

Eyewitness to the New Orleans disaster: report from a WSWS reader

6 September 2005

The World Socialist Web Site received a letter from New Orleans resident RC on September 3 describing his reactions to the disaster that unfolded in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. On September 4, he sent a further account of his personal experience of the hurricane and its aftermath. We publish both of these letters below.

Thank you, WSWS, for devoting some of your editorials to the tragedy here, with your characteristically excellent analysis of events. This event truly has laid bare, unlike any other, the awful contradictions and hypocrisies of American society. I love this city; I live in an area of the city where many of the people we see desperate and dying on television come from. I saw the desperation of the people first hand, having only escaped three days after the storm.

I'm a citizen of Caucasian origin, having grown up in a bourgeois middle-class environment in New Orleans, but I had long become alienated from that segment of the population. So when I moved back here after university, I chose to live down in the real New Orleans, among the beautiful and vibrant working class black community, from whom priceless contributions to the nation's culture and heritage have flowered from the strength and uniqueness of their culture, and from the experience of their centuries of tribulations.

I just weep, and cry and scream when I see the state of my citizenry. I am in rage at the reaction of the wealthier layers of the population to the looting, as well as their inhuman indifference to whether or not these people live or die. The people of this city, plagued by generations of betrayals by the two-party oligarchy, by corruption and indifference, and now abandonment unto misery and death, need to hear the message of the SEP and WSWS. These two hideous parties that America has lived under since time immemorial need to be put down utterly.

RC

3 September 2005

I'm not currently in New Orleans at this time. I escaped on Wednesday evening, to Baton Rouge. I spent the days in New Orleans after the storm riding on my bicycle between two residences approximately three miles apart from one another. One was the apartment of an elderly couple who are friends of the family, and the other my own house.

I was riding back and forth to retrieve essentials from my house, such as water, non-perishable food items and some housecats. At the time, I was under the mistaken assumption that the storm was over, and I knew I had to hunker down somewhere for days, because I knew at this point that the electricity was going to be off for a long, long time (at least a month, the officials said at this point).

But the storm we call the hurricane was only the beginning of a sort of storm that no one could have imagined. Already, everyone knew that this was the case, and this is when people started breaking into the big grocery stores.

Think of that in the following context: Already people had been told that the electricity was down for the foreseeable future, most of the main pumping stations were inoperable, and there were multiple levee breaches. The streets in the vast majority of the city were all waist-deep, at least. The only source of information in the entire area was via a single radio station, which was fielding calls from frightened people throughout the region. There was every conceivable rumor and degree of misinformation in the air. Mobile phones were already giving up due to the failure of cell phone towers.

And this was only Monday. Night fell. One could tell there were no lights on in the entire region, for the sky was completely devoid of the usual light pollution that

accompanies human population, as the stars were visible to a degree only possible way out in rural areas. The entire time, I was listening to the only functioning radio station on a little transistor radio, which was reporting news from the officials, but most of the time was attempting to function as a surrogate emergency services phone number, because 911 was completely overwhelmed with people calling for help.

All throughout both nights I was in New Orleans during the aftermath, people were calling in, asking for information or help. The callers ranged from people from other areas enquiring about the status of this or that neighborhood, to terrified people, often with little children, and the elderly and infirm pleading for anyone to come rescue them. The waters continued to rise, and places that didn't even flood during the hurricane itself began to be covered. The next couple of days were more of the same, except things were getting worse and worse, and people in general were becoming more and more frightened. The world now knows the results. And yes, the looting got worse. Of course, people from outside who know nothing about New Orleans are surprised. Our stinking leaders, right up to that pathetic shill they call the president, talk of "civic duty." There is an enormous population of poor, uneducated, and angry people here who have had few opportunities for generations.

The working class who actually have work have no hope of advancement from their meager salaries. Many find that the only way they can provide for themselves monetarily is by hustling and dealing something.

The educational system is a tragedy beyond description, with a shamefully inadequate budget, choked further by a crippling, self-interested bureaucracy, and has been so for generations. The entire city is awash with guns. It is clear that the only thing that has historically kept all hell from breaking loose in the past is our enormous and exceptionally brutal police force, which was effectively neutralized by the flooding.

Therefore, it only follows that there will be people stealing. All too human. And all the other violence. It's a preexisting condition here, with roots centuries deep.

These people didn't deserve this, they need love, and all they get is scorn on the television, and being herded together in the heat, under heavily armed guard, being treated like these so-called "enemy combatants" so

talked about. And then begrudgingly given some kind of transport. These beautiful, vibrant black people, whose epic struggle, whose work, and the very song from their hearts has so enormously shaped this nation. And to top it all off, you know what was stopping food and water getting to the dome and convention center? Nothing but neglect.

The way out of the city from the area of those two facilities is simple: west down Tchoupitoulas to Calliope St., get on the ramp to the Crescent City Connection (those twin bridges you see crossing the Mississippi River downtown), Highway 90 west, then I-310 to I-10 west, and you're outta there, hardly even getting your tires wet.

This is exactly the route I took after I hitched a ride. So, in other words, it's not like the city was cut off or anything. The reverse directions could have been bringing food and water early on, but, of course, that didn't happen. The way in was actually blocked by cops at every single inbound entrance to the route I just described, ostensibly to keep citizens out, for what seemed like 20 miles west of New Orleans.

It seems that every layer of government above the level of municipal officialdom made no preparations for this at all. Everyone knew the magnitude of this storm. The damn thing had been barreling towards somewhere along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico for how many days? Where was the mobilization of anything, anything at all?

I wouldn't be surprised at all if the highest echelons of our government actually hoped for a more catastrophic disaster than usual, so that it could knock Iraq and the gathering antiwar movement out of the headlines, so they could do their posturing. But it has done just the opposite, because the stinking racket they have been playing for so long is crumbling to dust, and they cannot even hope to appear to be anything but wraith-like monsters, without any genuine human feeling at all.

RC

4 September 2005



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