal and paternalistic dominated groups, however well meaning, to solve the problems for the Survivors or to speak on their behalf. This is why it's so important to have Black worker leadership play a major role in helping to organize and promote this struggle in the broad anti-war and African American liberation coalitions. We must make this tragedy and the struggle for Gulf Coast justice a major projection and demand of the anti-war movement and demonstrations, not only in the U.S. but internationally. Survivors must speak at anti-war activities throughout the U.S. and internationally. Likewise, the major African American mobilizations like the Millions More Movement must project this struggle as a major demand of the African American liberation movement. The U.S. Congressional Black Caucus must help make this struggle a centerpiece of the Congress. This human tragedy must be used to organize and mobilize millions of people to challenge the U.S. system of racist national, working class and women's oppression and to build international solidarity against the forces of U.S. and world imperialism who profit from this oppression. The writer is chairperson of Black Workers For Justice and a co-convenor of the Million Worker March Movement in the South.

[Printer-friendly version](#) • [Email this article to a friend](#)

## Blackwater Down: Fresh From Iraq, Private Security Forces Roam the Streets of an American City With Impunity

[Printer-friendly version](#) • [Email this article to a friend](#)

---

**Author:**            **Date Published:**

Jeremy Scahill    09/23/2005

**Link:**

<http://www.democracynow.org/article.pl?sid=05/09/23/1338246>

In this week's cover story in *The Nation*, Democracy Now! correspondent Jeremy Scahill reports on how mercenaries from private security firms like Blackwater USA and BATS are patrolling the streets in New Orleans. [includes rush transcript]

---

In his article in *The Nation*, Jeremy Scahill writes:

"As business leaders and government officials talk openly of changing the demographics of what was one of the most culturally vibrant of America's cities, mercenaries from companies like DynCorp, Intercon, American Security Group, Blackhawk, Wackenhut and an Israeli company called

Instinctive Shooting International (ISI) are fanning out to guard private businesses and homes, as well as government projects and institutions. Within two weeks of the hurricane, the number of private security companies registered in Louisiana jumped from 185 to 235. Some, like Blackwater, are under federal contract. Others have been hired by the wealthy elite"

- **Jeremy Scahill**, Democracy Now! correspondent.  
– Read Jeremy Scahill's article: "[Blackwater Down](#)"

---

#### RUSH TRANSCRIPT

*This transcript is available free of charge. However, donations help us provide closed captioning for the deaf and hard of hearing on our TV broadcast. Thank you for your generous contribution.*

**Donate** – [order@democracynow.org](mailto:order@democracynow.org)

&item\_name=Democracy%20Now&no\_shipping=1&return=http://www.democracynow.org/thankyou.  
@  
[democracynow.org](http://www.democracynow.org)&item\_name=Democracy%20Now&no\_shipping=1&return=http://www.democracynow.org  
\$50, [order@democracynow.org](mailto:order@democracynow.org)&item\_name=Democracy%20Now&no\_shipping=1&return=http://www.democracynow.org  
@  
[democracynow.org](http://www.democracynow.org)&item\_name=Democracy%20Now&no\_shipping=1&return=http://www.democracynow.org  
more...

**AMY GOODMAN:** Jeremy, can you talk about the security scene that is enforcing what Naomi Klein has just described to us?

**JEREMY SCAHILL:** One of the things that I think is really important to point out is that the very forces that Naomi's talking about that are now trying to implement these sort of austerity measures in some ways and then these policies that target the poor. The forces that are implementing these policies are being backed up now by the very forces that we see operating in Iraq and Afghanistan. You have the U.S. military, of course and the National Guard and there's an enormous number – It seems like everyone with a badge and gun is now descending on New Orleans. But you also have these private security companies like Blackwater. We have talked extensively about the role of Blackwater in New Orleans here on Democracy Now!.

I think we have to view this in the context of what we have seen for decades, in U.S. foreign policy and that is the hidden hand of the free market and the corporate elite, and then the iron fist of military force. So, these measures are being backed up by these private security firms. One of the people who's brought in private security companies is a powerful businessman by the name of James Reese. He lives in the wealthy, elite, gated community of Audubon Place. They have the only privately owned street in the city of New Orleans. Well, he brought in a company called Instinctive Shooting International, which is an Israeli firm, and it's actually owned and operated by a guy who lives in New Jersey and has had contracts to train New York City police officers, but he is an Israeli martial arts expert.

This is part of a bigger trend of outsourcing the training of homeland security to Israeli firms. He brought in these Israeli paramilitaries one of whom bragged to me about having been involved with the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. They're standing there in front of the Audubon Place community. I went up and talked to them, and one of the guys said to me, we fight the Palestinians all day every day of our lives, and then tapping on his M-16, he said, most Americans, when they see this, they get scared. It's enough to scare them away. But a lot of Americans, I think, would be shocked to know there are Israeli paramilitaries patrolling the streets of a U.S. city.

But what's more significant is who James Reese is, the man who brought them in. He serves in Mayor Ray Nagin's administration. He also runs a powerful business lobby, and Naomi has talked about him as well. He also was quoted openly in the Wall Street Journal saying he doesn't want

black people or poor people to return to New Orleans. These kinds of sentiments are then being backed up by these military and paramilitary forces. Blackwater is also a very interesting case. They got a lucrative \$400,000 contract from the federal government to provide security for FEMA reconstruction projects.

The head of Blackwater, the founder, is a man named Eric Prince. He is a mega-billionaire from Michigan. His father was a close friend of Gary Bauer. His father helped to found the Family Research Council. His sister, Betsy, is married to Dick DeVos, who is going to be the gubernatorial candidate of the Republican Party in the state of Michigan. He, Dick DeVos, is the son of Richard DeVos, the founder of Amway, the greatest benefactor in the history of the Republican Party, the man who largely funded the Republican revolution in 1994, this Christian fundamentalist corporation, Amway. So he comes from a powerful Michigan family. He has given hundreds of thousands of dollars to the Republican Party. He started this firm Blackwater Security. He himself is a former navy S.E.A.L. He staffs it with people he describes as patriots, although, it's interesting, they have been doing recruiting in Chile, hiring men who were trained under Augusto Pinochet's regime. So these forces are now - there are about two hundred of them - in New Orleans right now. One hundred and sixty-four of them are on a no-bid federal contract with FEMA to provide protection for these sites. This is part of a bigger push by these paramilitary firms to gain contracts here in the United States. For instance, Blackwater seized on the fact that four of their employees were killed in Fallujah in March of 2004. Eric Prince viewed this as a profit moment. So, what he did is hired -

**AMY GOODMAN:** This is that horrible moment -

**JEREMY SCAHILL:** Where we saw the charred bodies. They were hanged, and it resulted in the massive U.S. onslaught against Fallujah that resulted in tens of thousands of people having to flee the city, scores of people being killed, innocent civilians. Of course, now Fallujah has become an international symbol of resistance against the U.S. occupation in Iraq. Well after these four Blackwater mercenaries were killed in Fallujah and then their bodies mutilated and hung from a bridge, Eric Prince hired the Alexander Group which is a powerful Republican lobby firm tied to House Majority Leader, Tom DeLay, and then hired a former C.I.A. Department of - C.I.A., State department official, named Coffer Black, to help promote their cause in Washington. I

In fact, just as the hurricane was hitting, another high-level person from the Pentagon was hired by the Prince Group, the parent company of Blackwater, Joseph Schmitz. He had just resigned as the Inspector General of the Pentagon. He himself was involved with numerous scandals. So he is then brought on board, and then they get this contract. What's interesting is that when I spoke to the Blackwater mercenaries in New Orleans, they said clearly, we're here on a Department of Homeland Security contract.

That was denied by the Department of Homeland Security. One them showed me a badge, said he had been deputized by the Governor of the State of Louisiana. That was then denied. Well, after this report came out, and it went all over the web, and we talked about it on Democracy Now!, the response was tremendous.

Blackwater was then under siege from reporters confronting them with this, and they were forced to admit and so was the federal government, that in fact, Blackwater was on the Department of Homeland Security contract and that, in fact, they did operate with a letter from the Governor of the State of Louisiana, authorizing them to carry loaded weapons. So they're patrolling in unmarked cars around the streets, and they said that they were confronting criminals and stopping looters.

**JUAN GONZALEZ:** You actually interviewed some who claimed to have been involved in shootouts and to have actually shot people?

**JEREMY SCAHILL:** Right, and this is something that really underscores the danger of having these kinds of private security forces on the streets. I was - I walked down to a hotel on the corner of Bourbon and Canal in the French Quarter called the Astor Crown Plaza. It's a five star hotel

operated by one of the wealthiest businesspeople in the state of Louisiana, a man named F. Patrick Quinn III. He is married to Republican State Senator, Julie Quinn. They are a powerful Louisiana Republican family. He is the owner of the largest hotel chain in the state of Louisiana, and is a powerhouse hotel owner in the South, in general.

I was talking to his head of security, a guy named Michael Montgomery. He told me he was with a company based in Alabama called Body Guard and Tactical Security. Actually, Juan, when I was talking to him, he – I said that I was from New York, and he said, “Oh, I was in New York once.” I said, “Oh, yeah?” He said, “I was there for the New York Daily News strike,” and I naively thought somehow that he was an employee, that he had been an employee of the Daily News and I said, “My colleague and friend, Juan Gonzalez, was one of the leaders of that strike. He goes, “Oh, I know Juan Gonzalez. I spiked his car.” I said, what do you mean? He goes, “I was working security there, and we spiked about forty Daily News employees’ cars at La Guardia airport. He said he put sugar in the gas tanks of the car. So that was my introduction to the guy. So we start talking, and then I asked him, well –

**JUAN GONZALEZ:** So you solved the riddle of that big repair bill I had back in 1990.

**JEREMY SCAHILL:** Well, what's interesting, Juan, is you could send it to the BATS Company, Bodyguard And Tactical Security, except they don't exist. I talked to the Secretary of State offices in Alabama and Louisiana. There's no company called BATS registered. They were wearing uniforms that said Bodyguard and Tactical Security. So as I talked to him, this representative from the phantom company hired by a powerful Republican businessman, married to a Republican State Senator, a major donor to the Republican party and the Bush–Cheney campaign, operator of a five star hotel, that's, he said, under consideration for lucrative FEMA contract to house their workers, it's interesting, because the hotel remains pretty much empty. There are no FEMA workers coming in there.

But as I talked to this man who said that he had spiked your car, he told me a very scary story, that I think is the source for potential litigation against these private security firms. Michael Montgomery, the head of BATS, said that on the second night he was in New Orleans he was going to pick up one of Mr. Quinn's associates. They got stopped in the ninth ward. He said they came under fire from a group of people on an overpass that he described as black gang bangers. He said, “At the time I was on the phone with my business partner.” I said, “What did you do then?” He said, “I dropped the phone and opened fire.” I said, “With what kind of weapons?” – “AR-15 assault rifles and Glock 9's.” Fired up at the people he described as black gang bangers on this bridge. I said, “Then what happened? Did you kill them?” He said, “Well, let's just put it this way, I heard a lot of moaning and screaming, and the shooting stopped. Enough said.”

Well then he said that the Army came and responded to the incident, surrounded them and thought that “we were the enemy.” That's how he said it. He said, “I then explained to the Army soldiers that we were security. They didn't care. They didn't file a report. They left.” Five minutes later, Louisiana State Troopers come. They ask what happened. He explains the story to them. They then ask him, “How do we get out of the city.”

So this is the climate of impunity. This man – and as Michael Ratner of the Center for Constitutional Rights points out, how do we know that he was fired upon? How do we know what that incident was? Why wouldn't law enforcement file any kind of report on a shootout in which this guy is openly bragging to having shot up a bunch of people he described as black gang bangers on an overpass?

So if I, as an investigative journalist, cannot track down this company, what if you were one of the people who was shot and wounded by this guy? What if you are the family member of someone who was killed by him and you cannot trace down this company? In fact, the Louisiana agency that governs and licenses private security firms, when I talked to them, they were furious, and they say that they are going to be serving papers on him today to cease and desist operating as a security officer in the State of Louisiana.

What's key is that he was hired by Patrick Quinn. Patrick Quinn is liable for the torts of his employees. So if this man, in fact, did shoot up a bunch of people, Patrick Quinn, this wealthy, powerful businessman is also responsible for it. What's interesting is that Patrick Quinn, bringing in an apparently unlicensed company to provide security, is that while you have shelters teeming with people desperate for work, Patrick Quinn is bringing in Mexican workers from Texas to clean out his hotel, and because of Davis–Bacon, they don't have to pay them – because of the wipe out of the Davis–Bacon Act, they don't have to pay them livable wages. So that's why they don't want to go in and hire, for instance, African–American men and women to come and clean the hotel, because that gives them jobs and keeps them in the community. Instead, you bring in cheap labor from Texas, Mexicans piled on the back of a truck.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Soon after you did your piece, Jeremy, on Blackwater, when you first got down to New Orleans, and we posted it on the website, we started to get letters and email. There's an email petition of Blackwater employees. Describe it.

**JEREMY SCAHILL:** Yeah, the Blackwater employees and families have initiated a petition against me. What's interesting is that they don't take issue with any of the facts that I have reported. They take issue with the fact that I quote one of the Blackwater employees complaining that he's only getting paid \$350 because normally, they get \$1,000 or more –

**AMY GOODMAN:** A day.

**JEREMY SCAHILL:** Right, a day. They say they're just trying to provide for their families and put food on the table. These guys are making \$1,000–plus a day in Iraq and have all sorts of tax breaks. Well, now they're complaining of only getting \$350 a day.

The letter, this petition goes on to talk about how they're like any computer programmer or any auto worker. What's interesting is – I don't know about you, but I have never met an auto worker who makes \$1,000 a day.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Naomi Klein, you can describe how this security scene that Jeremy is describing on the streets of New Orleans fits in to your assessment of purging the poor?

**NAOMI KLEIN:** Well, Amy, I think what it really underscores is the violence of the economic project itself. I mean, what we are talking about is a wrenching process of uprooting hundreds of thousands of people, who are deeply rooted culturally, historically, economically, in the city of New Orleans. New Orleans is a city with a rich radical history, and people aren't going to accept this without a fight. That's why the radical gentrifiers of New Orleans are arriving with their own private armies.

You know, I was talking about this with Jeremy yesterday. It's almost like a kind of yuppy sci-fi version of old-school colonial warfare. It's like the military industrial complex has been replaced by the mercenary condominium complex. Because, what we are talking about here, the characters that Jeremy is describing like Quinn and Reese, these are the key land developers in New Orleans. They are the ones who are hiring these mercenaries to be the muscle behind the projects. So, I think that that is really the message.

But there's something else at play. You hear these names like Blackwater and then on the contracting side, the people getting the job to rebuild New Orleans are Bechtel, Halliburton, Fluor. These are the same companies that are in Iraq and Afghanistan. And they arrived very, very quickly, and the reason they arrived so quickly is because reconstruction now is a standing multi-billion dollar industry, global industry. Whenever there is a war or natural disaster, they move in instantly, often with pre-signed contracts.

You know, we were all in New Orleans, and I think, you know, that city needs a lot of things. It needs pumps. It needs affordable housing. It needs water, and it needs electricity, but I didn't see any shortage of law enforcement. As Jeremy said, you know, everybody with a badge and gun is there. So, the presence of these privatized police forces, I think is more ideological than it is anything else. Ideology is really driving the reconstruction project, and if you listen to what's

being said by groups like the Republican Study Committee, they're very clear about this.

They talk in the language of experimentation. They talk, like Ted said, "Bringing free market ideas to the disaster zone is white hot right now." Treasury secretary, John Snow, said, you know, "This is a time for all sorts of experiments." It's almost like they're putting on lab coats and seeing this area of massive humanitarian devastation as a place where they can vindicate their ideology. Their ideology, you know, suffered a pretty serious blow by the disaster itself.

