

Crackdown on looting

New Orleans police ordered to stop saving lives and start saving property

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New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin ordered nearly the entire active police force in the flood-ravaged city to abandon rescue operations Wednesday night and focus on efforts to halt looting. The decision came in response to mounting pressure from sensationalized media coverage which is increasingly placing emphasis on the property damage done by looters, suggesting that it has become nearly as significant a social problem as the virtual destruction of the city by Hurricane Katrina.

Nagin said that looters “are starting to get closer to heavily populated areas—hotels, hospitals, and we’re going to stop it right now.” He assigned 1,500 police to anti-looting duty. The Associated Press reported, “The number of officers called off the search-and-rescue mission amounts to virtually the entire police force in New Orleans.”

The order came only hours after Nagin warned that the death toll in New Orleans might rise to the “thousands” once the bodies of those trapped in their homes by the flood waters begin to be recovered. Thousands of people have been rescued from rooftops and attics over the past two days, but efforts to save other survivors will be drastically curtailed as a result of the new focus on saving property.

Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco said she would order National Guardsmen redeployed to stop looters as soon as federal emergency personnel were on scene to take over evacuations and rescues. “We will restore law and order,” the Democratic governor declared. “What angers me the most is that disasters like this often bring out the worst in people. I will not tolerate this kind of behavior.”

The media focus on the looting escalated throughout Wednesday, with the cable television networks, in

particular, broadcasting and rebroadcasting the same footage of looters, mainly young black people, emerging from flood-damaged stores, goods in hand.

There is a definite social significance to such coverage, which grossly distorts the reality of the worst natural disaster in American history. It demonstrates that under the profit system, private property counts for far more than human life.

The sensationalized press coverage has an obvious political purpose: to demonize the victims of Hurricane Katrina and whip up the basest sentiments, including racism. In this way, the media helps justify the policy already decided on by the American ruling class and the Bush administration—to carry out only the most perfunctory recovery efforts and leave the vast majority of working class victims of the catastrophe to fend for themselves.

It is noteworthy that only 12 hours before he ordered the police mobilization, Mayor Nagin brusquely rejected a question about looting from Matt Lauer, host of NBC’s *Today* program, telling him the media was grossly exaggerating the significance of a relative handful of people taking television sets and other electronic goods. The bulk of the “theft,” he pointed out, was desperate people taking food, bottled water and clothing to meet their immediate needs.

In a subsequent press interview, Nagin said, “It’s really difficult because my opinion of the looting is it started with people running out of food, and you can’t really argue with that too much. Then it escalated to this kind of mass chaos where people are taking electronic stuff and all that.”

A report in Wednesday’s *New York Times* confirmed this account, describing the scene at the Super Wal-

Mart on Tchoupitoulas Street in the Lower Garden District of New Orleans, where dozens of people were taking goods from the store with the tacit consent of both the store management and local police and firefighters. The store initially opened its doors to supply food to the rescue workers, but was then invaded by local residents, most of them in search of food and clothing.

One woman, accompanied by her teenage daughter, told the *Times*, “Ain’t nobody stealing anything. They said, ‘Take what you need,’ because the levee is a-busting. It’s about to flood and everything is going to be ruined anyway.” A young man told the newspaper, “We need clothes and food. The police are letting everybody go in and get what they need. They’re not letting you get TV’s and stuff, but the people are overpowering them.”

Like all such events, the hurricane disaster has an enormous social component, revealing what American society is made of. Contrary to Governor Blanco, however, the “worst in people” is shown in the lack of preparation by the authorities and their relative indifference to the suffering inflicted on several million people by the high winds, storm surge and flooding.

When it comes to theft, the looting of consumer goods from a few retail stores in impoverished New Orleans can hardly compare with the profiteering already under way on the part of big business. The price-gouging on gasoline sales alone—the retail price has jumped \$1 a gallon in some areas—has robbed billions of dollars from working people all over the United States. But no oil company executives or gasoline distributors are being vilified on the media, let alone hunted down by police and National Guardsmen.



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