



3/22/06

Malik Rahim and Common Ground: Paving the way home to New Orleans

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by CC Campbell-Rock

While politicians do battle with grassroots organizations, civil rights attorneys and community activists over the soul of New Orleans and the right of the displaced to return, Common Ground Collective, the first grassroots group to tackle the rebuilding process, continues to expand on its mission of paving the way for New Orleanians to return home.

"We are less than 90 days away from hurricane season, so we're launching our 'Are You Prepared Campaign,'" said Malik Rahim, founder of Common Ground.

Rahim, the keynote speaker at the ANSWER Coalition's "Stop the War" march and rally in San Francisco March 18, added, "We're asking universities to establish evacuee centers. We are building a preparedness kit."

The former Black Panther and community organizer said the focus of the hurricane preparedness campaign is to teach people how to rebuild and, if necessary, how to evacuate "without being dependent on an antiquated levee system or local, state and federal government."

"Our levee system is a failure. We don't need levees. We need a storm protection system," Rahim continued. "One thing we've learned: We can't control nature. We're asking people to rebuild and rebuild smart."

"We're communicating with the community. We're discussing hurricane resistance homes. We noticed that the wood houses in the Lower Ninth Ward looked like toothpicks, but houses build of bricks and cinderblocks are still standing. We need homes made of those materials, elevated homes. But all of these are moot issues until the wetlands are restored," said Common Ground spokesperson Sakura Koné.



Revolutionary journalist Kiilu Nyasha was with New Orleans' Common Ground Collective cofounder Malik Rahim and his son Malik at Friday's opening night reception for the "Black Panther Rank and File" photo exhibit that is showing until July 2 at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco. Since September, 4,500 people have volunteered with Common Ground, serving and working in solidarity with 65,000 Katrina survivors! Malik says that what he learned as a Panther guides the work of Common Ground. Both Kiilu and Malik have practiced the principles of the Black Panther Party every day of their lives.

Photo: JR

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Sakura Koné and his children – from left, Mzilikazi Koné, Sakura Koné, Sundjata Koné and Nzinga Koné – in a photo taken a couple of years ago near the Presidio in San Francisco. Sakura is now the spokesperson for the Common Ground Collective in New Orleans.

However, rebuilding smart is undergirded by the principle that man has to “co-exist with nature, not fight against it,” Koné added. “That’s the focus and skills of our construction workshop. We have a vision. We’re looking at rebuilding energy efficient homes, solar power and organic gardens. We don’t want to repeat the errors of these clowns who are running the government.”

Common Ground’s construction co-op is also operative. “We’re taking the unemployed and giving

them skills training in all aspects of the construction trades. They can then rebuild their own homes and work in the industry,” he added.

“Right now, Ray Nagin put out that you can rebuild – but rebuild at your own risk. If I had run for mayor, I’d be condoning an election that is criminal at best and immoral at the very least,” Rahim answered when asked why he declined to run for mayor.

“We (the U.S.) made more of a commitment to the Afghans, Iraqis and Mexicans. We made sure they had more of an opportunity to vote than Americans. Do we have satellite polls, which can be easily done?” he asked.

“I didn’t run for mayor because I hope to lead a recall on every person that gets into office. It’s just, once again, this state showing how much it cares about Black people. We have to make sure the whole election is exposed for what it is.”

But nothing can dampen the exuberance being felt by the group, as Common Ground plays host to at least 1,100 college students who have forsaken the usual Spring Break party ritual to go down to New Orleans to help in the rebuilding effort.

“We have over 1,000 people, students of all colors – Blacks, Whites, Asians, people from Ivy League to community colleges. It’s such a good feeling to see the youth contribute to the restoration of New Orleans,” Rahim affirmed.

Howard University sent 200 students, Florida A&M, Hampton Institute, Xavier and Dillard and Southern universities, New York University, Georgetown University and the University of California system, among many other campuses, have sent hundreds of students to take part in the biggest civic project in the states.

Koné said Common Ground has arranged entertainment for the students, who deserve to unwind after working long hours, day after day. “They are enjoying musical groups, poetry slams and comedians, among other entertainment activities, some of which is being done by students themselves.”

Additionally, Common Ground's legal committee scored a victory recently in its effort to prevent landlords from evicting tenants. "The legal committee has gotten evictions delayed until March 28. We are fighting landlords who are forcibly evicting people. They are throwing (tenants) out, jacking up rents or, worse, selling their properties to speculative developers."

Since its inception in September 2005, Common Ground has gutted out at least 500 homes, treated hundreds of residents at its health clinics, brought thousands of volunteers to the Crescent City and distributed cleaning supplies and food to all who asked.

Only six months old, the not-for-profit organization is putting a holistic vision in play. The group has established a pre-school and day care program which will evolve, over time, into an elementary school, then a high school.

A skirmish with police last week only made organizers of the Common Ground more determined to move on with its education agenda. At least 100 volunteers took over the Martin Luther King School for Science and Technology in the Lower Ninth Ward, while another 500 stood outside.

"We went to clean it up and restore it to working condition," said Koné. He said the organization got involved in the school after watching parents beg the Orleans Parish School Board and elected city officials to re-open the school.

Common Ground members were prepared to go to jail in their effort to help the parents and students.

"The cops stood and watched us," Koné said. After the group finished cleaning the school, Common Ground received a call from Cecil Picard, Louisiana's education superintendent. He commended the group on the "fine work" they had done, but "We'll take it from here," Picard added.

They were told that if they didn't vacate the premises, Common Ground would be sued. "The next day, the police pushed us out," Koné explained.

However, Common Ground's continuous negotiations with key Orleans Parish School Board members paid off when, on March 21, the school board adopted a resolution recognizing the community's desire for reopening the school and Common Ground's commitment to preparing the school for students' return.

"The Louisiana Department of Education, the Lower Ninth Ward Residents and Common Ground, with the support of the Orleans Parish School Board, will work to develop a plan in the next week to prepare for the basic opening (including inventorying of school contents, gutting, cleaning and mold remediation) of the Martin Luther King site for use by the community for educational purposes," according to the resolution posted on Common Ground's website, www.commongroundrelief.org.

"Our intention is to secure the approval from all necessary parties to open the school for community use in the immediate future and for the complete reopening of the school as quickly as feasible."

Families interested in enrolling their children in MLK Science and Technology Elementary School can call (504) 240-2111 for more information.

Rahim said he is more worried now about a pandemic crisis than a hurricane. "My greatest fear is that if a pandemic crisis hit this country and we have to depend on the governor, the mayor or the president to help us, what will happen to our people?"

Common Ground is currently negotiating for space in which to host a series of concerts. The fundraisers could add a much needed infusion of money with which to continue Common Ground's work. Donations are always welcomed. Contributors can call the non-profit organization at (504) 368-6897 to make a donation or contribute online at www.commongroundrelief.org.

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