I mean, there was talk in the first couple of days after the levees broke, that this was going to be for neoconservatism what the fall of the Berlin wall was for communism. That this was itself this incredibly graphic, damning event for the ideology of privatization, and Harry Belafonte, the other night, you know, he had a great quote at the fund-raiser organized by Wynton Marsalis where he said "This was the result of a political authority that subcontracts its responsibility to the private sector and abdicates responsibility altogether," but of course what Jeremy is describing is a radical abdication, further abdication in response to the disaster.

What I saw when I was in New Orleans was really the emergence of an absolutely unmasked corporate military state. Now, I know these sound like buzz words, but I'll give you an example. One of the images that's really stuck in my mind is the conversion of a huge Wal-Mart into a military base in downtown New Orleans. They call it Camp Wal-Mart. So here you have – and we even hear people suggesting that Wal-Mart should replace FEMA at running disaster response.

Another example of this is: There's a building in Baton Rouge, which is the Capital Annex, which is attached to the state legislature. It's where a lot of the government offices are located. Well, after the flood, the state – the Capital Annex building was opened up to many of the business groups that we have been discussing.

So, now, you have in that building, a complete merger of government interests. You have got the Mayor's office working out of that building. You have the state legislature working out of that building, but you also have James Reese's business association. You also have Greater New Orleans, Inc., which is a private lobby group representing everyone from Shell and Chevron to Coca-Cola, in that building. Then you have the Association of Conventions and Tourism, which is another private business group in that building.

Every morning – I was told this by the Assistant Secretary of Economic Development for Louisiana, he said, every morning there's an 8:30 meeting where seven to ten people from government and business sit down and plan the reconstruction of New Orleans. So, it is literally the merger – completely unmasked – of corporate and state interests. There's no distinction. No, they're not inviting the Teacher's Union to be at these meetings. They're not inviting housing rights activists to be at the meetings. You even see this in the repopulation plans for this city.

**JUAN GONZALEZ:** Well, Naomi, if I can just interrupt, because we have to cut this segment off, I'd like to ask Jeremy, any final remarks?

**JEREMY SCAHILL:** Senator Barak Obama has questioned giving this \$400,000 contract to the Blackwater security firm. I think that's a question that people need to be posing to their officials, because Congress could move swiftly to cut the welfare chain off for these private security firms, and it's something concrete that people can do right now as we look at the reconstruction of New Orleans, is to insure that as people do try to come back and rebuild their communities, that they don't have to face down the very paramilitary thugs that are killing people in Iraq.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Jeremy Scahill, Naomi Klein, thanks so much for being with us. This is Democracy Now!

<!--

---

Copyright © 2007 – Democracy Now!, All Rights Reserved

---

--> [www.democracynow.org](http://www.democracynow.org)

[Printer-friendly version](#) • [Email this article to a friend](#)

## Floodlines: Catherine Jones' Blog

[Printer-friendly version](#) • [Email this article to a friend](#)

---

**Author:** Catherine Jones      **Date Published:** 10/25/2005      **Link:** <http://www.floodlines.blogspot.com/>

A post-Katrina blog which I'm cautiously restarting, mostly as a testament to the increasing complexity of life in this city, as well as an homage to the thousands of unsung people who are pouring their hearts and souls into fighting for justice and equality as we rebuild.

**Monday, November 28, 2005**

### Photos

here's a link to the first set of photos i took... pardon the awkwardness with my new digital camera :) <http://www.flickr.com/photos/33985017@N00/sets/1469457/>

*posted by catherine at 8:26 PM*

**Friday, November 25, 2005**

### Sometimes things do go right

Every day for the past few months, I've seen people's stuff out on the street. Every day. Sofas, photographs, laundry, musical instruments; I'm sure you're sick of me talking about it. Sometimes, the stuff is all soggy and moldy and turned inside-out and you know it got flooded out with everything else. Lots of times, though, everything is intact and there's a big "For Rent" sign in front of the house, and I wonder.

A few weeks after I got back, it was a beautiful Saturday and lots of people had started returning to my neighborhood to clean out their houses. In less than an hour, I'd talked to three different people who had all gotten evicted by their landlords. One landlord even told her tenant, an older Black gentleman who'd been living in the place for 15 years, and doing all the renovations for free (!), that she wanted him out so she could make more money.

"That's cold," he told me. "Where does she think I'm gonna go?" He ended up moving to Baton Rouge; he says there's nothing for him here anymore.

We keep hearing stories of people coming back to find all their stuff out on the street with no notice at all. The 73-year-old neighbor of some friends in Treme who went out of town one night and came back to find everything thrown, shattered, into the street. He ended up setting up a camp on the curb outside his house because he had nowhere else to go, and that night the temperatures started dropping. Cold, cold, cold.

Until very recently, there were hardly any tenant protections in New Orleans, and people were reluctant to fight evictions anyway, because they didn't know if it was worth the hassle. One of my neighbors said he wasn't going to fight his landlord in court even if he was in the right, because he couldn't afford a lawyer, and didn't know where to find one, and wasn't sure he'd win anyway, and it still didn't resolve the fact that he needed to find someplace new to live.

Sometimes, though, things do go right.

A few days ago, team of lawyers from the [People's Hurricane Fund](#) and [New Orleans Legal Assistance](#) (NOLAC), as well as other groups, won a major victory that now makes it impossible for Katrina survivors to get evicted without adequate due process. They will be mailed eviction

notices and their trials can't even be scheduled until 45 days later. And FEMA is obligated to provide information to protect survivors.

Wow!

And then, the next day, FEMA, after tremendous public outcry from evacuees in hotels around the country, pushed back its deadline for evacuees to move out of FEMA-subsidized hotel rooms, giving people breathing room to look for a place until January 7.

These are 2 major victories! And they wouldn't have happened without people organizing together to improve their conditions: hurricane survivors and grassroots organizations creating a strong voice to demand real justice and accountability. What potential we have in this moment, I keep thinking.

Let's keep our voices up, y'all: right now it may be all we've got.

*posted by catherine at 12:02 PM*

### **Wednesday, November 23, 2005** **The camera, the love and the recipes**

Yesterday I got back from Washington, DC. It was the first time I'd left Louisiana since I'd returned here, about five days after the storm. I was strangely apprehensive about leaving. I know this storm has made us weird down here: I am used to people cooking huge pots of red beans for strangers on the neutral ground; I am not used to eight different kinds of toothpaste in Walgreens. What would it mean for me, I wondered, to go to a place where people take the subway to work, and don't talk to each other, and then go home, or maybe stop for groceries or a beer on the way? Could I function in a place that wasn't so marked, as we are here, by such deep collective grief?

And of course I had those moments of culture shock: looking at my friend's enormous pile of junk mail in her entryway; being amazed that I could recycle my Arizona tea can at a party; getting snapped at by a shopworker when I pocketed a tiny perfume bottle that I'd really assumed was free. (In New Orleans right now, you can find huge crates of bottled water, and dry food, and hot meals, and cleaning supplies, and toiletries, and blankets and coats and pants and baby clothes and diapers, almost anywhere. I kind of forgot that in the real world, if there's stuff in a big bin, you can't just walk up and take it.)

And of course there were all those reminders that DC is a functioning city: garbage, for example, does not consist of furniture and electrical wire and sheetrock and decaying animals. It can fit into cans that people organize neatly on their curbs. And it doesn't get picked up by tractors and bulldozers, but by garbage trucks. And every single billboard has an advertisement on it. And every single streetlight works, and the mail comes, and there are no 1-800-GOT-JUNK? signs on the telephone poles, and the power lines don't lean down over the sidewalks like nooses. But I knew about all that. I had been expecting it, and it was somehow less weird than I'd thought it would be to see so much intact-ness.

Here's what I wasn't expecting: the love, the camera, or the recipes.

I'd decided to take a train, partially because it was so much cheaper than flying, and partially because I wanted to look out a window for 24 hours and watch the land change. I had all these visions of myself sitting alone on a train gazing out of a window for hours and hours, not doing anything, not thinking anything. I knew it would be exactly what I needed.

Here's what really happened on the train: 20 minutes after pulling out of New Orleans, my whole car started talking. Everybody. About the storm, obviously: it's become a sort of dysfunctional security blanket for us. It gives us definition and purpose. We don't go anywhere without it, tucked, barely visible, into our back pockets.

But not only about the storm, not only about houses, jobs, relatives, schools. Not only about jail

and being evicted and not being able to find the doctor. No, not only about those things. We talked about grandparents, holidays, the games we used to play as kids. We talked about cooking for about three hours. We got into arguments about how long it takes to learn how to make good red beans. A 23-year-old cook was going back to Pittsburgh, where his fiance' and three-week-old son were waiting for him. He'd found a job in Pittsburgh restaurant, where he'd convinced them to let him cook "real New Orleans" food. Now the restaurant is making all kinds of money.

"Yes, indeed," the 90-year-old great-aunt across the aisle kept saying. "Yes, indeed. But I bet it's cold up there."

"Baby, it's cold everywhere," the old man said in front of her, buried in his jacket.

Once people found out I was in medical school, that was it. "Congratulations!" people told me. The seat next to me was never empty again. "But I'm not a doctor yet," I kept saying over and over again. "I don't care, baby!" everybody said as they showed me their rashes, told me about allergies and headaches.

Then I started speaking in Spanish with a construction worker from Panama. He had gotten on the train with paint still drying on his clothes. He was going up to Atlanta to get his truck and his five roommates to come down here to work. After that all the Spanish speakers on the train made a little corner in the lounge car. Deep into the night we drank hot chocolate and talked about food and kids and immigration policy and how to fix cars.

No alone-time on that train. That was ok. Privacy might be nice sometime, but I guess now's the time for us to be together. "This is what's happening to me now," I thought, surrounded on that train by so many beautiful people. "I am so, so grateful." --

The reason I went to DC in the first place was to meet with other national leaders of the American Medical Student Association (AMSA), a joyously progressive and dynamic group of medical students from across the country. I was really apprehensive about the meeting, because I'm so aware, even back in New Orleans, of how much my own capacity for doing work has shrunk in the past few months. I was worried about being around people who can function at a really high level. (And if you think medical students in general are super-high-functioning, try spending some time with these brilliant, committed, activist medical students. Whoa.) Energy is dizzying to me these days. I was worried I wouldn't be able to keep up with folks, and that people might think I was a slacker.

But then I got there, and spent the next few days being crushed in all these enormous hugs the AMSA people are sort of famous for. There is so much love among these folks. And so much commitment to social justice.

And here's what else: AMSA is serious. They are totally committed. We spent a huge part of the time there talking about how to be strategic about ending healthcare disparities based on race. This is an enormous national organization of medical students, taking on institutionalized racism in the healthcare system as a number-one priority! That's huge!

I spent so many moments, maybe while I should have been trying to catch up (!), looking at all these people who are doing so much amazing work, and thinking, "if this is the future of medicine, we might have a chance."

At the end, they gave me a digital camera.

A digital camera!!

I'd been talking to someone about how I usually hate cameras, how I feel like they interfere with memory and how they have the capacity to intrude upon the lives of the people you're filming; but how right now I feel like I really need one. I feel this huge sense of responsibility to communicate to people what's really happening here, and I think I need to be taking pictures. The next thing I knew, Wanda and Rachel had organized with all the other national leaders to collect money... and

they got me a camera!!

Nothing like that kind of gift to keep you accountable. Expect pictures soon.

*posted by catherine at 9:56 AM*

**Wednesday, November 16, 2005**  
**No Losing Us**

Today my mother called me to say that a family friend, a well-respected doctor, had killed himself last night. He had lost most of his patients after the storm and was struggling to rebuild his practice. Everyone knew he was depressed. I played with his kids when I was little: I remember rolling Hot Wheels through their kitchen, grabbing CapriSuns from their overflowing pantry. He hung himself in their house. All those closets we used to play hide-and-seek in.

He hung himself. After my mom told me that I couldn't breathe. I sat down on someone's pale blue steps in the middle of Dauphine Street and I couldn't even cry.

He was a good person and a good doctor. He will be missed.

Fittingly, perhaps, I went to the All-Saints' second-line this afternoon. Irvin Mayfield was playing trumpet and, as expected, lots of tourists and media showed up. At the beginning I had that "where are all the locals?" feeling that still marks so many of our cultural events. Where were we, in the midst of all those TV cameras? There are so many cameras marking our lives these days, it is hard to tell where we are sometimes. It was a little too much for me. I went into the St Louis No.1 and walked alone among the graves, the evening sun turning all those decaying tombstones silver.

Then the music started and I walked back out onto Basin Street and then I could see us. There we were! Suddenly I felt so silly: there is no losing us, even amongst all these strangers.

There is no losing us.

The sun hung low over the empty Iberville projects and the St Louis No.1, and the music started, and all the New Orleans people started dancing like we have for centuries. The way we move our feet, even the streets know it's us.

Here are my people: Mostly, we are not the ones with video cameras. We are not wearing Mardi Gras beads. We are not the ones not dancing. We do not say to each other, "Irvin Mayfield is a really good trumpeter." We do not say, "Such a shame, all the devastation," or "Martha will be so sorry she missed this."

Here are my people: the ones who did not have time to change after work. The ones who have come to the second-line in coveralls and scrubs, and chambermaids' dresses and hardhats, and Burger King T-shirts and security-guards' uniforms and cook's pants and even some people in all-white haz-mat suits. The ones who are back, the ones who never left, the ones who are here. The mothers carrying babies and groceries. The friends embracing wildly on corners saying, "how'd y'all make out?"

This is what we say to each other:

"I didn't get any water but my mama, she got about six feet of water."

"Girl, I never thought I'd see you here!! I thought y'all went to Dallas!"

"Everybody's over by my sister's house and she about to kill us all."

"I lost my house and my job but I'm ok. How you doing?"

"Baby, this is my first second line since the storm. I'm all right!"

Here are my people: the ones shivering on this first cold day; we are the ones who bundle up when it becomes 54 degrees out. We are the ones drinking '40's out of paper bags, the ones who know all the words to all the songs, the ones who know how to dance and walk at the same time. The old people pushing walkers and still keeping time!

Did I say there is no losing us? Even amongst all those strangers, all those cameras, all that water? Even amid all that distance? Even though we have been scattered to the four corners of this huge planet, even though I have seen so many of you for the last time? Did I say there is no losing us? Even with everybody's baby pictures decaying on the neutral ground, and all our refrigerators standing out on the curb with the magnets still on them, and all the trophies and trumpets and graduation suits warped and stiff and moldy, piled on sidewalks for miles and miles and miles?

Did I say there is no losing us? Did I say it?

Look around you. Listen. Here we are. We are everywhere. We are even in the air we breathe.

*posted by catherine at 5:47 PM*

**Monday, November 14, 2005**

**How we hold each other, and how we don't**

I had another amnesia moment today, in the Walgreens on Decatur Street. I didn't realize until I got inside that it was the first time since the storm that I'd been inside a fully-stocked chain store, and I suddenly had no idea why I was there. For a long time all I could do was wander down the aisles, gazing at the neat rows of deodorants and Tylenol. Finally the manager came up to me and asked me if I was ok. I told him it was the first time I'd been in a store so well organized; I was feeling mystified and trying to remember why I'd gone in.

His face softened. "Lotsa people are having that," he said, and put his hand on my shoulder. "You just let me know what you need, baby. I'm here for you." As soon as he said that I remembered: barrettes and a Sharpie marker. I started to feel a little normal again.

Right after Walgreens I went to the A&P on Royal, where some shelves are so bare you can see the rust that happened even before the hurricane. Yellow collard greens wilt onto the produce shelves; there isn't any lettuce. "This is more like it," I thought, before I even realized it.

It seems like everywhere I go, everyone's talking about the cops. Since the time I got pulled over a few days ago, I have been stopped by police two more times. Once they said they were checking the licenses of people who were driving around "in this neighborhood" and once a sheriff waved me over to the side of the road because he said I was speeding. Probably I was. Again, I didn't get a ticket. He even said something like, "I wouldn't give a ticket to a person like you."

Wow. A person like me? What on earth does this sheriff know about me, besides what I look like?

Two days before that, my friend Greg, who is Black, was arrested while he was watching the police arrest someone else, next door to the clinic in Algiers. They never told him what he was being charged with, and they took hold of his shirt collar and banged his head against the windshield of the car, again and again.

