

New Orleans police attack residents protesting public housing demolition

Jeff Lassahn
22 December 2007

On Thursday, New Orleans police attacked demonstrators attempting to gain entrance to a city council meeting scheduled to discuss and vote on the destruction of 4,500 units of public housing. The proposed demolition is part of the effort to utilize the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina in 2005 to bring about permanent demographic change in New Orleans, aimed at preventing the return of poor and primarily black residents.

The local authorities and police acted in a thoroughly provocative manner Thursday. A police SWAT team was located inside the hall between council members and the audience, while barriers were set up outside manned by dozens of police.

Protesters first attempted to open the iron gates blocking their access to the meeting, alleging that the meeting was disproportionately filled with supporters of the demolition. Police responded with Tasers and large cans of mace, resulting in four hospitalizations. Videos of the event show demonstrators first being sprayed and forcibly kept from entering, and later, flushing their eyes out with water.

According to the Associated Press, “One woman was sprayed by police and dragged from the gates; emergency workers took her away on a stretcher. Another woman said she was stunned by officers, and still had what appeared to be a Taser wire hanging from her shirt. “I was just standing, trying to get into my City Council meeting,” said the dazed woman, Kim Ellis, who was taken away in an ambulance.”

The elected officials incurred the wrath of demonstrators and others by their arrogant and indifferent attitude. “City Council members—some sipping water, others leafing through file folders—looked on impassively as a man was tasered, handcuffed and dragged from the council chambers,”

reports the *Los Angeles Times*.

In the end, in what was largely a foregone conclusion, the seven-member council voted unanimously to demolish public housing units, confirming the suspicions of residents and demonstrators that their opposition would not be registered. Democratic Party mayor Ray Nagin issued a press release in which he claimed that “this is an incredible day. You heard lots of pain today. The City Council in its wisdom has come up with a solution that will allow us to move forward, to hold HUD [Housing and Urban Development] accountable.”

Various groups demanding that the housing be rebuilt offer a different story. The complexes now slated for demolition have been boarded up for over two years, ever since Katrina hit New Orleans. Some 3,000 former residents of public housing have been unable to return and are spread throughout the country. Of the buildings in question, some barely sustained any damage during the hurricane and reportedly could be repaired and reopened within a relatively short time, but are now slated for destruction.

According to Nicolai Ouroussoff, architecture critic of the *New York Times*, in an article highly critical of the proposed demolition, “The projects in New Orleans have little to do with the sterile brick towers and alienating plazas that usually come to mind when we think of inner-city housing. Some rank among the best early examples of public housing built in the United States, both in design and in quality of construction.”

Ouroussoff continues: “The quality of the construction materials would also be unimaginable in public housing today: Their concrete structural frames, red-brick facades and pitched terra cotta roofs would seem at home on a university campus.

“The problems facing these projects have more to do

with misguided policy and the city's complex racial history than with bad design. The deterioration can be attributed to the government's decision decades ago to gut most of the public services that supported them."

In any event, whatever the shape of the housing, the residents are no doubt correct in their suspicion that they are unwanted and that little or nothing will be done to bring them home.

An unusually high 57 percent of New Orleans residents were renters prior to Katrina. Since the storm, rent has skyrocketed 45 percent in the city, making housing costs an enormous hurdle for working-class residents trying to return. The homeless population has nearly doubled, from 6,300 prior to Katrina to over 12,000 presently. In the face of such an acute housing crisis, the lack of any effort to repair the public housing up for demolition shows the decision is not just a matter of engineering.

Instead, the vote to demolish housing is a continuation of policies intended to refashion New Orleans in the interest of business and profit. The projects to be demolished—C.J. Peete, B.W. Cooper, Lafitte, and St. Bernard—were indeed areas of poverty and crime, as residents have testified. The city government claims that their rebuilding as "mixed-use" units will end this by intermixing higher-priced market rate housing with subsidized public housing.

Of the new units, though, only 900 of 3,200 are reported to be for low-income residents, ensuring a vast demographic change. Thousands of predominantly black and working-class residents will be forced into increasingly unaffordable housing, or join the swelling ranks of the homeless population. After another project, St. Thomas, now River Garden, underwent redevelopment only 25 percent of the housing was subsidized compared to 75 percent at market rate. Of 800 families originally living there, only 70 have been able to return.

Overall housing policies show a similar trend of redevelopment in the interests of profit and demographic change. The city of New Orleans is able to demolish houses for alleged health and safety reasons, with little input from residents themselves, thus quickly clearing the way for redevelopment. Tracy Washington, the president of the Louisiana Justice Institute, told *Democracy Now* of a 61-year-old woman who had finally received a \$130,000 grant to rebuild

her home, only to find that the city had demolished it despite her protests. In return she was offered \$100,000, far below what is needed to purchase land and build a new house.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact