

Hurricane Katrina evacuees in Michigan: “They ordered the evacuation, but there were no buses, nothing”

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About one million people have been displaced by Hurricane Katrina, according to various reports. Most of the survivors have left New Orleans and the surrounding areas, dispersed throughout the country in emergency shelters, military bases and donated living spaces. A majority moved in with friends and family, and so their new location is not known. Nearly 60,000 remain displaced within Louisiana's overburdened shelter system.

At least 60,000 moved to Arkansas, immediately increasing the state's population by 2.5 percent. More than 220,000 have been brought to Texas, which has sought the aid of other states to provide shelters. From there, authorities have flown them to places as far as Michigan, Arizona, Utah, West Virginia and Iowa.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* went to the Southfield, Michigan, Ramada Inn, which donated rooms and food to nearly 200 evacuees from Louisiana.

A 28-year-old mother with two children, aged 11 and 12, said she was extremely upset with what has happened. She was at the hotel with her friend who had encouraged her to come to Detroit. “I lost my car, my home, I lost everything in the flood,” said the mother who did not want to reveal her name. “And it upsets me because it didn't have to happen this way had they just spent the money to fix the levees. My kids and I are homeless, and we don't know where we are going to live.”

She continued, “They issued a mandatory evacuation to leave the city, so I took my kids to Houston, Texas, so that they would be safe.” Later, they went to the Astrodome.

The mother had a hard time recalling the days of the events, because “it was all such a whirl. I thought it was on Tuesday, but I am not sure. We were at the Astrodome for a couple of days when I saw someone circulating around asking if anyone wanted to go to Detroit. I decided to go because I had a good friend there who could help me.”

About 80 percent of New Orleans evacuees were able to leave before Katrina hit, while the rest remained in the city during the storm, abandoned by a nonexistent evacuation policy. Many of those left behind are being loaded on to buses and planes by FEMA and scattered across the country, without receiving a

hint as to their destination.

In another cruel blow, FEMA suddenly announced late last Friday that it would discontinue its two-day program of handing out \$2,000 debit cards to evacuees. It will distribute the remainder of the cards to those in shelters in Texas, and no other states will receive them. Many people waited on lines for hours in expectation of receiving one, only to find out they were duped into waiting to fill out FEMA paperwork without obtaining any immediate financial assistance. FEMA officials have pledged to make direct deposits into evacuees' bank accounts on an individual basis some time in the future, but with many victims left with no mailing address or open account, such a plan is fraught with problems.

In addition, insurance companies have claimed that many victims' houses were destroyed by flood damage, not the hurricane. The insurers say that even if the homes were insured, no damages would be paid out unless homeowners had bought separate flood insurance. Private insurers do not provide flood insurance; it is only offered by the government, with a \$250,000 cap on compensation for private residences, far below the market price of many New Orleans homes. Only about 84,000 New Orleans homeowners, or 40 percent, had flood insurance. The rest will likely be forced to sell their lots to developers.

FEMA bused up to 500 evacuees to Michigan to be housed in the barracks at Fort Custer Training Center outside Battle Creek. In addition, hundreds have driven up to Michigan on their own. In Sterling Heights, 28 evacuees have been staying at the Best Western Sterling Inn. Between 150 and 200 people displaced by hurricane Katrina have been offered temporary assistance by the Ramada Inn in Southfield, Michigan.

Wallace Wells, a spokesman for the Ramada Hotel and director of “Operation Open Arms,” said the hotel was hosting approximately 200 people from Louisiana displaced by the flood. “Our aim is to raise \$10 million dollars for relief for the families. That may be a tall order, but we have raised \$700,000 so far.” Wells said their aim was to get homes, jobs and placements for education for those staying at the hotel.

“People are being offered houses so that they have a place to

stay. We realize that these families have lost everything, so we want to offer the housing without making them pay rent when they do not have the money,” he said. The *Detroit Free Press* reported that hundreds of people have called a Detroit hurricane hot line set up to accept assistance and donations for the people stranded in Michigan’s hotels and army bases.

Sam Yono, the owner of the Ramada Inn in Southfield, offered rooms, apparently frustrated by the disorganization and slow response of authorities. The *Detroit News* writes, “Yono was born only months after his family’s Iraqi village of Telkaif was devastated by a massive flood.” His brother was killed in the flood, and since then, “Yono has always identified with the poor, the suffering and, especially, with those who lose their homes from raging waters.”

When the *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team arrived at the Southfield Ramada, a young volunteer assigned to act as security for the flood victims angrily told them to leave the premises, assuming they were with the mainstream media. Reporters from Fox News, a television station known for its right-wing news coverage, had an office across the street. “I don’t think these people want to be bothered,” he said.

However, once he understood that the team was from the WSWs, which has opposed the Iraq war and has carried extensive coverage exposing the government’s role in the Katrina tragedy, his reaction quickly changed. “These people are OK,” he told other staffers. “Their publication is telling the uncensored truth. They are not like the others.” A number of the evacuees began to tell their harrowing stories.

Tomeka, 17, came from Harvey, Louisiana, across the river from New Orleans. She traveled to Detroit along with 25 other members of her family, all siblings and cousins, after they realized their homes were severely damaged due to the hurricane and flooding. They all arrived at the Southfield Ramada Inn.

She described her family’s ordeal to WSWs reporters. “I was scared. I never experienced anything like this,” Tomeka said. “The roof of our house was lifted off and the roof of our cousins’ home was smashed in.”

“When the storm came, we first stayed at a hotel, all 26 of us. The hotel also became damaged, and we had to evacuate this as well, so we went back to our houses. The houses were unlivable because the roof was smashed in and the water was very high.

“Later we went to our auntie’s house in Monroe, Louisiana. But after a while we had an altercation with her. She put us out, and we had to leave. We also had relatives in Detroit. They helped us out by renting two cars, and along with the one we had, we decided to drive to Detroit. We also went to her house, but it was pretty difficult.”

Fabian, 46, an electrician from New Orleans, said, “It was a rough experience. We’ve been through many hurricanes, but nothing like this. That’s why a lot of people stayed. I would have stayed. If my aunt had not begged me to go with her, I would have been one of them on the rooftop.”

Fabian had been in contact with a few of his friends from New Orleans. “A couple friends of ours were on that bridge barefoot. If I had stayed, I might have been one of them.” They were bused to Arkansas and Houston. He said, “When you get on those buses, you don’t know where you’re going. They’re going to places they’ve never been. They don’t know their way around, they don’t have their own transportation, and they don’t know if they’ll find jobs.”

Comparing the conditions in the hotel and the endemic poverty facing many of New Orleans’ residents, he said, “You got some people in this hotel living better than they ever lived. But it’s only for a few weeks. We still have nothing to go back to. Others are living in army barracks. I don’t know how they’re doing it.”

Fabian also spoke about the dislocation affecting many of the evacuees: “We’ve got families spread out and separated; they don’t know where they’re at. FEMA is supposed to be giving us \$2,000—for what I don’t know. All my belongings are gone. We’re only supposed to be here two weeks. They told me a house in Pontiac is open, but that’s not acceptable to me. I want to stay in the Southfield-Detroit area; I graduated from high school in this area, so I know my way around. I have no transportation, I don’t know anything about that place.

“The plane ticket from Baton Rouge cost \$600! From Houston it’s \$300. Why should I have to pay that? I should be reimbursed.” He also said his home and workplace had been destroyed, his car lost, and he did not know if he would be compensated. He plans to remain in Detroit and is waiting for his daughter to fly in from Baton Rouge.

Fabian called the government response “terrible.” He said, “It was not only race but what class you were in. Some people just couldn’t get out. They ordered the evacuation, but there were no buses, nothing.”

“Mike Brown was an idiot,” he added, “I believe they did nothing because it was mostly black. They also had no resources the government could use there. If it was one of Bush’s neighborhoods or his friends’, they would have had help right away.”

He also denounced the media, describing their portrayal of the victims as “ridiculous.” “It was three, four, five days before they got anything. People were dying, they were stuck together like sardines, they had to defecate basically where they stood, there was no security and the criminals were put in this tight box with everyone else. It was the government’s fault.”



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