We have a patient named Mr Ross who comes to the Central City clinic every day we're there, so we can check his blood pressure, and so he can remind me to call FEMA, and so he can tell us stories of what Central City was like when he was growing up here, back in the '40s. His mother owned lots of apartment buildings in the neighborhood, and one day we were sitting on the corner and he pointed to a building a few blocks away that now has an entire wall missing, desks and bedroom sets still arranged for the whole world to see. "If my mama was alive," he said, "I would have found me some tools already, and fixed that whole place up for her. She liked to keep her places nice."

"Your pressure's amazing!" we say, every single time he comes. But he still comes every day. "Y'all are basically the only people I have to talk to anymore," he told me the other day.

Yesterday my friend Joanna was talking about how people just come up to her on the street and start talking. So many people's networks are completely disrupted, especially people who are poor. One of her neighbors said she was the first person he'd talked to in three days. He told her everything. I wonder if this is what it's like when you get older, when all your friends die and you

don't have the desire or energy to build new relationships. Will we become a city of mourners, sitting alone on stoops watching other people's lives parade by? All these broken hearts we wear on our sleeves.

*posted by catherine at 11:04 AM*

**Wednesday, November 09, 2005**

**This is real, and a step toward justice**

I keep having conversations with people about how "surreal" everything is right now. On so many levels, it's true: we're running a free integrative medicine clinic out of a mosque; we set up other clinics in churches and parking lots and baseball diamonds; military police patrol the streets in Humvees; people have dinner in fancy restaurants like nothing ever happened. There are so many day spas open uptown! Huge parts of the 7th Ward still don't have power. My block is still lined with drowned cars and upside-down refrigerators. I spent a large part of this afternoon lugging huge vessels of water to my house so we could flush toilets; a house in my parents' neighborhood has a sign out front that says, "Cox! When can we get our cable back?" The animal rescue people are still out in full force. I really wonder what they do all day.

But I'm not sure about the word "surreal." On some level it seems like too much luxury for us to declare that ultimately this is anything but real.

Today I gave a ride to a man who had been walking all day. He walked from the Greyhound station all the way to his house in the Lower 9th ward; he looked at his house for 20 minutes, couldn't take it anymore, and walked back. Water had gotten up to the roof. The military had kicked in his front door and everything was all over the place. So many people talk about how it's one thing to come to the knowledge from far away that you've lost everything; to see it before your eyes is another thing entirely. He won't come back, he says. He will get a job in Baker, Louisiana (right outside Baton Rouge); his wife and 12-year-old daughter are in Texas, where they will stay so his daughter can finish out the school year. He only wishes he could be with them at the end of a long day. His daughter is growing up too fast.

Yesterday we went to the March on Gretna, which was organized in protest of the time during the hurricane when hundreds of weary African-American people tried to cross the Mississippi River Bridge to safety and were turned away by armed police with guard dogs. The police shot at the people and sent them back to New Orleans, which was flooding, and which had no food or water or electricity or medical care. People had to go back to the Convention Center, where they made orderly stacks of bodies in corners and on sidewalks as the people died.

Over 100 people crossed the bridge yesterday, but still I felt surrounded by ghosts. I have never been more conscious of the people who weren't there: all these families scattered to the winds, picking up new lives in Texas and Wyoming and Ohio. It seemed fitting to me that the most beautiful aspects of this march were the drivers in the opposing lanes of traffic: a driver of an 18-wheeler who couldn't stop honking, who kept yelling over and over, "I feel y'all, man! I just feel y'all!" The backs of pickup trucks full of work crews, shouting and cheering, their fists up in the air.

*posted by catherine at 9:16 PM*

**Friday, November 04, 2005:**

**Littering, and what we remember**

Yesterday at the clinic I had a patient who couldn't remember the name of the street he used to live on. The Times-Picayune had a big story in the Living section today about short-term memory loss. I find myself gazing at people and wondering where I've met them before. The other day, a woman drove by the clinic and said, "I can't find the Winn-Dixie anymore! I've been living in this neighborhood my whole life, and I don't even know where the grocery store is."

I remember one of my first patients ever since the storm, a woman from Chalmette who spent twelve days tied to a steeple. She says the only way she could survive was by forgetting many, many of those days. "I lost nine days of my life," she told me. "That's why I'm here now."

What does it mean that so many of us have forgotten some of the things that used to define our world; things like numbers and names and addresses, places, people? What has taken up that space in our minds? How, and why, and what, must we remember now, in order to keep surviving?

I dressed up as fire for Halloween and it was all right. People danced on Frenchmen Street until about one-thirty in the morning, when the National Guard actually tried to enforce a Last Call in this 24-hour city. On the way home from the street party, our friend L. got stopped by the police because some paper fragments of her costume fell onto the sidewalk. They were wearing pig noses and she thought they were joking. They ended up arresting her for littering and she spent that night and most of the next day in jail.

Littering! On my block there are twelve refrigerators, with contents that have been rotting since August. There are bales of electrical wire; there are heaps of sofa cushions, moldy mattresses, soggy shirts and trousers. There are warped bookshelves, their contents spilling out into the street. There are entire trees, shattered and dusty. There are broken chairs rattling on the curb like kindling. There are the bones of animals. How can anyone be arrested for littering here, in this whole desert city full of garbage?

Our other friend, M., spent most of the night trying to figure out how to get L. out of jail, a disaster even when New Orleans is functioning normally, but in this case it involved even extra questions, like, Where is jail these days? She asked about 8 cops and no one knew, since a few days ago they'd closed down the Greyhound station they had been using as a makeshift jail. After over an hour of searching, she found what they're using as jail these days, a garage in the Orleans Parish Criminal Sheriff's building. Court is a cubicle in the garage, where thirty male prisoners, shackled at the ankles, sat on the floor awaiting their hearings. No one had seen a lawyer. Our friend L didn't have any water for almost 24 hours since she'd been in jail, even though in the court next to the judge there was a crate of Ozarka bottles. L asked the judge for one but the judge said, "Those aren't for you. Those are for the staff."

Our friend M says this experience brought home to her how the prison system doesn't only lock up its inmates, but all their loved ones too. She felt like she couldn't leave the jail at all, because maybe that would be the time they'd decide to let L out, or give out some tiny bit of information. She, too, felt captive. All that time she spent waiting for L to get out, she couldn't read or talk on the phone or do anything. She slept and looked around a lot. All she wanted was a hot shower and some food that wasn't peanuts.

Today the thing about this Halloween arrest story that sticks with me is its ordinariness. It is not abnormal in New Orleans, especially for people who are poor or people of color, to be picked up off the street at the drop of a hat. Parents are used to the idea that children may not come home one day. Even in privileged circles, jail is seen as a weird inevitability: Tulane Medical School gives out the name and number of a lawyer to help out any students who may run awry of the law.

Even still, though, I don't know if I can imagine rich white people getting arrested in this city for littering. (L is Mexican). Another friend talks about how anytime she is in the car with her African-American boyfriend after dark, they get stopped by police. There has only been one night since the hurricane where they didn't get stopped.

Today I made an illegal left turn off Rampart onto Esplanade. I've been doing it every day since the storm. Today, a cop pulled me over and explained that I'd made an illegal left turn. When he was going through my license and registration, he found out that my license plate was also expired, my insurance card was out-of-date, my registration was expired, and I didn't have a brake tag. He said he'd only cite me for the brake tag, and if I got a new one before my court date (which is not until January!), the charge would probably be dropped. When he gave me the ticket he'd written, he said, "I made your court date a long while away. That way you'll have plenty of

time to get your brake tag taken care of. I know things here hard right now, with the hurricane and everything."

*posted by catherine at 6:46 PM*

## About Me

**Name:** catherine

I am a New Orleanian first and foremost. I am a medical student; I am madly in love with my family and friends and the young children and glorious elders in my life; I go on long runs and short road trips and glittery costumed escapades... but really, the love of my life is New Orleans. I am a daughter and granddaughter of this city: this land is the blood in my veins. I am dedicated to struggling inside and outside New Orleans for racial and economic justice, and high-quality accessible healthcare, and the weaving back together of fractured communities, and the right of all people to be home.

## Monday, October 31, 2005: "Natural Disasters Don't Discriminate"?

Today is Halloween, which means that in addition to trucks full of National Guard and contractors, the streets are also teeming with superheroes on bikes and winged angels driving pickup trucks. Tonight I hope we are all out in force, costumed freaks dancing our demons away.

The other day I spent five hours at the FEMA station with Yogi, an 82-year-old African-American man who lives across the street from the clinic. We were both there to find out what happened to our checks, which were supposed to have been mailed out weeks ago. I know so many rich white folks who got their checks back in September. Some even got two. Neither Yogi nor his son have gotten anything yet; meanwhile they don't have a phone and depend on the Red Cross and neighbors for some of their meals. And they are better off than most in the neighborhood.

The FEMA office is a cryptic maze of desks and folding chairs, and depending on what you're there for, they assign you to a different row of folding chairs. Every time someone gets up to go see a caseworker, everyone else in the chairs behind them has to get up and move one spot closer to the top of the line. Every time we had to move, all the old folks had to heave up their tired bodies, gather possessions, maneuver walking sticks, readjust to the new seat. We are all used to moving too much these days. From three seats back I could hear Yogi's rusty bones creaking like old doors.

There's a big poster on the wall there that says, "Natural disasters don't discriminate." I spent a good part of my five hours wondering who put that poster there, and why. Do they want us to scrape our minds for any trace of logic to convince us that we are all equal here, that the people who waded through floodwaters, and lost relatives, and waited under a scorching sun for days with no food and water, and who are even now being prohibited from seeing their houses, and who are even now being stopped by police and arrested with a force and exuberance greater than I have ever seen before, even here, are not overwhelmingly poor and Black? And that so much of this, and the racism that allows it to exist, is not actually the result of disaster but the cause of it?

After being herded around the FEMA office for so long, Yogi felt like he needed to thank me for taking him on this errand. He and his son cooked an unfathomably huge meal for me at their house. They're worried that the hippie cooks at the clinic don't know how to cook mustard greens properly, so they made me bring my leftovers back to everyone else. They put an enormous amount of greens and cornbread and rice and potato salad into a plastic Betty Boop bowl, covered it in foil, and told me to make sure everyone got a taste of what "real greens" are like.

After work on Saturday I ran, in my work clothes, to a street parade with the Box Of Wine Krewe. It started in the Treme and ran to MiMi's in the Marigny. The Soul Rebels brass band played, improvising lyrics to traditional songs so the refrains now said, "Where's my FEMA check?" I was one of the only ones not in costume, among a horde of pirates, dominatrixes, and various abstract

renditions of hurricane loss. Along the route I picked up branches and streamers and scraps of yellow Caution tape so that by the end of the evening I was a tree/majorette. I felt more at home then than I ever would have if I'd stayed in my unadorned hoodie. Being in costume is really really important in New Orleans. By the end of the evening, the dominatrixes were whipping the National Guard's humvees and all these individual Guard people kept coming over to us and saying things like, "Man, we really wish we could come party with y'all.. maybe after our shift? how long y'all gonna be out here for?"

Then I went to see the Rebirth Brass Band play at Tipitinas. I've been seeing Rebirth play since I was about thirteen and it's been a while since I was blown away by one of their shows. But that night it was beautiful. The majority of the crowd was local Black folks; it was the first time since I've been back in New Orleans where I've been around so many Black folks just hanging out. I mean, hundreds of people, singing along to all the songs. Leaning over the balconies, arms outstretched. Dancing on chairs and tables, pushing over the stage and dancing on speakers, so many people dancing on the stage you couldn't tell who was the band and who wasn't. It was one of my most welcome-home moments yet, all these hundreds of sweaty people in this familiar space, each and every one of us making that music.

The next morning I took a long walk through the Bywater, where there are still streets that have things like, "Mom bad legs please help now" spray-painted on them. People walking dogs and watering flowers amidst all these piles of sticks that used to be someone's house. There's one silver warehouse there that I used to love, shiny in its decay. Now strips of the corrugated metal have been peeled away and you can see straight through it, all the way to the Mississippi River Bridge, silent and gleaming like church towers in the white morning.

*posted by catherine at 10:09 AM*

#### **Thursday, October 27, 2005: Axes**

At dinner tonight we talked about axes. What it means to grow up thinking you need to have an axe in the house in case you need to chop your way out the roof one day. I don't know if that ever happened in my childhood, even though in New Orleans we always lived inside the shadow of some looming storm. Growing up white and middle class, I think I always had an assumption that even if a major disaster hit, we'd somehow be safe. That if they sent out the lifeboats, we'd be first to get on. Crazy how that kind of reality can get ingrained in your brain, even at six; how it colors the world decades later, when you find out it's true.

Today we set up a little shot station and first aid center at the Israelite Baptist church and everyone we saw said they wouldn't have gone anywhere to get a shot if they hadn't been walking right by on the way home from work. I'm glad to be there, even if there's not a whole whole lot we can do for people yet.

I'm going to a potluck tonight. I'm bringing cereal and soy milk. Usually that wouldn't cut it at a potluck, but tonight I think it'll be ok. No grocery stores are open past six, and everyone's contributing whatever they've got in their measly fridges. So nice to have anything, even if it's Cheerios, to bring to a party.

Walked home tonight thru the French Quarter after it had gotten dark. It's full of men, now, different than usual. These guys are from places like Ohio and Jersey; they're cops and firefighters and Army Corps of Engineers people. Mainly white. They're making lots more money in our city than most folks from New Orleans ever thought of making. These men don't whistle and catcall from across the street, they walk over from the well-lit bars and try to start drunken conversations. I feel eerie on a whole 'nother level, like I'm a stranger in a new place, learning the codes of how to protect myself all over again.

And meanwhile there are all these other workers here, the ones who don't unwind on Bourbon Street after a long day. Most evenings some of us have been going to different hotels and work sites where large numbers of mainly Latino workers are staying, sometimes imprisoned by their

bosses. Sometimes we have to set up our clinic a few blocks away, because the bosses won't allow medical workers into the areas where the workers are. People sneak off in the dark to get medical care; they return to the barely-lit hotels two by two with herbs and aspirin. They sleep four or five hours; the next day they've started working again long before sunrise.

*posted by catherine at 8:57 PM*

### **Wednesday, October 26, 2005: new ghosts**

Every day there are new ghosts.

Yesterday i spent the afternoon walking around my old neighborhood, almost crying. Little things would make me almost cry: a violin in a yard, encased in mold. My neighbor's studio window, with "New Orleans, I love you so much!" spray-painted across it. I don't know if he's back, or if he's coming back, ever. I feel ok about crying on the street these days, but yesterday, every time i was about to give in and let myself do it, i'd run into an old neighbor and we'd have the How'd Y'all Make Out conversation. Did you leave, where'd you go, how's your family, how's your place, where are you staying now, listen to the crazy thing I did the other day. These days, I have that conversation so many times, it's almost mundane. Lost the house, job's in Lafayette but the kids are in school in Baton Rouge, so-and-so moved to Dallas, forever. I always brace myself for the news. No one ever says, "I'm great! How are you doing?" Weeks ago our reunions were joyous, screaming affairs in the middle of streets. We were so glad to see each other alive. The National Guard and the Animal Rescue workers would gaze at us in awe as we'd jump into each other's arms from all the way down the block. Now the quantity of stories has become overwhelming. Sometimes I want to just walk on by and not listen. But for some reason I always stop.

Today we went to the Israelite Baptist Church in Central City to talk about setting up a free clinic there a couple of days a week. Reverend Larry was amazing; he brightened my whole day. The church does a whole host of programs, everything from an exercise ministry to a drug program called "Sons of Blood and Thunder." For the past three Sundays they've had services without electricity, and every week over 100 people showed up. Rev. Larry explained to us that everything they do, they do it for the community, whether people are religious or not. No one has to be a part of the church to participate in the activities the church does. They've even set up a nonprofit to do things like distribute condoms and talk to teenagers about sex and drugs, since it's hard to do those kinds of things through the church itself. We said we'd be happy to do the clinic in whatever space they had available, that we were good at making do, having set up clinics in parking lots and baseball diamonds, and Rev. Larry said, "Y'all are my kinda people." I think I'm still smiling from when he said that.

