

Hurricane Katrina two years on

Part 3: New Orleans levees still not rebuilt

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The following is the third part in a series of articles on the second anniversary of the Hurricane Katrina disaster. Part one, "New Orleans—A city in social and economic distress", was posed on August 29. Part two, "New Orleans: a scene of devastation and blight," was posted on August 31. This final installment will deal with profiteering in the Gulf Opportunity Zone.

"Hurricane Katrina: Social Consequences & Political Lessons," a pamphlet from Mehring Books that brings together articles and statements posted on the WSWs in the immediate aftermath of the Katrina disaster, is also available for purchase online.

At the two-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans is hardly less vulnerable to a major storm than it was in the period prior to August 2005.

The levee failure in 2005 was a manmade disaster caused by poor planning, inadequate funding and deficient construction. However, far from drawing any conclusions from this calamity, state and federal officials are laying the groundwork for a repeat occurrence. If another hurricane of similar magnitude were to strike today, the city could once again be inundated by floodwaters.

A special report on the two-year anniversary of Katrina in the August 12 edition of *Time* magazine carried the subtitle, "How a perfect storm of big-money politics, shoddy engineering and environmental ignorance is setting up the city for another catastrophe."

In its initial report published in the immediate aftermath of Katrina, the US Army Corps of Engineers claimed that the levees failed because they were overwhelmed by a storm of a magnitude they were not designed to withstand. Independent reports have refuted this view.

The storm surge from Hurricane Katrina overcame levees protecting New Orleans, which lies below sea level on a strip of land between Lake Pontchartrain and the Mississippi River. There were more than two dozen levee

breaches. The Mississippi River Gulf Outlet Canal breached its levees in about 20 places. Massive levee breaches occurred on the 17th Street Canal, the Industrial Avenue Canal and the London Avenue Canal, which intersect the heart of the city, leaving more than 80 percent of New Orleans flooded.

The storm surge resulted in water levels rising above the tops of levees in many areas. However, the London Avenue Canal levees and the 17th Street Canal levees failed without water reaching the tops of the floodwalls. These levee failures resulted in some of the most severe flooding.

A study by the Independent Levee Investigation Team published in 2006, while noting that the storm overtopped the levees in a few locations, cited poor construction and maintenance as the main cause of the catastrophe, along with "more global 'organizational' and institutional problems."

Robert Bea of the University of California Berkley, who led the investigation of the levee failure, called it the "largest engineering disaster in the history of the United States."

In its final report published in July 2006, the investigation team wrote, "Hurricane Katrina was a large hurricane, and its arrival at New Orleans represented the root cause of a natural disaster. This disaster grew to a full blown catastrophe, however, principally due to the massive and repeated failure of the regional flood protection system and the consequent flooding of approximately 85 percent of the greater metropolitan area of New Orleans."

Investigators found that in many areas the levees had been built using "major volumes of highly erodable sands and lightweight shell sands" that gave way in the face of the rising waters. It also found that sheetpile curtains supporting the concrete floodwalls atop the levees were not deep enough, allowing underseepage that led to massive breaches.

The investigation cited local authorities for failing to agree to Army Corps of Engineers plans for the construction of floodgates on the three drainage canals at the southern edge of Lake Pontchartrain. These were, according to the report, like “daggers” pointed at the heart of New Orleans. Breaches in levees along the canals were the source of 80 percent of the floodwater that covered the main downtown area of the city.

This gross negligence occurred despite the fact that it was well known that a potentially catastrophic storm was inevitable. In the wake of Hurricane Betsy in 1965, which flooded New Orleans and caused 75 deaths, Congress authorized the upgrading of levees around the city to withstand a category three hurricane, even though Betsy was category four.

The project was pursued in an unserious manner. To a large extent, it was viewed as a means of fattening the pockets of contractors, rather than a life-and-death question for the people of the city. It was poorly planned and rife with serious engineering errors. Forty years on, when Katrina hit, the project was still not complete. Indeed, the damage to New Orleans was exponentially greater than that visited by Betsy.

The experience since Katrina has demonstrated that government authorities at all levels are incapable of drawing the necessary conclusions and taking the required steps that arise from this disaster. Congress has refused to authorize funding to rebuild the levees even to their inadequate pre-Katrina state, let alone to build levees able to withstand a stronger storm. The work that is underway is not scheduled for completion until 2011.

Commenting on the state of the rebuilt levees, Bea told *National Geographic* in May of 2007, “These levees will not be there if you put a Katrina surge against them.” He noted that heavy rains had already washed away portions of the newly rebuilt levees, exposing a core of erodable sandy and muddy soils.

Another engineer warned that the new floodgates being installed at the head of the drainage canals were inadequate and might fail. He pointed out that the gates had no mechanism for clearing sediment and debris and might not be able to close properly. He also warned that new pumps were not functioning properly.

Further, the Army Corps has been unable to develop a regional plan for storm protection, which would include restoring wetlands that help absorb the impact of a storm. Work on sealing off the Mississippi River Gulf outlet, an old navigation channel, has yet to begin. Scientists say that the channel contributed to the erosion of wetlands and

helped magnify the impact of Katrina by funneling water into the city.

This situation is not the result simply of individual corruption or incompetence, though that certainly abounds. A repeat of the Katrina catastrophe is almost inevitable given the stranglehold private wealth exerts over all levels of the political system. US flood control coordination and planning are virtually non-existent.

The Army Corps of Engineers, which is charged with overseeing dam and levee construction as well as the maintenance of ports and waterways within the United States, is a military run organization, although the projects it oversees are virtually all non-defense related. Corps projects are funded by earmarks, money requested by individual Congressman for projects in their areas, which are often paybacks to wealthy political backers.

Following Katrina, Louisiana congressmen proposed a reconstruction bill that included billions for projects important to wealthy oil and shipping interests, but relatively little for actual levee construction.

Under these conditions, centralized planning and oversight, which are critical in the construction of a rational and effective storm protection system covering vast areas of the Gulf coast is impossible.

The design and realization of such a plan would require a centrally organized and massively funded effort that would run counter to the entire axis of US capitalist policy over the past three decades, which has been based on privatization and the looting of society’s resources to enrich a wealthy elite.

The American ruling elite has all but dismantled government oversight and regulation, branding basic concern over the health and safety of working people as an impediment to the free market. The result has been the breakdown of the basic infrastructure upon which the lives of millions of people depend.

The continued inability of the US government to provide protection to the people of New Orleans and the Gulf region demonstrates that the basic needs of working people are incompatible with a system based on production for private profit.



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