

New Orleans Response: Just What the Rightwing Ordered

Hurricane Katrina exposed the institutional racism and disdain for the poor that remain ingrained in the fabric of our society. It wasn't nature's fury alone, but the Right's gutting of the basic capacities of the democratic state that led to the failure to respond quickly and humanely to the Hurricane victims.

The Bush Administration's preference for tax-giveaways to the rich and its opposition to public investment of any form (except in the military), perhaps coupled with the knowledge that New Orleans is 68% black, led it to reject a \$70 billion Army Corps of Engineer request to repair the levees years ago. For a brief moment, mainstream news outlets noticed that the United States is starkly inequalitarian. But this brief public window onto the consequences of three decades of punitive social policy will not by itself reverse Bush's funneling tax benefits to the rich. These policies can only be overturned by a political defeat of the "trickle down" economics revived under Bush. Only the rebirth of a majoritarian democratic left, aware of the Right's use of racism to divide a potential progressive majority, can give rise to the accountable government programs necessary to provide all communities with high-quality public health care, housing, education, and infrastructure development.

Hurricane Katrina's devastation of New Orleans and much of the Gulf Coast demonstrates more than any other event in recent history the absence of social solidarity in the United States and the lack of government commitment to the common welfare. Police in one New Orleans suburb turned back at gun-point black New Orleans residents fleeing a flooded and dangerous city. Poor and working poor were left to fend for themselves, then blamed for their failure to escape. Public officials not only failed to mobilize hundreds of New Orleans school buses to evacuate thousands of car-less residents, the buses were abandoned in flooded parking lots. Much of the states' Na-



tional Guard forces, which should have responded to the crisis, were instead bogged down in Iraq.

The government that failed so miserably to prepare for or respond to the disaster is precisely the government that Republicans and other reactionaries want—a government stripped not only of financial resources, but of well-trained, motivated, and accountable public employees.

That the Bush regime transformed FEMA's leadership into a dumping ground for political cronies exemplifies that the Right has no commitment to the public good.

The poor and working people who are the primary victims of this storm and its aftermath are likely to be the primary victims of the recovery. Homes beyond repair number more than 100,000.

Corporate developers will be quick to buy out the poor at bargain basement prices, as they attempt to transform the Big Easy from a unique cultural community into a corporate tourist magnet. What happens to those who have lost titles to a destroyed house in a poor neighborhood? Who will uncover the title in the flooded courthouse, and decide on compensation—or even track down a displaced family that fled to Houston or Baton Rouge? And who speaks for the large number of renters? Mainstream politicians of all stripes will counsel in favor of "privatization" and tax give-away "investment zones." Where are the calls from political leaders for a true Marshall Plan for our cities, which would train residents in the skilled trades needed to rebuild crumbling infrastructure and affordable, quality housing while simultaneously providing one way out of decades and centuries of economic and racial oppression? Where are the leaders ready to reverse the practices that accentuate climate change and resulting eco-devastations?

The Administration is already pursuing a corporate-friendly, union-busting path by suspending prevailing-wage and affirmative action rules for contractors. Paying nine dollars an hour and employing black New Orleans

residents is evidently too much for George Bush and his corporate friends. And now weeks after the tragedy the President still proposes solutions that are inadequate and under funded. Progressives must organize and demand a “bottom up” recovery program that is transparent, inclusive, and fully funded—without gutting other important programs, particular those that benefit the poor. Community-based and poor people’s organizations must be at the center of planning and implementing the recovery.

Katrina has exposed the Bush regime’s hypocrisy, but we cannot say previous administrations of either party would have done better. The failure to protect New Orleans stems from political leaders taking a pass on the public investments needed to provide true social security for all citizens. The literature on the vulnerability of the Gulf region is large, scientifically verified and accessible; it has even been featured on NOVA TV-episodes and in National Geographic. The development of the Gulf Coast involved billions of public dollars for the petro-chemical industry, and later the gaming industry. Flood controls that benefited agri-business and real estate interests undermined the barrier islands and marshes that protected the region from flooding. Any sane rebuilding of the Gulf region must follow the principles of sustainable development—even when such principles run up against the capitalist values of privatization and profit maximization.

Since the election of Ronald Reagan, the work of the governing Right has been to cut taxes, shrink government services, and starve income support programs. It’s been a bi-partisan policy, where Democrats offered a version of conservatism-lite promoting neo-liberal policies of “re-inventing government,” making it smaller but less effective. Both sides, though the Right has been more blatant, have used racist stereotyping to demonize the poor and thus erode public support for the social safety net. After a generation of choosing between neo-conservatism and New Democrats, the public is left with a government incapable of responding to a crisis that even Republican voters say requires a governmental response. Because there is less financial profit in building public levees, restoring marshland, constructing affordable housing, or providing meaningful job training for the unemployed, it takes a democratic government using funds collected via progressive taxation to create such public goods.

DSA supports a special, independent commission to investigate the Katrina disaster, as well as the long-term neglect of investment in public infrastructure that makes all of us vulnerable to further ‘acts of nature.’ We demand that poor people’s organizations such as ACORN be involved in planning the rebuild from its earliest stages. We

call on the Attorney Generals of the relevant states to appoint special prosecutors to investigate those public officials and private institutions that recklessly disregarded the poor and frail. We demand vast increases in legal service budgets so that low-income people can protect themselves from predatory developers. We call on Congress to implement a need-based system for rationing heating oil, and other petroleum products if necessary, to counter the rationing created by price-gouging speculative “market forces.”

Democratic socialists understand that we live in a society driven by the priorities of large corporations. Such corporations are “retooling” the economy and the wage structure to inflate profits and drive down living standards. At the center of this “race-to-the-bottom” economic strategy is the elimination of unions and other institutions that allow ordinary people to fight back and to contest for a government that will act on their behalf. The forces of reaction also deliberately use racially coded language and symbols to maintain institutionalized racism, dividing a potential multi-racial coalition against corporate power.

Like many others, DSA is raising funds for relief. Our efforts will be geared towards aiding community-based organizations that fight for the interests of poor and working people. We also challenge ourselves, and our allies in the larger progressive community, to redouble efforts to take back the political and ideological ground lost to the Right. If the trend toward gutting the capacity of the democratic state continues, more Katrinas will result in further collapses of basic civic decency and civic responsibility.

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