After we left, Molly said. "I'd always heard organizing in New Orleans is about relationships, and I think I'm starting to see how that works." It's been really amazing to see other people here willing and ready to learn about how organizing works here, people being conscious that there is a long and rich history of amazing work here. I feel like a big part of my job is to help translate that reality to people, help people slow down and listen and be respectful of the place they've come to. Every time I get in the car with folks from out of town, I hear myself saying things like, "this didn't always used to be a Wal-Mart. This was the St Thomas housing project until just a few years ago, and there was hella organizing going on back here." People need to know that if they are coming to rebuild my city.

Thinking a lot about what it means for me to be "rebuilding" this city as a healthcare worker and someone committed to racial and social justice. I think I'm coming to an understanding of how I need to balance actually being out there and doing work, because there's always more people needing healthcare than there are ways to fill that need-- even here! in this city where so many people still aren't around--and also being conscious and strategic about what kind of healthcare there needs to be. Feeling excited about building relationships with grassroots anti-racist healthcare providers in the city, like the St Thomas Health Clinic; feeling like this is a time where anything is possible and where healthcare itself can be an amazing force in the struggle for racial

justice in this broken city.

Driving home tonight I felt like I was in the middle of a checkerboard. The Quarter lit up like Disneyworld; poor black neighborhoods a few blocks over so dark I couldn't even see the street in front of me. The whole city like that: housing projects so desolate you can hear the doors, loose from their hinges, creaking in the breeze like songs. Who's here, who's not. Who gets to come home, who doesn't. At night I feel us all here, lost together, wandering through that dark.

*posted by catherine at 10:38 PM*

[View my complete profile](#)

[Printer-friendly version](#) • [Email this article to a friend](#)

## Looking for Common Ground

[Printer-friendly version](#) • [Email this article to a friend](#)

---

**Organization:**

[New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice](#)

**Author:**

David Bacon

**Date Published:**

11/27/2005

**Link:**

<http://www.colorlines.com/article.php?ID=19>

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.

[Printer-friendly version](#) • [Email this article to a friend](#)

## A 20-Point Plan to Destroy Black New Orleans

[Printer-friendly version](#) • [Email this article to a friend](#)

---

<b>Organization:</b> SF Bayview	<b>Author:</b> Robert D. Bullard	<b>Date Published:</b> 02/01/2006
------------------------------------	-------------------------------------	--------------------------------------

As reconstruction and rebuilding move forward in New Orleans and the Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama Gulf Coast region, it is clear that the lethargic and inept emergency response after Hurricane Katrina was a disaster that overshadowed the deadly storm itself. Yet, there is a "second disaster" in the making – driven by racism, classism, elitism, paternalism and

old-fashioned greed.

The following "Twenty-Point Plan to Destroy Black New Orleans" is based on trends and observations made over the past three months. Hopefully, the good people of New Orleans, Louisiana, the Gulf Coast and the United States will not allow this plan to go forward – and instead adopt a principled plan and approach to rebuilding and bringing back New Orleans that is respectful of all of its citizens.

**1. Selectively hand out FEMA grants.** The Federal Emergency Management Agency is being consistent in the slow response in getting aid to Katrina survivors. FEMA's grant assistance program favors middle-income households. Make it difficult for low-income and Black Katrina survivors to access government assistance. Direct the bulk of the grant assistance to middle-income white storm victims. The Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights and several other legal groups have sued FEMA over its response and handling of aid to storm victims. FEMA has referred more than 2 million people, many of them with low incomes, to the Small Business Administration to get the loans.

**2. Systematically deny the poor and Blacks SSA loans.** Screen out poor and deny Black households disaster loans. The New York Times editorial summed up this problem: "The Poor Need Not Apply." The Small Business Administration has processed only a third of the 276,000 home loan applications it has received. However, the SBA has rejected 82 percent of the applications it received, a higher percentage than in most previous disasters. Well-off neighborhoods like Lakeview have received 47 percent of the loan approvals, while poverty-stricken neighborhoods have gotten 7 percent. Middle-class Black neighborhoods in the eastern part of the city have lower loan rates.

**3. Award insurance claims using the "wind or water" trap.** Because of the enormity of the damage in the wake of Katrina, insurance companies will categorize a lot of legitimate wind claims as flood- or water-related. The "wind or water" problem will hit Black storm victims hardest because they are likely to have their insurance with small companies – since the major firms "redlined" many Black neighborhoods. Most rebuilding funds after disasters come from private insurance – not the government.

**4. Redline Black insurance policyholders.** Numerous studies show that African Americans are more likely than whites to receive insufficient insurance settlement amounts. Insurance firms target Black policyholders for low and inadequate insurance settlements based on majority Black zip codes to subsidize fair settlements made to white policyholders. If Black homeowners and business owners expect to recover from Katrina, then they must receive full and just insurance settlements. FEMA and the SBA cannot be counted on to rebuild Black communities.

**5. Use "green building" and flood-proofing codes to restrict redevelopment.** Requiring rebuilding plans to conform to "green building" materials and new flood-proofing codes can price many low- and moderate-income homeowners and small business owners out of the market. This will hit Black homeowners and Black business owners especially hard since they generally have lower incomes and lower wealth.

**6. Apply discriminatory environmental clean-up standards.** Failure to apply uniform clean-up standards can kill off Black neighborhoods. Use of full-scale cleanup of white neighborhoods to residential standards, while allowing no cleanup or partial cleanup – industrial standards – of Black residential neighborhoods. Failure to clean up Black residential areas can act as a disincentive for redevelopment. It could also make people sick. Use the argument that Black neighborhoods were already highly polluted with background contamination, or "hot spots," exceeding EPA safe levels pre-Katrina and thus need not be cleaned to more rigorous residential standards.

**7. Sacrifice "low-lying" Black neighborhoods in the name of saving the wetlands and environmental restoration.** Allow Black neighborhoods like the Lower Ninth Ward and New Orleans East to be "yielded back to the swamp" while allowing similar low-lying white areas to be

rebuilt and redeveloped. This is a form of "ethnic cleansing" that was not possible before Katrina. Instead of emphasizing equitable rebuilding, uniform clean-up standards, equal protection and environmental justice for African American communities, public officials should send mixed signals for rebuilding vulnerable "low-lying" Black neighborhoods.

**8. Promote a smaller, more upscale and "whiter" New Orleans.** Concentrating on getting less-damaged neighborhoods up and running could translate into a smaller, more upscale and whiter New Orleans and a dramatically down-sized Black community. Clearly, shrinking New Orleans neighborhoods disproportionately shrinks Black votes, Black political power and Black wealth.

**9. Revise land use and zoning ordinances to exclude.** Katrina can be used to change land use and zoning codes to "zone against" undesirable land uses that were not politically possible before the storm. Also, "expulsive" zoning can be used to push out certain land uses and certain people.

**10. Phased rebuilding and restoration scheme that concentrates on the "high ground."** New Orleans officials are being advised to concentrate rebuilding on the areas that remained high and dry after Katrina. These areas are disproportionately white and affluent. This scenario builds on pre-existing inequities and "white privilege" and ensures future inequities and "white privilege." By the time rebuilding gets around to Black "low-lying" areas, there are not likely to be any rebuilding funds left. This is the "oops, we are out of funds" scenario.

**11. Apply eminent domain as a Black land grab.** Give Katrina evacuees one year to return before the city is allowed to legally "take" their property through eminent domain. Clearly, it will take much longer than a year for most New Orleanians to return home. This proposal could turn into a giant land grab of Black property and loss of Black wealth they have invested in their homes and businesses.

**12. No financial assistance for evacuees to return.** Thousands of Katrina evacuees were shipped to more than three dozen states with no provisions for return – equivalent to a "one-way" ticket. Many Katrina evacuees are running short of funds. No money translates into no return to their homes and neighborhoods. Promote the "right to return" without committing adequate resources to assist evacuees to return.

**13. Keep evacuees away from New Orleans jobs.** The nation's unemployment rate was 5 percent in November 2005. The November 2005 jobless rate for Katrina returnees was 12.5 percent, while 27.8 percent of evacuees living elsewhere were unemployed. However, the Black jobless rate was 47 percent in November compared with 13 percent for whites who have not gone back.

Katrina evacuees who have made it back to their home region have much lower levels of joblessness. This is especially important for African Americans whose joblessness rate fell over 30 percentage points for returnees. The problem is that the vast majority of Black Katrina evacuees have not returned to their home region. Only 21 percent of Black evacuees have returned compared with 48 percent of whites.

**14. Fail to enforce fair housing laws.** Allow housing discrimination against Blacks to run rampant. Katrina created a housing shortage and opened a floodgate of discrimination against Black homeowners and renters. In December 2005, the National Fair Housing Alliance found high rates of housing discrimination against African-Americans displaced by Hurricane Katrina. In 66 percent of the tests conducted by the NFHA, 43 of 65 instances, whites were favored over African-Americans.

**15. No commitment to rebuild and replace low-income public housing.** Shortly after Katrina struck, even the secretary of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development spoke of not rebuilding all of the public housing lost during the storm. The HUD secretary's statement is a powerful signal to New Orleans' poor that public housing may not be around for them to return to.

**16. Downplay the Black cultural heritage of New Orleans.** Promote rebuilding and the vision of

a "new" New Orleans as if the rich Black culture did not matter or act as if it can be replaced or replicated in a "theme park" type redevelopment scenario. Developers should capture and market the "Black essence" of New Orleans without including Black people.

**17. Treatment of mixed-income housing as superior to all-Black neighborhoods.** First, there is nothing inherently inferior about an "all-Black" neighborhood – or an all-Black anything for that matter. Black New Orleanians who chose to live in neighborhoods that happened to be all-Black – whites have always had the right to move in or move out of these neighborhoods – should not be forced to have their neighborhoods rebuilt as "integrated" or "multicultural" neighborhoods. Also, "mixed-income" housing, to many Blacks, conjures up the idea of 10 percent of the fair market housing units set aside for them. Many Blacks are battle-weary of competing for that 10 percent. New Orleans was 68 percent Black before Katrina – and most Black folks were comfortable with that.

**18. Allow "oversight" (overseer) board to manage Katrina funds that flow to New Orleans.** Take away "home rule," since the billions of Katrina redevelopment dollars that will flow to New Orleans is too much money for a majority Slack city council and a Black mayor to oversee or manage. More important, the oversight board will need to represent "big-money" interests – real estate, developers, banking, insurance, hotels, law firms, tourist industry etc. – well beyond the purview of a democratically elected city government to ensure that the vision of the "new" New Orleans, "smaller and more upscale," gets implemented.

**19. Delay rebuilding and construction of New Orleans schools.** The longer the New Orleans schools stay closed, the longer the families with children will stay away. Schools are a major predictor of racial polarization. Before Katrina, over 125,000 New Orleans children were attending schools in the city. Blacks made up 93 percent of New Orleans schools. Evacuated children are enrolled in school districts from Arizona to Pennsylvania. Three months after the storm, only one of the New Orleans' 116 schools was open.

**20. Hold elections without appropriate Voting Rights Act safeguards.** Almost 300,000 registered voters left New Orleans after Katrina. The powerful storm damaged or destroyed 300 of the 442 polling places. Holding city elections pose major challenges regarding registration, absentee ballots, city workers, polling places and identification for displaced New Orleanians. 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. More than three months after Katrina struck, 80 percent of New Orleans voters have not made their way back to the city, including most African Americans, who comprised a two-thirds majority of the population before the storm.

Most of the estimated 60,000 to 100,000 New Orleans residents who have made it back are white and middle class, changing the racial and political complexion of the city. Holding elections while the vast majority of New Orleans voters are displaced outside of their home district and even their home state is unprecedented in the history of the United States, but it also raises racial justice and human rights questions.

*Robert D. Bullard is the director of the Environmental Justice Resource Center at Clark Atlanta University.*

[Printer-friendly version](#) • [Email this article to a friend](#)

## Bush, lies and videotape

[Printer-friendly version](#) • [Email this article to a friend](#)

---

**Organization:**    **Author:**    **Date Published:**

People's Institute for Survival and Beyond C.C. Campbell-Rock 03/08/2006

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.

The poster says, "If living were Critics of the administration say finger—a thing that money could buy, 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."



The teeth of an excavator shovel moves in on a family photograph still hanging on the wall of a home being demolished in New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward.

Photo: Alex Brandon. AP

"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 aftermath fraught with racism

Ron Chisom, a native New Orleansian, 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 Revis 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 passing of his mother, Evelyn Theresa Comeaux, 84. "Mama died from influenza. They took her out in a helicopter and we couldn't find her; 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](http://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 I. 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](http://www.KatrinaAction.org) and [www.ColorofChange.org](http://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](mailto:campbellrock@sfbayview.com)

[Printer-friendly version](#) • [Email this article to a friend](#)

## Guantanamo on the Mississippi

[Printer-friendly version](#) • [Email this article to a friend](#)

---

### Organization:

[Safe Streets/Strong Communities](#)

### Author:

Jordan Flaherty

### Date Published:

03/11/2006

### Link:

<http://www.leftturn.org/?q=node/604>

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.ffflic.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/>

[Printer-friendly version](#) • [Email this article to a friend](#)

## In the Wake of the Storm: Environment, Disaster, and Race After Katrina

[Printer-friendly version](#) • [Email this article to a friend](#)

---

### Organization:

[Russell Sage Foundation](#)

### Author:

Manuel Pastor, Robert D. Bullard, James K. Boyce, Alice Fothergill, Rachel Morello-Frosch and Beverly Wright

### Date Published:

05/01/2006

### Link:

<http://www.russellsage.org/news/katrinabulletin2>

---

### Attachment

### Size

[wake\\_of\\_the\\_storm.pdf](#)

612.31 KB

[Printer-friendly version](#) • [Email this article to a friend](#)

## And Injustice for All: Workers' Lives in the Reconstruction of New Orleans

[Printer-friendly version](#) • [Email this article to a friend](#)

---

### Organization:

[Advancement Project](#)

### Author:

Judith Browne-Dianis (Advancement Project,), Jennifer Lai (Advancement Project), Marielena Hincapie (National Immigration Law Center), and Saket Soni (New Orleans Worker Justice Coalition/Advancement Project)

### Date Published:

07/01/2006

### Link:

<http://www.advancementproject.org/publications/hurricane-katrina.php>

Click [here](#) to order hard copy or download PDF from Advancement project. In new window, click report title to begin download.

Attachment	Size
<a href="#">workersreport.pdf</a>	0 bytes

[Printer-friendly version](#) • [Email this article to a friend](#)

## Book: "Katrina's Legacy: White Racism and Black Reconstruction in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast"

[Printer-friendly version](#) • [Email this article to a friend](#)

**Author:** Eric Mann    **Date Published:** 08/03/2006    **Link:** <http://frontlinespress.com/>

"Buy this book and study it well. Eric Mann was my first teacher in the black freedom movement; he taught me door-to-door canvassing and basic organizing. And then he introduced me to SNCC. Eric is still teaching and organizing a new generation, and setting the pace as we build up our strength for the Battle of New Orleans."

— **Komozi Woodard**, author of *A Nation within a Nation: Amiri Baraka and Black Power Politics*

"Eric Mann is one of the few people who can combine strategy, tactics, effective grassroots organizing, and compelling writing."

— **Phil Hutchings**, former Chair, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee

"*Katrina's Legacy* stands with *Black Nations 9/11* as the clearest strategic statement within the movement, a must read for anyone working in solidarity with the reconstruction movement in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast."

— **Kali Akuno**, People's Hurricane Relief Fund Oversight Coalition

"Mann's writing is a door. Our movement, and indeed, the very life of Black New Orleans, depends on our ability to fully comprehend and embrace the counter-hegemonic and long-term movement building demands that Mann describes."

— **Xochitl Bervera**, Families and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children

"Excellent. Mann has a distinct talent for drawing political lessons from historical events. Every movement needs a map. *Katrina's Legacy* takes us to the ravaged Gulf Coast and shows us how to find the road toward a Third Reconstruction. America needs this movement, and Eric helps us find our way."

