

Three months after the Katrina disaster: New Orleans left for dead

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An editorial last Sunday in the *New York Times*, headlined “Death of an American City,” begins, “We are about to lose New Orleans.” It goes on to state that “the moment is upon us when a major American city will die, leaving nothing but a few shells for tourists to visit like a museum.”

Adding that this major American city “is in complete shambles”—and that the government plan for reconstruction is “a rudderless ship”—the *Times* states what is, in fact, a brutal reality.

The *Times* makes the correct point that without reassurances that the failed levee system will be reconstructed to protect the city against future deadly storms, residents and business owners will not be willing to make a commitment to return and rebuild their city and their lives. In fact, authorities have done nothing to provide any such guarantee, an ominous indication that New Orleans is being abandoned and left to die.

Some 100 days after Hurricane Katrina hit land on August 29, at least 80 percent of New Orleans residents have not returned. The city’s infrastructure is in ruins. Only 50 percent of homes still standing have gas service. Best estimates are that only half have electricity. City buses are operating at 10 percent.

Before the Katrina disaster, 55,000 students attended 116 public schools in New Orleans. Today, just one has reopened. While five more schools are scheduled to open this month, only 4,000 students are registered for them. When Tulane University reopens January 17 it will be with 230 fewer faculty, as the prestigious institution copes with lost revenues and budget cuts totaling about \$100 million.

Thousands of hurricane evacuees remain scattered across the US. Some 40,000 families are still living in trailers. Where trailers are desperately needed by returning Louisiana residents trying to rebuild their homes and their lives, the Federal Emergency Management

Agency has provided only 8,780, according to FEMA’s own figures. In another demonstration of bureaucratic ineptitude and indifference, thousands of available trailers stored nearby have not been delivered, the supplier awaiting payment from FEMA.

In devastated working class neighborhoods, like New Orleans’ Ninth Ward and nearby St. Bernard Parish, those who have returned face environmental hazards from toxic waste, spotty utility coverage and a lack of temporary housing. “Why couldn’t they put some mobile trailers right there where people could live at?” asked Upper Ninth Ward resident Alvin Cambric, interviewed by the *New Standard*. Cambric’s situation is typical. He is currently living in the front room of his storm-ravaged house, with no electricity, surviving on donated canned food.

Families continue to find bodies of loved ones left to rot in the hurricane’s wake.

A three-month hurricane-related deferment of mortgage payments ended on December 1. Some homeowners, many of whom cannot move back because their houses are severely damaged or have no electricity, are still living in hotels. The Louisiana Office of Financial Institutions has received hundreds of complaints that lenders are demanding homeowners make as many as four payments at once or face foreclosure.

A federal judge ruled Monday that FEMA must continue to pay for temporary housing in hotels, granting a last-minute reprieve for the estimated 41,000 evacuees still living in these accommodations in 47 states. There is no concrete plan for what will happen after the new February 7 deadline passes.

The permanent dispersal of hundreds of thousands of New Orleans residents across the country is not merely the result of indifference and incompetence. It facilitates a policy of downsizing the city and purging it, in particular, of its poorest residents.

Addressing the nation from New Orleans in mid-September, two weeks after Katrina hit, President Bush pledged not only to rebuild the city, but to build it “higher and better.” These promises have now been exposed for the hollow lies they always were.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote at the time, the real content of this public relations speech was “a series of signals to Wall Street and corporate America that not even the destruction of a major city will alter the very policies that produced the debacle.”

While the official death toll for Louisiana, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama and Georgia stands at 1,323, the real count will never be known. The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children lists more than 1,000 children still missing in the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, a harrowing figure.

In New Orleans, only the French Quarter and the city’s tourist areas have seen the beginnings of a revival. Even if one accepts the official unemployment figures of 15 percent in the metropolitan area, this still means a net loss of over 220,000 jobs. Only fast food restaurants and the hotel industry have seen any real signs of growth.

No federally funded program is in place to provide jobs or compensation for the hundreds of thousands who have lost their livelihoods and the ability to provide for their families. The jobless and displaced have been left to struggle on their own under conditions where the government itself was culpable not only for inadequate flood protection, but the utter failure to provide timely rescue and relief operations. There is no discussion of a public works program, which could create sorely needed jobs as well as rebuild the region’s ravaged infrastructure.

What is being demonstrated in the most tragic human terms is the inability of the capitalist profit system to provide even the basic prerequisites for civilized life in a major American city struggling in the aftershock of a hurricane catastrophe. There will no shift in basic social policy in response to the Katrina tragedy, even as it has become increasingly clear that proper planning and allocation of funds could have prevented the levees bursting in the first place.

While private contractors, not a few of them Bush cronies, are reaping the benefits of the “rebuilding” effort—and the most affluent neighborhoods and businesses begin to get back on their feet—for the mass of working people whose lives have been devastated, no significant assistance will be forthcoming. Their neighborhoods will not be restored to anything resembling their former condition, if they are rebuilt at all. Simply

put, it is not “cost effective”—so tough luck!

As the *Times* editorial points out, the cost of rebuilding the New Orleans levees, drainage canals and other defenses against a Category 5 hurricane would likely be in excess of \$32 billion. While it is widely accepted that without such protections a future hurricane catastrophe is all but assured, there has been no clamoring from any section of the political establishment—Republican or Democrat—for this money to be allocated.

Instead, in the wake of Katrina, Congress is pushing through major cuts in federal programs for the poor combined with new tax cuts for the rich. Just before Thanksgiving, the House of Representatives approved \$51 billion in budget cuts that will slash funds for programs like Medicare, food stamps and farm subsidies. Last week, it approved \$95 billion in tax cuts, including a two-year extension of Bush’s 2001 tax cut for stock dividends and capital gains—a provision that will overwhelmingly benefit the richest 10 percent of the population.

The price tag for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan continues to increase, exceeding \$300 billion. A government that has dragged the country into an illegal war—at a cost of nearly 2,150 American lives and tens of thousands of Iraqi lives—continues to spend billions a month to crush Iraqi resistance to the US occupation, while the population of the Gulf Coast region is left to rot at the mercy of the “magic” of the capitalist market.

The abandonment of New Orleans means the death of a city that has made a unique cultural contribution to American life, particularly in the field of music. The birthplace of jazz has from its earliest days been a vibrant blend of cultures—French, Spanish, Caribbean, African. But this means next to nothing to the money-mad US ruling elite.

Some 100 years ago San Francisco was rebuilt from the rubble of the great earthquake. Thirty-five years prior to that, Chicago was resurrected after the catastrophic fire of 1871. But in the twenty-first century, the decay and parasitism of American capitalism are such that no similar effort is to be made to save New Orleans.



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