— **Vijay Prashad**, author of *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity*

"Places the Gulf catastrophe in the historical context of racist capitalist rule in the U.S. at a critical time when the 'cracks in the ruling class levees' are visible for all to see. Mann provides political leadership, the outlines of a plan for action, and calls us to our battle stations."

— **Glen Ford**, Executive Editor and Co-Publisher, *The Black Commentator*

“From the first days after Katrina struck New Orleans, Eric Mann has been a crucial ally to organizers on the ground. His *Katrina's Legacy* is vital for anyone looking for a deeper understanding of what happened in New Orleans, and what we can do about it.”

— **Jordan Flaherty**, New Orleans organizer; Editor, *Left Turn Magazine*

“An inspiring call to action rooted in a powerful tradition of Black resistance in the South. It provides a comprehensive framework, a clear vision and strategy for this moment in history to build the movement among communities of color and low-wage workers.”

— **Ai-jen Poo**, CAAAV Organizing Asian Communities

[Printer-friendly version](#) • [Email this article to a friend](#)

## Abandoned and Abused: Orleans Parish Prisoners in the Wake of Hurricane Katrina

[Add new comment](#) • [Printer-friendly version](#) • [Email this article to a friend](#)

---

### Organization:

American Civil Liberties Union: National Prison Project

### Date Published:

08/09/2006

### Link:

<http://www.aclu.org/prison/conditions/26198res20060809.html>

---

### Attachment

### Size

[oppreport20060809.pdf](#)

3.88 MB

[Add new comment](#) • [Printer-friendly version](#) • [Email this article to a friend](#)

## Finding Faith in our Darkest Hour

[Printer-friendly version](#) • [Email this article to a friend](#)

### Organization:

Families and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children

### Author:

Xochitl Bervera

### Date Published:

08/30/2006

FFLIC'S  
FOCUS  
ON THE family  
News From Families & Friends of Louisiana's  
Incarcerated Children

Finding Faith in Our Darkest Hour  
By Xochitl Bervera

Friends from around the country ask us: “How are things in New Orleans? Are things getting better?” I always have to pause, surprised that people haven’t heard. I forget that the national

media has abandoned us, that George Bush flew into town for five minutes to make promises of federal support which gave the rest of the country and the world permission to look away. I am stunned that people don't know how much worse it is in New Orleans today for our organization, for our members, for our community than it was even six months ago.

When people ask, I have to tell them: It's worse than you think. It's not what people want to hear, but it's the truth that isn't being reported in the mainstream media, so I have to keep telling them. And every time, I draw on a renewed commitment on the part of FFLIC and many others in New Orleans and around the country to hold onto faith and to the knowledge that the spiritual and material power of people who believe in and work for justice will one day prevail – and so we keep moving forward. Because it is always darkest before dawn and New Orleans, a year after Katrina, is due for the brightest of dawns.

How are things in New Orleans? For the young people and families who are FFLIC's heart and soul, things are not well. Besides the chaos of still-unrepaired infrastructure (traffic lights are still broken, garbage pick up remains illusive, levees are insufficiently repaired, and entire neighborhoods remain exactly as they did in October of last year) the clear plan of developers and the business community to deny the right of return to New Orleans' Black community is being implemented in the ugliest of ways. HUD recently unveiled its plan to demolish 5000 units of public housing. The Recovery School District will simply not open its schools that serve poor Black neighborhoods. Officials refuse to re-open Charity Hospital, the source of health care for New Orleans' poor and working class. All are part of a plan that has been in the works since the day after the storm. We are witnessing the normally gradual process of gentrification sped up to its logical conclusion, with developers interested in eliminating (and quickly!) all public infrastructure that supports the lives of poor and working class Black communities, and politicians eager to accommodate them. Politicians publicly make their commitment to welcome everyone back while quietly making the policy decisions that guarantee its impossibility.

And yet, people keep coming home! Black New Orleanians, whose land and city this is, are finding their way back every day despite all the predictions and efforts to the contrary. Our families and communities made it back to vote and made their numbers and power felt. Folks are back looking for jobs which don't exist and housing which is boarded up and vacant.

What does this mean? It means there are hundreds of children in the city with no public schools to attend in their neighborhood. It means there are thousands of people suffering with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (only psychologists tell us there is no "Post" to our PTSD as the stress of daily life in New Orleans is newly traumatizing each day) with no mental health care. It means people still have no consistent place to live, no sense of protection from a future storm, no jobs to make a living, no health care to treat even basic medical needs. It means folks come back, are forced to leave again, come back and forth and back and forth...

It means that the institutions that stabilize a community – like churches, schools, and grandmas – are absent, while instability and stress factors are through the roof.

It means that there has been a 25% jump in the mortality rate, including a threefold increase in the suicide rate. It means that Arsenio and Markee Hunter, Warren Simeon, Iraum Taylor and Reggie Dantzler, – all New Orleans youth and several of whom were friends and children of FFLIC's – were slaughtered on a street corners not 5 blocks from our offices, gunned down with a submachine gun that somehow make it back into the city and onto the streets. It means we have lost Kerry Washington, a son and a father, who died mysteriously inside the overcrowded, overheated Orleans Parish Prison –where he paid with his life for an old warrant of simple drug possession. It means Ronald Smith who was gunned down by police will never get to see how beautifully his brother testified at a city council hearing two months ago. It means our members and families live in fear of both the violence on the streets and the violence of the police who are supposed to protect them.

It means, in short, that the clash between the gentrifying forces and the Black community – who were not meant to survive, endure, and return – has turned deadly. Where the lack of schools, housing and healthcare fails to keep people away, those in power will turn to the police and prisons.

If there was ever any doubt that the criminal justice system would be used to keep Black New Orleanians from returning, the last few months have eliminated the last of it. With 300 National Guardsmen called in to patrol (with M-16s which are “locked and loaded”) the empty streets of the neighborhoods where the lack of infrastructure has slowed efforts to rebuild, the NOPD has been able to turn its attention to “protecting” the neighborhoods that have been rebuilt. By consistently profiling, harassing and arresting poor people of color, NOPD are now making over 140 arrests per week. The vast majority of these arrests are for minor violations, including spitting on a sidewalk. The kinds of charges being put on people – resisting arrest, obstruction of justice, battery on a police officer – speak more to the tension between NOPD and community than to public safety.

The rise in NOPD arrests occurs at a moment when the Orleans Parish Prison is becoming increasingly dangerous by its overcrowding and lack of adequate health care. Harsh criticism from national media and lawyers of Sheriff Gusman’s operation of OPP has not stopped him from opening new “temporary” beds at breakneck speed and sending hundreds of prisoners up to the state penitentiary in Angola to try and keep up with the new arrests.

So how are things in New Orleans?

But, there is a beacon of light. Undeniably, organizing has taken root in the city. From neighborhood associations to workers rights, environmental justice, and public safety reform groups, people are beginning to come together and use their people power, their power to disrupt, to shame, to confront elected officials and demand that they do what they were elected to do: serve the people of this city.

An inspiring example of how organizing and reform work are together making a difference is in the juvenile justice system itself. Even as news coverage concentrates all the blame for crime on young Black men, and the demonized threat of these young Black men is used to justify everything from shutting down public housing to bringing in the National Guard, the juvenile justice system itself is continuing on the path of reform that had just begun when the storm hit.

The changes in New Orleans’ juvenile justice system are real. During the six months before Katrina, there were over 4000 juvenile arrests in New Orleans. In these last six months, there have been 169. After the storm, Orleans Parish Juvenile Court Chief Judge David Bell took leadership in implementing many reforms that had previously been discussed, but never implemented. For starters, he brought in Attorney (and FFLIC friend) Ilona Picou to work as the court's recovery coordinator. Ilona, well versed in juvenile justice reform, coordinated 38 volunteer attorneys from outside Louisiana to winnow down the number of active cases from 26,500 to 2,500.

A new set of procedures on how to deal with kids has dropped the number of kids being arrested by police from over 100 a day to an average of 17 per day. Police are no longer arresting kids for trespass, for example, for sitting on a basketball court after school. The Court has been able to use savings from such basic changes to upgrade its computer and phone systems. It has also purchased vehicles for use by families in need of supervision, drug court, weekend detention and alternatives to detention programs. Money that had been used to put kids in jail before the storm is now being used to bring support families need to keep their kids at home.

So, why is juvenile justice improving at the very same moment criminal justice for adults is

spinning out of control, and despite the recent blame–the–victim policy responses of curfews and increased law enforcement? In part, it is because juvenile justice reform efforts – led by FFLIC and the Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana – were already underway when Katrina hit. Before the storm, FFLIC, a voting member of the Children and Youth Planning Board was actively engaged in getting the many stakeholders to agree that detention reform in Orleans Parish was necessary. After touring the decrepit Youth Study Center and witnessing first hand the horrific conditions in which over 100 of our children were detained on any given day, FFLIC made a commitment to ensure that any reforms of the juvenile justice system would include the closure of that facility and the reduction of the number of children held at any given time. FFLIC worked hard with other stake holders, including the juvenile court judges, to recruit the Annie E. Casey Foundations Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative (JDAI) to come to Orleans to implement their proven program to reform local juvenile justice systems and help jurisdictions spend less on incarceration and more quality community based programs for kids and families.

So when the storm hit, the adult system and the juvenile system responded in precisely opposite ways. The juvenile system which had been forced to see children as the precious human being they are, and detention beds as the costly, ineffective burden they are, chose to speed up its reform process. The adult system which had made no such culture shift and no such commitment to change, has continued down its path of death and destruction.

What does this mean? To FFLIC, it is a reminder that our work has impact, value and indeed can make a very real difference in people’s lives and in the systems which affect our lives. To all of us, it shows that issue based organizing has the potential to result in system shifts that can withstand a racist onslaught even of the magnitude we are witnessing in New Orleans today. It also tells us that FFLIC must not be content to just see the changes in the juvenile system, knowing more children each day are being bumped into the adult system and that no matter what the courts say, our 17 and 18 year old children are no less human, no less ours, no less worthy of our commitment to keep them safe from the harm of the streets, safe from the harm of law enforcement, safe from the harm of racism and displacement. As FFLIC looks forward, we must re–commit ourselves to organizing, to building our membership base and to our mission of improving the lives of Louisiana’s youth, especially those at risk of getting involved in the juvenile justice system in the context of today’s it’s–worse–than–you–think New Orleans. If we and the many others in New Orleans who have begun, keep on organizing, we have hope that we may soon be able to answer the question differently, “So how are things in New Orleans?”

[Printer-friendly version](#) • [Email this article to a friend](#)

## Commissioners from African diaspora come in solidarity to New Orleans

[Printer-friendly version](#) • [Email this article to a friend](#)

---

### Organization:

Peoples Hurricane Relief Fund and Oversight Coalition

### Author:

Arlene Eisen

### Date Published:

09/03/2006

### Link:

<http://www.peopleshurricane.org/news/commissioners–from–african–diaspora–come–in...>

For a week surrounding the Anniversary Commemoration of the Great Flood, members of the **International Commission of Inquiry (ICI)** traveled from New Orleans to Biloxi, horrified and amazed at the level of destruction and abandonment of whole neighborhoods. They listened and shared tears with those still traumatized by the crimes that agents of the government committed against tens of thousands of Black New Orleanians.

*I lost everything I had except my life. I'm a retired school teacher in Biloxi. They send \$250 billion overseas and \$3 billion here. Where is it! Sitting in our stinking governor's office. If the President was here now, I'm in a mood now, I'd bust him in the mouth...*

As she hugged people who had gathered at the **Katrina Media Center** in a Baptist Church on Main Street, in Biloxi, MS, **Edenice Sant'ana de Jesus** emphasized, "We—like you-- are bound by an umbilical cord to Africa". A founder of the **Workers' Party**, the **Unified Black Movement** and **Black Women's Organization** in Brazil, she explained the mission of the Commission: "We're here to gather testimony about your experience with Katrina. To figure out how is it possible that in the richest country in the world, this [referring to the total destruction she had witnessed and tales of horror she had heard] could happen... We stand here in the tradition of our great thinkers, like Malcolm X and Steven Biko—who have taught us to keep fighting for self-determination....I call on my ancestors and yours to build a strong bond among us that can force the government to meet our needs and human rights."

*My name is Tatiana. I am seven years old. When the hurricane came it was bad. My mother who had twins in her belly got sick. I was scared they almost died and the police was being very mean to the boys.*

**Tiyani Lybon Mabasa**, one of the founders of the **Black Consciousness Movement** that was led by **Steven Biko** and current president of the Socialist Party of Azania, explained why he had traveled from South Africa to serve on the Commission. "Because of the United States, the conditions of Black people are difficult all over the world. This is why I'm not talking as an outsider. The struggle here is not different from the struggle in Africa. We all are subject to the injustices of colonization."

*After four days of hell in the Superdome, they forced the men and women into separate lines to board the buses. When we questioned why we had to separate from our children, the National Guard drew their guns on us.... Then a woman in the crowd who couldn't breathe handed her baby to me because I'm tall. I was about to board the bus, but the National Guard wouldn't let me return the baby.*

**Chucho Jesus Garcia**, founder of the **Afro Venezuelan Network and Elegua Youth Organization**, also participated in the Commission. After days of bearing witness to peoples' suffering, he told the crowd gathered in Congo Square in New Orleans to commemorate the Anniversary of the Great Flood, "We have a great weight on our shoulders to struggle for justice in this modern slaveship. Today's 21<sup>st</sup> century slavery, is rooted in capitalism, and like 17<sup>th</sup> century slavery pulls us away from our homes and families. It is our responsibility to continue this struggle and we will carry it out."

*I'm somebody's father. I'm somebody's brother. I'm somebody's husband. We formed a rescue team. We rescued 200 people, but the authorities never asked our name. We got no respect...I thank you gentlemen and lady for coming down and being part of our pain. It's like we don't exist except for working and paying taxes.*

**Sammy Hayon**, an Egyptian-born French trade unionist, was the fourth member of the Commission. At each gathering he emphasized that the devastation he had witnessed a year after the Storm was not "natural", but rather the product of a system that has no respect for human life.

### **Origins of the International Commission of Inquiry for the International Tribunal**

On December 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup>, 2005 hundreds of Internally Displaced People from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita gathered in Jackson, Mississippi in a Survivors Assembly to demand accountability, reconstruction and restitution from all levels and departments of the US government. Their demands were in response to the government's deliberate abandonment of hundreds of thousands of Black people in the aftermath of Katrina. Katrina was a category 5 hurricane that hit the Gulf Coast of Mississippi on August 29, 2005 and left over 2,000 dead or missing and over 800,000 without homes, jobs or help. Those forced to leave their homes comprise the largest and most inhumane internal displacement of Blacks since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century following the Civil War.

The **Survivors Assembly** was facilitated by the **Peoples Hurricane Relief Fund and Oversight Coalition**

(PHRF-OC), the **Mississippi Disaster Relief Coalition (MS-DRC)**, the **Black Activists Coalition on Katrina**, and over 50 coalition partners from a broad range of political, religious, and social sectors in North America. On December 10, 2005 over 5,000 survivors and their supporters marched on City Hall in New Orleans demanding the right to return with dignity to their homes and their communities.

From these voices came a call to put the US Government on trial for its Katrina-related crimes against humanity.

Since the Storm, members of the **National Conference of Black Lawyers** and others have been collecting testimony of Katrina survivors and witnesses. But the arrival of the International Commission of Inquiry's visit to New Orleans -- hosted by the **Peoples Hurricane Relief Fund and Oversight Committee (PHRF-OC)**, the **Black Activist Coalition on Katrina**, and the **U.S. Human Rights Network**-- was the first, fact-gathering effort by international experts for the **International Tribunal on Katrina**.

### **Bearing Witness and Investigating**

*We was like a disease or something to them. [the National Guard] They would pass us—we were starving, our kids had their tongues hanging out from thirst—but they wouldn't help us or even talk to us. When they finally gave us some water and MRE's, they threw them at us like we were dogs. We had to get down on our knees to pick up a bottle of water....Something needs to be done with our Black people. We can't let them do this to us again.*

In addition to meeting with individuals in Biloxi and New Orleans who witnessed crimes and abuses by government agents, the ICI extensively toured the devastation and also met with organizations and experts working to ensure the rights of internally displaced people. **Shana Griffin** from **INCITE** and founder of the **New Orleans Women's Health Clinic**, documented how Black women who are heads of households face the biggest obstacles of any displaced people in coming home. **Monique Harden**, co-director of **Advocates for Environmental Human Rights**, explained to the ICI how environmental racism—long epidemic in the Gulf—denies people their human rights, including the right to return. The US government must take responsibility for cleaning up all toxic sites—which disproportionately affect Black people. Representatives from the **Coalition for Workers' Justice** and a group of Brazilian workers in New Orleans reported to Commissioners the many ways workers—especially undocumented workers are denied their human rights.

### **War against Black People**

*They were shooting in the air as we ran across the bridge trying to get to dry land, "You niggahs and monkeys are not gonna get across that bridge, believe you me." But I ran any way because I knew my grand kids and I would die if we had to turn around and go back to those rising waters....Men were carrying older people. Baby, we were gonna get across....They treated everybody in Orleans Parish like we were criminals...After we crossed, they held us at gunpoint for 12 hours under the bridge...I'm a grandmother with a heart condition but they didn't care.*

Robert Bolden came by the **PHRF** office in his work clothes. A tall muscular man in his fifties, Mr. Bolden is proud that he has always provided for his family, never drank or used drugs and was never arrested. He sobbed as he relived his time at the Convention Center.

*They set us up and forced us to go to the Convention Center rather than cross the bridge to dry land. My mother has a house in Algiers. It was dry, I could have stayed with her...They told us there would be buses at the convention Center to take us to safety, but the buses didn't come for days...It was pitch black inside, no electricity and you could hear people crying for help, but there was nothing we could do. I don't know why they treated us like this...*

*Finally, as they were herding us on to the buses, the police asked me "what kind of drugs do you do?" I said "none". He ordered me on my knees. But I don't get on my knees for no one except for God. I tried to reason with them. I didn't do nothing to deserve that treatment. So four or five of them beat me on my legs and knees, so I had to get down. They left me on the ground... If I don't break a law, then treat me the same as the president. They maced me too and the mace burned for days. There was no water to wash the stuff off with. My legs still hurt, but I have no health insurance to get them checked....America actually treated us like that...The president has been here*

*13 times. He's only worried about Bourbon Street. He don't care about poor people.*

Geneva, who – with 17 family members-- clung to her New Orleans East roof from 7:45AM Monday to sometime Wednesday, when a boat finally took the sick and the babies off. It took months for all the family members to find each other.

*The boat took us to a truck and the truck hauled us like we were dogs to the Convention Center...The US has to recognize what they have done to us. We were left to die...*

#### Next Steps

The **National Conference of Black Lawyers**, the **International Commission of Inquiry** and staff from the **Peoples Hurricane Relief Fund (PHRF)** will continue taking testimony, investigating records and interviewing advocates and experts.

At the same time, staff of the **PHRF** will facilitate a process that provides support and the opportunity for survivors and witnesses of crimes by state agents to participate in further planning of the tribunal. They need support in processing their grief. They also need justice. June Brown bitterly demands,

*We lost everything. Can you repair my grandson's mind! You got money to repair my son's mind!*

To date, **ICI**, the **National Conference of Black Lawyers** and **PHRF** staff have collected testimony from some 30 witnesses. It is a wrenching process. Those involved are convinced that witnesses need a support/action group that provides them the structure to turn their grief and anger into action—action that shapes the Tribunal and the demands for justice that the Tribunal process will unleash.

The organizers of the **International Tribunal on Katrina** call on all organizations, individuals, and elected officials in the United States and around the world to sign on as endorsers of the **International Tribunal on Katrina**, and to contribute time, resources and funds to organize this call for justice.

Also, if you would like to testify or have documents, please contact **PHRF-OC**, 1418 N. Clairborne #2, New Orleans, LA 70116, (504) 301-0215 or email [info@peopleshurricane.org](mailto:info@peopleshurricane.org) or email Chokwe Lumumba at [clumumba@aol.com](mailto:clumumba@aol.com)

" target="\_blank">[clumumba@aol.com](mailto:clumumba@aol.com).

By Arlene Eisen. Contact [arlenesreport@yahoo.com](mailto:arlenesreport@yahoo.com)

" target="\_blank">[arlenesreport@yahoo.com](mailto:arlenesreport@yahoo.com)

[Printer-friendly version](#) • [Email this article to a friend](#)

## Dismantling a Community

[Printer-friendly version](#) • [Email this article to a friend](#)

---

#### Organization:

Center for Community Change

#### Date Published:

10/01/2006

#### Link:

<http://www.communitychange.org/issues/education/publications/>

Dismantling a Community, a new publication from the Center, chronicles the selling-off of New Orleans Schools in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

Rather than build the first-class public education system that New Orleans kids have deserved for decades, Federal Government officials and right-wing advocates used this tragedy as fertile ground for social experimentation on a grand scale.

Thousands of seasoned teachers have been let go and teacher's unions have been decimated while some \$40 million has been spent to turn the New Orleans education system into a complex web of individually operated schools where parents have to vie for a quality education for their children.

Dismantling a Community tells the consequences of the ongoing assault that privatization advocates have unleashed on the fragile neighborhoods of New Orleans.

[Click here to download the report](#)

Attachment	Size
<a href="#">DismantlingFULL.pdf</a>	4.85 MB

[Printer-friendly version](#) • [Email this article to a friend](#)

## Book: What Lies Beneath: Katrina, Race, and the State of the Nation

[Printer-friendly version](#) • [Email this article to a friend](#)

**Author:** South End Press Collective (editors)      **Date Published:** 01/02/2007

**Link:** <http://www.southendpress.org/2006/items/87670>

In August 2005, thousands of New Orleans residents—overwhelmingly poor, largely people of color, the majority black—were left to face one of the worst “natural” disasters in US history on their own. They were left to die in prisons, in nursing homes, and on the street. Survivors were criminalized as “looters” for struggling to obtain food, water, diapers, medicine, and other essentials of life that no one else could or would provide. As Katrina’s waters receded and the body count soared, an ugly truth (re)surfaced: The lives of those who are poor, who are vulnerable, and who are not white are not valued by the US government.

While commentators across the political spectrum, celebrities, and other observers expressed outrage that the US government would let this happen to Americans—even “those Americans”—millions *outside* of New Orleans live without adequate health insurance; clean air and water; decent education, housing, nutrition, health care, and work; and freedom from police brutality and state repression. And thousands are deported, displaced, and dying in prisons and illegal wars from coast to coast, gulf to gulf.

Short and accessible, this anthology, featuring such voices as Common Ground, INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, Suheir Hammad, Jordan Flaherty, and Ross Gelbspan, takes readers beyond the Superdome. It explores the complexity of this turning point in US history as representative of the nation’s direction and priorities.

A portion of the proceeds will be donated to the [People’s Hurricane Relief Fund and Oversight Coalition](#)

[Printer-friendly version](#) • [Email this article to a friend](#)

# Proposed Resolution to Protect the Human Rights of People Struggling to Return to and Rebuild the Gulf Coast Region

[Printer-friendly version](#) • [Email this article to a friend](#)

---

**Author:**

by Kimberley Richards, People's Institute for Survival and Beyond (New Orleans, LA), Monique Harden, Advocates for Environmental Human Rights (New Orleans, LA)

**Date Published:**

07/01/2007

## **Proposed Resolution to Protect the Human Rights of People Struggling to Return to and Rebuild the Gulf Coast Region in the Aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina & Rita**

### **Presented to the US Social Forum People's Assembly**

Whereas, if another world is possible, another United States is necessary and another South is critical;

Whereas, people around the world witnessed the U.S. government's racist treatment of African Americans in the Gulf Region of the southern United States during Hurricane Katrina;

Whereas, this racist treatment included the federal government's approval of a hurricane evacuation plan designed for people who have access to vehicles and resources for lodging away from the Gulf Coast region, which discriminated against African Americans who do not have access to vehicles and resources for lodging;

Whereas, this racist treatment included the federal government placing the lives of African Americans in jeopardy by failing to immediately transport African Americans to safe haven;

Whereas, this racist treatment included the federal government constructing substandard and ineptly designed levees that were breached by a storm surge that flooded 80% of the city of New Orleans;

Whereas, this racist treatment included the federal government ignoring the eyewitness accounts of African American hurricane survivors living in the Ninth Ward of New Orleans, who heard an explosion at their levee before their homes and neighborhood were inundated with floodwater;

Whereas, this racist treatment included giving law enforcement officers a shoot to kill order that allowed the brutalization, incarceration, and merciless killing of African American hurricane survivors;

Whereas, this racist treatment included law enforcement officers blocking access of mostly African American hurricane survivors to bridges that led to higher and safer ground near the city of New Orleans;

Whereas, this racist treatment included a search and rescue operation that separated African Americans hurricane survivors from family members and brought them far distances without their knowledge or consent;

Whereas, this racist treatment included denying food, water, and shelter to African Americans who were evacuated from the Gulf region;

Whereas, the government continues the injustice to this present day – twenty-two months after Hurricane Katrina – with a privatization scheme that is hostile to the needs and human rights of African American, Vietnamese American, Latino, and poor white people who live in the Gulf Coast region;

Whereas, the post-hurricane governmental programs began with providing lucrative contracts to companies that overstated their expenses while perpetrating wage theft and other abuses on mostly Latino migrant and immigrant workers; 2

Whereas, a governmental priority of recovery expenditures has not been the rebuilding of homes and communities, but the expansion of the prison industrial complex and the deployment of the national guard to residential neighborhoods in New Orleans;

Whereas, the post-hurricane governmental programs include repairing and upgrading levees and floodwalls in a way that – as of June 2007 and at least through the end of 2011 – will protect predominantly white neighborhoods in New Orleans from flooding, but will not protect any African American neighborhood in New Orleans from flooding;

Whereas, the post-hurricane governmental programs include providing huge tax breaks for private companies seeking to demolish public housing units in New Orleans that were not damaged by the hurricanes and take over other Gulf Coast neighborhoods for the purpose of building golf courses, condominiums and other housing that Gulf Coast residents cannot afford;

Whereas, the post-hurricane governmental programs include replacing public schools and public healthcare facilities with privately owned companies;

Whereas, nearly two years ago, more than 750,000 people from the Gulf Coast were displaced from their homes as a result of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita as well as substandard levees constructed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers;

Whereas, to this present day, approximately 300,000 people suffer the injustice of prolonged displacement and remain separated from their homes, families, friends, and communities as a result of hostile governmental programs that deny their right to return home, which constitute an ethnic cleansing of New Orleans and the Gulf region;

Whereas, the Robert T. Stafford Act, the federal law establishing governmental responses to national disasters, mandates that the President has complete discretion in responding or not responding to a disaster and its after effects; and establishes that people affected by a disaster have no legal right to any assistance, including emergency medical care and shelter;

Whereas, the United Nations has established the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, which recognizes that people who are forced to flee their homes as a result of a natural or man-made disaster are internally displaced people, and provides protections for internally displaced people who would otherwise have neither a right to restorative justice nor protection from unfair and abusive treatment by governmental and private entities that unjustly prolong their displacement and deny their right to return;

Whereas, the United Nations' Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement prohibits displacement that is aimed at or results in ethnic cleansing or altering the racial, ethnic or religious composition of the affected population;

Whereas, the United Nations' Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement establishes the right of displaced persons to request and receive humanitarian assistance and protection, as well as the right to voluntarily to return to their communities or resettle;

Whereas, the United Nations' Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement establishes the right of displaced persons to housing that requires governments to provide temporary housing for the duration of the displacement and support the rebuilding of permanent homes; 3

Whereas, the United Nations' Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement establishes the right of

displaced persons to education that requires governments to provide education and training facilities as soon as conditions permit;

Whereas, the United Nations' Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement establishes the right of displaced persons to healthcare that includes mental health and social services;

Whereas, in international settings, the U.S. government has endorsed the United Nations' Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, encouraged other nations to adopt the Guiding Principles as binding national law, and established a foreign policy, USAID Assistance to Internally Displaced Persons Policy, which applies the Guiding Principles to the assistance that is provided by the U.S. government to displaced people in other countries;

Whereas, social justice and human rights organizations led by African Americans and other people of color in the Gulf Coast region are in the struggle to bring people back home which involves advocating that the government comply with the United Nations' Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, and seek to build a united front that dismantles the racist and regressive politics and governance controlling our communities in the South;

Therefore, be it resolved that the United States Social Forum ("USSF") People's Assembly stands in solidarity with the people of the Gulf Coast region who are struggling to rebuild their lives and communities and those who remain displaced;

Therefore, be it resolved that the USSF People's Assembly calls for a just, anti-racist, and sustainable rebuilding of the Gulf Coast that ends the U.S. government's human rights violations which have denied mostly African American residents of the Gulf Coast their right to return and rebuild; and have created a new slavery of mostly Latino migrant and immigrant people whose labor has been brutally exploited in the reconstruction of Gulf Coast communities;

Therefore, be it further resolved that the USSF People's Assembly advocates for federal laws that

- adopt the rights and duties established by the United Nations' Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement in order to protect the human rights of people from the Gulf Coast who are struggling to return to and rebuild their communities, as well as the human rights of all other people who become displaced as a result of a natural or man-made disaster;
- prohibit the exploitation and abuse of people, regardless of status, who work in the reconstruction of communities damaged by a disaster; and
- establish and fund the Gulf Coast Civic Works Project, a civic works program in the Gulf Coast that would create 100,000 rebuilding jobs for the region's residents.

Attachment	Size
<a href="#">Gulf Coast Proposed Resolution – USSF.pdf</a>	33.04 KB

[Printer-friendly version](#) • [Email this article to a friend](#)

## Feature Stories from Democracy Now! to mark the 2 Year Anniversary of Katrina

[Printer-friendly version](#) • [Email this article to a friend](#)

---

<b>Organization:</b> Democracy Now!	<b>Date Published:</b> 08/29/2007	<b>Link:</b> <a href="http://www.democracynow.org/shows/2007/8/29">http://www.democracynow.org/shows/2007/8/29</a>
--	--------------------------------------	---



### The Path to Destruction: Two Years After Katrina, Cleanup and Recovery Far From Complete

Today marks the second anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. The storm ravaged the Gulf coast of Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama and left over 1,600 people dead. More than 300,000 homes were destroyed and over 770,000 people displaced. It was the most powerful and expensive natural disaster to hit the country and one of the deadliest hurricanes recorded in US history. We speak with Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter, John McQuaid. [includes rush transcript]



### New Orleans Hit By Another "Hurricane of Racism, Greed and Corruption" – Community Activist Malik Rahim

On the second anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, Democracy Now! broadcasts live from the Lower Ninth Ward in New Orleans. We take a look at the state of New Orleans two years after the storm with two local activists: Malik Rahim, cofounder of the Common Ground Collective and Alice Craft-Kerney of the Lower Ninth Ward Health Clinic. [includes rush transcript]



### "The Red Cross Has Basically Stolen Money from Victims in New Orleans" – People's Hurricane Relief Fund Blasts Katrina Aid Program

A five-day International Tribunal on Hurricanes Katrina and Rita opened last night in New Orleans. The tribunal is bringing together hurricane survivors, international delegations, expert witnesses, a team of human rights and civil rights prosecutors, and a panel of US-based and international judges. [includes rush transcript]



### The Privatization of Education: How New Orleans Went from a Public School System to a Charter-School City

While many in New Orleans have waited two years for recovery, the restructuring of its schools seemed to happen overnight. Not long after Hurricane Katrina flooded New Orleans two years ago, the Louisiana legislature cleared the way for the state to assume control of 107 out of 128 schools in the Orleans district. The state began immediately converting its newly-acquired schools to charter schools. We speak with Nat LaCour of the American Federation of Teachers. [includes rush transcript]



### Jailed in New Orleans Two Weeks Before Katrina, Fmr. Corrections Officer Held for Four Months Without Charge

Roderick Dean, a former corrections officer, recounts his harrowing ordeal two years ago when he was arrested and jailed without charge on August 11, 2005—two weeks before Hurricane Katrina. When the storm hit, Dean was in New Orleans Parish Prison where he narrowly escaped drowning after the jail flooded. He was never charged and released four months later. [includes rush transcript]



### The Danziger Bridge Killings: How New Orleans Police Gunned Down Civilians Fleeing the Flood

On the second anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, we take a look back the Danziger Bridge killings. Seven police officers been indicted for opening fire on two African American families on the Danziger Bridge days after the storm, killing two people and wounding four others. At the time, the official story was that they gunned down snipers. Now the question is why they shot at two families fleeing the flood. [includes rush transcript]



### "The Resilience of the People Is What Carries This City Forward": Poet Sunni Patterson & Hip-Hop Artist Truth Universal Reflect on New Orleans Two Years After Katrina

We end today's show from with a pair of spoken word acts from New Orleans: poet and performer Sunni Patterson and hip-hop artist Truth Universal. [includes rush transcript]

[Printer-friendly version](#) • [Email this article to a friend](#)

## BLUEPRINT FOR GULF RENEWAL: THE KATRINA CRISIS AND A COMMUNITY AGENDA FOR ACTION

[Printer-friendly version](#) • [Email this article to a friend](#)

**Organization:**  
Institute for Southern Studies

**Date Published:**  
08/29/2007

**Link:**  
<http://www.southernstudies.org/gulfblueprint.pdf>

Attachment	Size
<a href="#">gulfblueprint.pdf</a>	1.56 MB

[Printer-friendly version](#) • [Email this article to a friend](#)

## International Tribunal DVD

[Printer-friendly version](#) • [Email this article to a friend](#)

**Organization:**  
Peoples Hurricane Relief Fund and Oversight Coalition

**Date Published:**  
08/29/2007

**Link:**  
<http://www.peopleshurricane.org/dvd>



- Excerpts of eyewitness testimony from 6 of the more than 25 Survivor witnesses on human rights atrocities before, during and post Katrina in areas including police brutality, healthcare, housing, racial discrimination, incarceration, disaster preparedness, forced eviction and displacement, education, and labor.
- Expert testimony in the fields of human rights, criminal justice, healthcare, levee preparedness, military occupation, voting rights, education, and indigenous rights present reports and evidence of human rights violations before during and after the storms.

To order the Tribunal DVD, visit <http://www.peopleshurricane.org/dvd>

For more information on the International Tribunal, visit <http://internationaltribunal.org/>

[Printer-friendly version](#) • [Email this article to a friend](#)

## Katrina 2nd Anniversary article round up

[Printer-friendly version](#) • [Email this article to a friend](#)

---

**Author:**  
Rahula Janowski, Heads Up Collective

**Date Published:**  
08/31/2007

**Link:**  
<http://hupcollective.livejournal.com/17727.html>

### ***NOLA: 2 years on article compilation***

Like most of you, two years ago I spent several days watching in horror and grief as the City of New Orleans was first hit by a fierce hurricane, then flooded, then abandoned by a racist, corrupt government.

Two years on, thousands of residents are still displaced, many neighborhoods are still without services like water and electricity, opening schools is a huge struggle, and the eye of the nation has turned elsewhere. A blogger friend recently pointed out the discrepancy between the amount of mainstream media coverage of the 10th anniversary of the death of Diana Princess of Wales in comparison with the amount of mainstream media coverage of the two year anniversary of Katrina. It's sickening.

We have a responsibility to remember, to refuse to forget what happened in New Orleans and what is ongoing in New Orleans; to keep our eyes open, to demand the right of return for displaced residents and the rebuilding of New Orleans. In September we'll be posting a list of grassroots organizations working for justice for New Orleans and the gulf coast, which a comrade is currently compiling; for now, please check out this compilation of articles written about New Orleans and the aftermath of Katrina on this second anniversary .

In solidarity,

Rahula Janowski  
For the Heads Up Collective

[And Still They Rise: Confronting Katrina by Dave Zirin](#)

[New Orleans Hit By Another "Hurricane of Racism, Greed and Corruption" - Community Activist Malik Rahim on Democracy Now!](#)

Two years ago, Hurricane Katrina made its devastating landfall on the Gulf Coast.

Today, much of the region's infrastructure remains in ruin. In New Orleans, Hurricane Katrina caused damage to 300,000 housing units, of which 71% were low-income housing. Most of the city's public housing received no or moderate damage, but approximately 1,300 out of 5,146 units have been reopened (the rest remain boarded up awaiting demolition). There is a severe shortage of affordable housing in the post-Katrina New Orleans housing market, which has meant the continued displacement of predominantly low-income African Americans two years after the storm.

Advancement Project pledges to persist in the fight for people's right to return home. We recently partnered with Brave New Foundation to distribute a short video, *When the Saints Go Marching In*, to raise awareness of the ongoing housing crisis in New Orleans. During the making of this video, the filmmakers heard the story of the Aguilar family who lost their home to storm and only received \$4,000 in payments from their insurance company. They met

Mr. Washington, an 87- year-old man and former carpenter, who owned three homes prior to the storm. He is still living in a FEMA trailer today. And they met Julie, who could have returned to her job and normal life, if the government had opened up the public housing unit that she had lived in prior to the storm.

You can watch their stories at: <http://whentheseaints.org>

You can also view Advancement Project's documentary about the fight for public housing in New Orleans, This Is My Home, at: [www.advancementproject.org](http://www.advancementproject.org).

There is something you can do to help. Please sign the petition urging the Senate to pass the Gulf Coast Recovery Bill of 2007 (S. 1668). The bill is expected to come to a vote after Labor Day. Its passage will be an important step toward rebuilding the infrastructure in the Gulf Coast region.

Please sign the petition at: <http://whentheseaints.org>

[A Farewell Letter on the Second Anniversary of Katrina A Message from an Organizer to the Left and Progressive Forces inside the USA by Curtis Muhammad](#)

SPECIAL REPORT: Billions in Katrina aid mis-spent; blueprint for Gulf recovery outlined

DURHAM, N.C. -- Two years after the onslaught of hurricanes Katrina and Rita, much of the Gulf Coast is still in crisis -- and billions of federal recovery money remains bottled up or has been squandered due to red tape, failures of oversight and misguided priorities.

That's the conclusion of Blueprint for Gulf Renewal, a new report from the Institute for Southern Studies.

A full version of the report is available at: <http://www.southernstudies.org/gulfblueprint.pdf>

The study, published in collaboration with Oxfam America and the Jewish Funds for Justice, looks at 80 statistical indicators and draws on interviews with more than 40 Gulf Coast leaders to identify roadblocks to recovery, and ways federal leaders can tackle critical needs in the region like housing, jobs and coastal protection.

"In September 2005, President Bush pledged to 'do what it takes, and stay as long as it takes,' to rebuild after Katrina," says Chris Kromm, director of the Institute and co-author of the report. "But thousands of lives are still in limbo and miles of the Gulf still lie in ruins -- the recovery is failing."

The study also features "Where did the Katrina money go?" -- an in-depth analysis of federal Katrina spending since 2005. The Institute reveals that, out of the \$116 billion in Katrina funds allocated, less than 30% has gone towards long-term rebuilding -- and less than half of that has been spent, much less reached those most in need.

"The President says he's written a 'big check' for the Gulf Coast, but the over 60,000 families still in FEMA trailers must be wondering if the check bounced," says Jeffrey Buchanan of the RFK Memorial Center for Human Rights and co-author of the spending analysis.

The report also offers a set of practical solutions, gleaned from interviews with 40 Gulf Coast community leaders, for our nation's leaders to turn the situation around.

"Two years after Katrina, our nation has an opportunity to change course and demonstrate its sincere commitment to those being left behind in the faltering recovery," says Sue Sturgis, a co-author of the full report. "Only strong national leadership can build a better future for the region, because only Washington has the resources necessary to ensure an equitable and just reconstruction."

"It's well past time for the federal government to make good on its promises to the people of the Gulf," adds Sturgis.

The report is already making a splash in the media, with national coverage by the Associated Press, Bloomberg News, Gannet, The Los Angeles Times and McClatchy News. The report has also been featured on over 50 TV and radio broadcasts nation-wide, including MSNBC, National Public Radio, PBS "NewsHour" and XM satellite radio.

The Institute for Southern Studies launched Gulf Coast Reconstruction Watch to track the Katrina recovery in October 2005, and has since published several widely-followed reports including A New Agenda for the Gulf Coast (February 2007), One Year after Katrina (August 2006) and The Mardi Gras Index (February 2006).

For a copy of the report and more of the Institute's ongoing coverage of the crisis in the Gulf, visit:

[www.southernstudies.org/gulfwatch](http://www.southernstudies.org/gulfwatch)

## [Two Years Post Katrina: Racism and Criminal Justice"](#)

[Colorlines](#) has a special section on their website for this anniversary

This week ColorLines.com honors the second anniversary of Hurricane Katrina with a special multimedia issue that reviews the continued struggles in the Gulf Coast after the devastating storm.

A Return to New Orleans: A video on the housing struggle facing Black residents of New Orleans.

Locked Up in New Orleans: From the Nation Magazine, a look at the increasing imprisonment of young men of color without reprieve.

ColorLines Gulf Coast Discussion Guide : A guided tour of our past articles on race and rebuilding.

Images - New Immigrants in New Orleans: An original audio slideshow documenting the wave of Latino immigrants arriving in the two years after Hurricane Katrina.

Two years ago, we were struggling to comprehend what was happening in New Orleans. Hurricane Katrina had hit, and just as it seemed that the worst was over, the levees broke. We watched in horror as people were left to drown in their homes. In the weeks that followed, we came to understand the callousness that led to the tragedy, and heard promises that the Gulf would be rebuilt.

Today, we can see how empty those promises were. New Orleans is still half its former size, and people have become so desperate and discouraged that crime is on the rise. Families are still living in FEMA trailers, which we have learned contain toxic levels of formaldehyde. Public housing units that were unharmed by the flood have remained empty.

Ella Baker Center has partnered with Brave New Foundation to promote their new video about Katrina survivors. It tells the heartbreaking stories of good people unable to return home, like the Aguilar family, who lost their home and received only \$4,000 in payments from their insurance company. When the Saints Go Marching In also tells the story of Mr. Washington, an 87-year-old former carpenter, who owned three homes prior to the storm. He is still living in a FEMA trailer today. And there's Julie, who could have returned to her job and normal life if the government had opened up the public housing units where she lived prior to the storm.

Our people must not be forgotten. Watch the video here: <http://www.ellabakercenter.org/page.php?pageid=16&contentid=315>

Then, take the next step. Please sign the petition urging the Senate to pass the Gulf Coast Recovery Bill of 2007 (S1668). The bill is expected to come up for a vote after soon after Labor Day. Its passage will be an important step toward rebuilding the infrastructure in the Gulf Coast region.

Sign the petition at: <http://whentesaints.org>

One of our partner organizations, ColorOfChange.org, has also launched a new project to broadcast the stories of Katrina survivors, told in their own words. Voices From the Gulf presents the stories of 10 survivors, with plans to add hundreds more as survivors who want to tell their stories are connected to volunteers armed with only a video camera and an Internet connection. Please check out the videos today, and if you can, volunteer to help share more survivors' stories.

Forward ever,

Jakada Imani  
Ella Baker Center for Human Rights

[New Orleans After 24 Months By Greg Palast](#)

Catalyst Project organized a panel at this year's National Conference on Organized Resistance, featuring Mayaba Liebenenthal, Amber McZeal, and Maya Dempster, who discussed their lives and political work post-Katrina, in New Orleans and as evacuees, from the challenges of survivor organizing to their visions for justice in the Gulf Coast. This is an excerpt from that forum, which was moderated by Ingrid Chapman, transcribed by Dee Ouellette & Jen Collins, and edited by Molly McClure.

Ingrid: Where are you living, and what work are you doing now?

Mayaba: I live in New Orleans and work with INCITE: Women of Color against Violence and Critical Resistance [CR]. INCITE seeks the liberation of women of color by challenging domestic violence and recognizing that the state is often the perpetrator of much of the violence against women, women of color especially. CR is a prison abolition group working against the prison industrial complex and modern-day slavery. We're trying to figure out what it actually looks like to have true community accountability.

Amber: I work with Survivors for Survivors in the Bay Area, which started in 2005 by an evacuee/journalist/historian from New Orleans, C.C. Campbell Rock. Survivors for Survivors assists with the unmet needs of the 2,000 families still displaced in the Bay Area, currently 16,000 displaced overall in California. We deal with requests anywhere from a food card to an electricity bill to a cell phone bill to rent. Survivors for Survivors started a work-for-hire catering company called "A Taste of New Orleans" intended to help provide self-sustenance for evacuees. I also work with a play of stories from the Katrina Diaspora called "Stardust and Empty Wagons" that was staged in San Francisco.

Maya: I'm living in New York City and working with the Solidarity Coalition of Katrina and Rita Survivors. We had about 5000 displaced individuals to the New York City area. We have weekly meetings and a monthly united front meeting, which is a platform for all of the other not-for-profits in New York City area to get together and focus on basic needs of survivors still not being met. We're focusing more on media now because it's a way for us to touch more individuals. I also work with Ghetto Dreams Movement, which is a music/movie/entertainment organization, originally based in New Orleans, that we use to bring awareness to survivors' issues in New York City Area. Ghetto Dreams Movement also creates jobs for displaced individuals.

Mayaba: CR is working on an amnesty campaign for prisoners of Katrina. When OPP [Orleans Parish Prison] got flooded all of the evidence got washed away, and thousands of people's cases never went to trial. We're trying to get amnesty for people still inside, and all charges dropped. INCITE initiated a project called the Women's Health and Justice Initiative [WHJI] which is opening a women's clinic, a multidimensional project that sees service as part of a larger reproductive justice model. In our approach, the clinic is part of a political process, so if you test positive for lead poisoning, there's also a space for you to organize around the fact that the EPA [Environmental Protection Agency] didn't clean up the lead. We want the healthcare at the clinic to be a space to take action, so you can create a sense of agency around your body and a holistic sense of self, for yourself and for your community.

Ingrid: What are some of the major issues facing the communities you organize?

Amber: One of the biggest issues is getting in touch with everyone to organize them. Within my community itself, the 2000 people in the Bay Area, we still don't have a list of those people. We put up posters and go to church events where survivors gather, but it's pretty much word of mouth and few people will come to those events because they're not looking for consolation from a priest right now. They're looking for the basic three: jobs, shelter, food. And they're looking for justice.

Mayaba: What happened with Katrina and what's going on with the land grab in New Orleans are like a microcosm of the overall state of the US today. You can go into every inner city community and they are suffering the same way. I go to Detroit and they are having the same problems that we are having in New Orleans, and they didn't have a natural disaster, right? We're losing affordable housing. We've lost affordable housing. Our communities are over-policed. We're policed up and it doesn't make us any safer. We can't get public education. We're being denied access to health care. Workers' rights are being stepped on all over the place and the breakdown of our communities is huge. So what are the issues facing us? We're being stomped. We're trying to rebuild at a time where no one really wants us to rebuild.

Amber: They brought police and enforcement to New Orleans before they started bringing other resources to actually sustain life. That doesn't promote safety --- that says to the people of New Orleans that you are a threat. After I evacuated, Maya (Amber?): I wanted desperately to return to the city. A few of us were lucky enough to have a hotel room in the city [paid for by FEMA]. When that was taken away, there was nothing put in place of it. It was about a two-month period of "this is going to be the last day that FEMA will pay for your hotel." Not knowing where you're going to sleep at night leaves you in a very confused, clouded state of mind. I do believe that it was purposeful. There was no incentive to return home. There still isn't. Our hearts are home but there's no incentive there. And what we have to do is create incentives to return home and a way to return home.

Maya: In New York, similar to everywhere there are displaced people, the feeling towards evacuees at first was

welcoming, but when the cameras stopped rolling that's when the help stopped. Keeping your head clear is very important just to be able to function, because there was never a time we had to actually cry over our city. We just kept running, kept going, kept going and all of a sudden it was a year had passed and we were still moving, still trying to find housing, still trying to just live. Those things were interrupted greatly. Life has not returned to normal, there is no sense of normalcy. We're still not OK.

Ingrid: How does gender play into the challenges facing your communities and the people that you work with?

Mayaba: Women of color bear the brunt of disasters: natural disasters, state-inflicted disasters, state-enforced disasters. Women of color are at the intersection of sexism and racism, and this perspective is often times ignored or separated, like you walk into one area and you're a woman and you go over here and you're black and somehow never the twain shall meet. The lack of gender analysis is particularly problematic in the organizing work in terms of trying to transform society into a way that we want to live our lives. We need that analysis of racism and sexism to develop community accountability strategies for a functional stateless society. We need to be able to ask: why are women of color affected like this? Why are we the highest rising HIV population, the fastest growing population in prisons? We know that domestic violence goes up after disasters. Yet few services have actually been put in place to help to change this or alleviate any of these conditions.

Black women are loved in theory but not in practice. There is a lack of visibility of us as women of color, outside of symbolic imagery. You saw Black women crying on TV during the flood, disempowered, the most disenfranchised person you could find. Organizations will work "on your behalf" but when you say what you need yourself it doesn't matter. At the INCITE clinic, nearly 90 percent of our funding has come from individual donors and people who support us. Foundations? Not into it. Non-profits? Not into it. Yet they have all been asking what we need and what we want to do, and when we finally say it we're ignored.

Ingrid: What would justice in the Gulf Coast, and justice for displaced Katrina survivors look like to you?

Maya: A good start would be some admittance to the neglect, to the government failing their citizens. It wouldn't change what happened but it's a good start. The treatment of people of African descent by the government, national guard, state police, and other states' police is dehumanizing and unacceptable. I had eight sheriffs hold shotguns to my head at about 9:30 at night. This was while the curfew was still in effect. The curfew was for midnight but nevertheless that still occurred. Imagine just leaving your house, getting in your car, and eight sheriffs jump out, put shotguns to your head, and tell you to get on the ground. Focusing on Mardi Gras parties is not important when there are numerous murders on a daily basis. The focus needs to change so the city can heal.

Amber: New Orleans is where my home was and my heart is. Maya hit on something when she said "New Orleanians are not new to neglect." That is a problem. The hundreds of thousands who are displaced are accustomed to being neglected. Which is why giving voice to survivors through "Stardust and Empty Wagons" is crucial. We're used to being told to shut up, or being killed in order to be silenced. The government moves like molasses, like we say in the south, and molasses moves very, very slow. And slow is not going to work right now. As fast as the hurricane hit and the levees blew and the people were out, that's as fast as we needed to move to be back in. Since it's all knocked down let's rebuild it the right way. We can start to curb our addiction to oil and electricity now by switching over to solar paneling on all the houses. Then New Orleans can be a model for the rest of the country.

Ingrid: What do you feel inspired about?

Maya: I find this forum to be extremely inspiring, and also very healing. Every time we get to speak and share these stories with different people it helps the healing process, and helps to invoke change.

Amber: You can't kill the spirit and that's what New Orleans culture is about. That's what second lines are about. We don't die. It doesn't matter what you do to my body. I will still carry joy.

Ingrid: What is the role of allies in the struggle for justice in the Gulf Coast and for survivors?

Mayaba: When allies come to New Orleans, it's really important to do work in your own communities as well, especially to undo the racism that we've been taught and that's reinforced with every breath and step we take. We had a rally about ending the violence in New Orleans that felt like a Klan rally---it was the most pro-police white thing that I've ever seen in my life. A woman had a sign saying "Thugs are Terrorists." What I want is for people to look into your own communities and organize around that kind of mentality. You don't need to come to New Orleans to do that.

Amber: Allies can leverage the resources they have to the ends that we need, like connecting organizations to technical support. Allies can act as liaisons connecting us to opportunities like this to tell the truth as we see it. If you fight the same issues of housing and gentrification in your own town, make the connections to what's happening in New Orleans. We need tangible sustainability. Stop giving your money to the Red Cross, to these corporations who run commercials with Aaron Neville songs and sad pictures. That is not what we look like. Do I look like that to you?

New Orleanians don't like pity. We're a very proud people. Demand that the U.S. adhere to the U.N. guidelines for internally displaced peoples. Police the U.S. on the grounds of crimes against humanity because that's what's going on. Demand that Blanco release the LRA [Louisiana Recovery Authority] funds that she's been sitting on and accruing interest for the past year. These funds are for the Road Home program, which has no incentive for renters, which all of us happen to have been. The majority of New Orleanians were renters, but these funds would only allocate a hundred and fifty thousand dollar grant to every homeowner whose property was damaged or lost to rebuild their home. Become knowledgeable of what's going on, like Big Easy money profiteering. The same companies in Iraq right now are the companies doing recovery efforts and getting the no-bid contracts in New Orleans.

Ingrid: How does the struggle in New Orleans impact the broader struggle for justice in this country?

Mayaba: We're at a very remarkable moment to be able to change the entire framework that we use to talk about injustice. We can talk about what happened in Katrina as human rights issues, which gives the US an international context and an international language. We're actually at a time where we can align our social movements in this country with the human rights and social movements of everywhere else.

Maya: Katrina was the largest migration of African-Americans since slavery. I can't help but think that had that not been the case we might have gotten a little bit more of a dignified response from the media, from the government. Aid wouldn't have taken so long, and not arrived. Most hurricane survivors didn't even receive the \$2000 that was supposed to aid in your immediate needs let alone monies for personal property loss or any kind of personal assistance. Most people got nothing but leaving their homes and never returning.

Amber: 9-11 was a disaster with a one-mile radius. Katrina hit a hundred and forty miles of coastline. 9-11 directly affected a few thousand people. Throughout the Gulf we're talking over a million people directly affected, between the two hurricanes from Lake Charles to the Mississippi and further north. Yet you see in the news a lot of attention placed on "oh he bought a car with his FEMA money" for those who did receive the personal property money, a lot of judgment about what they did with it. It's these little things that hurt after a while.

Ingrid: How can people support your particular organizations?

Amber: Bring "Stardust and Empty Wagons" out for a performance or for a reading--- all the proceeds go to the immediate needs of evacuees. If you know evacuees in your area, connect them to either resources or technology to be connected with other evacuees. It's huge, it's crucial. Community was a big factor for New Orleans and the pain that we feel right now is the unraveling of our culture. Culture is our life.

Mayaba: The New Orleans Women's Clinic is opening, any and all fundraising is appreciated. CR has a video called "I Won't Drown on that Levee and You Ain't Gonna Break my Back." We need to raise awareness about what happened in the prison, what's still happening. Get the word out about organizing on the ground, because the news is not getting out about how much grassroots activity is happening there. If people knew that, it would undermine every intention and plan that the government has for the city.

Maya: We have a collaboration of different musicians from New Orleans that make up the Ghetto Dreams Movement, ready to do shows and perform. We have media for sale, there are two albums. They are songs of inspiration, and days before hurricane Katrina. This music is very healing to us, so if you see that, support it.

Amber: We need reparations. You can even change the name, because the needs have changed. I don't need a mule. I don't know where I would put a mule.

Mayaba: Would the mule now be a Honda? I'd like a hybrid.

Mayaba Liebenthal is a Black feminist anarchist and human rights advocate committed to creating projects institutions that support self-determined and sustainable communities development. A New Orleans resident, she is a member of various community based organizations including INCITE: Women of Color Against Violence, and Critical Resistance. She is a contributor to the South End anthology, *What Lies Beneath Katrina: Race and the State of the Nation*.

Amber McZeal is a native New Orleanian by way of Lafayette, Louisiana. She currently resides in Berkeley, California where she is a volunteer public and community relations director with the social justice activist group Survivors for Survivors, a survivor initiated non-profit organization assisting hurricane survivors with needs still unmet by the national recovery agencies. Prior to Katrina she was a student of jazz performance at Southern University in New Orleans. She is continuing her studies in sound therapy in California.

Maya Dempster is a writer artist and activist. She is a New Orleans resident via New York City right now. As a survivor of Katrina and Rita she now works closely with New York Solidarity Coalition of Katrina/Rita Survivors to aid evacuees in the struggle for social justice.

Catalyst Project ([www.collectiveliberation.org](http://www.collectiveliberation.org)) is a center for political education and movement building based in the

San Francisco Bay Area, committed to anti-racist work in majority white sections of left social movements with the goal of building multiracial left movements for liberation. Since Katrina, Catalyst has made solidarity with the Gulf Coast a major part of our work.

From color of change comes this:

Introducing Voices from the Gulf

There are thousands of untold stories from Katrina survivors. Watch them, and help them be told through Voices from the Gulf.

We all know the headlines dominating the public conversation around Hurricane Katrina: politicians making declarations but doing very little, levees not being rebuilt, and thousands of people who want to return home but can't.

But we rarely get a chance to hear Katrina survivors speaking in their own words, talking about where they are today and how they are moving forward to rebuild their lives. On the second anniversary of Katrina, we wanted to connect folks around the country, as directly as possible, to Katrina survivors -- creating a window into their lives. And we wanted to provide a platform for Katrina survivors to make their stories heard, now and into the future.

The result is VoicesFromTheGulf.com. Check it out and participate here:

<http://www.colorofchange.org/vfg/?id=1969-46679>

VoicesFromTheGulf.com launches today with stories from ten different individuals and families, each with a unique perspective and experience. But that's just the start. In the coming weeks and months, we hope to add hundreds more stories, as survivors who want to share their stories are connected to volunteers who have a video camera and Internet connection. The site makes it easy. Survivors and videographers fill out a simple form and, based on geography, are put in contact with one another. They then get together, shoot their video, and upload it to the VoicesFromTheGulf.com website.

If you have a video camera, and you'd like to interview a Katrina survivor, sign up here:

<http://www.colorofchange.org/vfg/camera.html?id=1969-46679>

If you're a Katrina survivor and want to share your experiences, sign up here:

<http://www.colorofchange.org/vfg/survivor.html?id=1969-46679>

As the media moves on to other stories, a living collection of testimony is critical. It puts the stories of survivors at the center of the dialogue around a just rebuild. And it informs those of us who want to support Katrina survivors with knowledge about who they are and what they need.

The failures during Hurricane Katrina were a failure of America as a community. But the stories of people reaching out, connecting, and helping one another during and immediately after the storm showed Americans at our best. If America doesn't want to fail the Gulf Coast again -- if we want to help -- we have to stay connected. VoicesFromTheGulf.com is about making this connection happen.

We hope you'll join us in sharing and hearing these stories.

Thank You and Peace,

-- James, Van, Gabriel, Clarissa, Mervyn, and the rest of the ColorOfChange.org team  
August 24th, 2007

Another resource is [cws.workshop.org/katrinareader](http://cws.workshop.org/katrinareader) which will eventually have a whole bunch of second commemoration materials up.

[Hurricane Katrina: The Black Nation's 9-11! By Saladin Muhammad](#)

Gulf South Allied Funders invite you to

A blow-out New Orleans style party to honor the activists who are bringing the spirit of hope to their communities and to benefit the Twenty-First Century Foundation's Hurricane Katrina Initiative

featuring:

Master of Ceremonies Van Jones

Author and Performance Poet Michael Otieno Molina

Henry Clement & the Gumbo Band

The Food & Spirits of New Orleans

Wednesday, September 19th

6pm till much later

The Park Chalet

1000 Great Highway at Ocean Beach

San Francisco

Visit Twenty-First Century's Hurricane Katrina Initiative

Buy Tickets! More information Email us at [risingup@fusionconsultants.org](mailto:risingup@fusionconsultants.org)

The Twenty-First Century Foundation presents an interactive, multi-media Funders Briefing on the victories and challenges of rebuilding the Gulf Coast sponsored by The Gulf South Allied Funders (GSAF)

Wednesday, September 19, 2007

2 to 5 pm

Tides Center

The Presidio, San Francisco

Join five outstanding Gulf Coast activists for an in depth analysis of the challenges and opportunities of rebuilding the Gulf Coast, the approaches that are working, and the strategies that are still needed.

Presenters

Steve Bradbury, Louisiana ACORN

Judith Browne-Dianis, The Advancement Project

Derrick Evans, Turkey Creek Community Initiative

Derrick Johnson, NAACP of Mississippi

Patricia Jones, Lower Ninth Ward Neighborhood Empowerment Network Association

Jason Sanders, Tides Foundation

Rev. John H. Vaughn, Twenty-First Century Foundation

The Gulf South Allied Funders include Resource Generation, Women Donors Network, Threshold Foundation, Tides Foundation, and individual donors.

[Printer-friendly version](#) • [Email this article to a friend](#)

## International Tribunal Issues Preliminary Findings: Bus, Blanco, Nagin Committed Crimes against Humanity

[Printer-friendly version](#) • [Email this article to a friend](#)

---

**Organization:**

Peoples Hurricane Relief Fund and Oversight Coalition

**Author:**

Kali Akuno

**Date Published:**

09/10/2007

**PRESS RELEASE**

Contact: Monifa Bandele (917) 407- 3018

**International Tribunal Issues Preliminary Findings  
Bush, Blanco, Nagin Committed Crimes against Humanity**

### New Orleans—

Between August 29, 2007 and September 2, 2007, a Tribunal of 16 esteemed jurists from nine countries, including Algeria, Brazil, France, Guadeloupe, Martinique, Mexico, South Africa, Venezuela, and the United States, convened in New Orleans to hear testimony by experts and survivors of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

After hearing nearly 30 hours of testimony by hurricane survivors and experts – covering government neglect and negligence in 15 areas, ranging from police brutality to environmental racism, from misappropriation of relief to gentrification, the jurists announced their preliminary findings.

Jill Soffiyah Elijah, the Deputy Director of the Criminal Justice Institute at Harvard Law School and Coordinating Justice for the International Tribunal on Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, announced the Tribunal's preliminary findings, "It is our view that the US Government has committed crimes against humanity particularly in relation to its failure to maintain functional levees that should have protected the City of New Orleans from flooding....it was the reckless disregard and, in some instances, negligence of the US government, the state of Louisiana and the city of New Orleans that created the devastation we continue to see today."

Elijah also announced that the Tribunal made preliminary findings that the federal, state and local governments are guilty of violating the human rights to life, dignity and recognition of personhood; the right to be free from racial discrimination-- especially as it pertains to the actions of law enforcement personnel and vigilantes; the right to return, resettlement and reintegration of internally displaced persons; the right to be free from degrading treatment and punishment; the right to freedom of movement; the right to adequate housing and education; the right to vote and participate in governance and the right to a fair trial, the right to liberty and security of person and the right to equal protection under the law. Both actions and failure to act by the governments had disproportionate devastating impact with respect to race and gender.

The jurists announced that they would deliver their final verdict December 8, 2007—the second anniversary of the Katrina Survivors' Assembly. In the meantime, prosecutors will be submitting additional evidence and videotaped affidavits from an additional 25 survivors.

The prosecution team included experienced attorneys from respected legal associations around the country: the ACLU of New York, National Economic and Social Rights Initiative, the US Human Rights Network, the National Conference of Black Lawyers, the Center for Constitutional Rights, National Lawyers Guild, the Center for Law and Social Justice at Medgar Evers College, the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, Mississippi Workers Center for Human Rights, Washington DC Legal Defender, Mississippi Disaster Relief Coalition, International Association of Democratic Lawyers, Legal Empowerment Center and the Louisiana Justice Initiative.

The Tribunal Conveners—representing movements for justice on four continents—reminded Tribunal participants and witnesses of the solemnity of their task. Lybon Mabasa, a founding member with Stephen Biko of the Black Consciousness Movement w in South Africa, insisted, "We must hold these criminal governments to account in order to stop the world from sinking into barbarism and to make the world one where life is worth living."

#

For samples of videotaped testimony, contact Monifa Bandele at (917) 407-3018

[Printer-friendly version](#) • [Email this article to a friend](#)