

Three years since Hurricane Katrina

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30 August 2008

Three years ago, on August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina made landfall on the US Gulf Coast. The storm devastated nearly 100,000 square miles and displaced over a million people. New Orleans, Louisiana, bore the brunt of this disaster, after the levee system failed and nearly 80 percent of the city was submerged.

Overwhelmingly those most deeply affected by Katrina were among the poorest layers of the working class in a long-impooverished and neglected region of the United States. In the days following the hurricane's landfall, the initial tragedy in New Orleans was compounded by official neglect, incompetence, and military repression.

The storm and its aftermath exposed in the starkest way the gross inequality at the heart of American social life. Thousands of New Orleans residents stayed behind after a last-minute evacuation was ordered—many of them extremely poor, without means of transportation, disabled or elderly. The low-income and minority neighborhoods—low-lying and long neglected—were virtually obliterated when adjacent levee walls gave way.

Hundreds of residents who had survived the storm died while waiting for medical care, water, and rescue. For days, thousands of New Orleans residents were stranded on rooftops and closed interstate ramps in the scorching heat, or crowded into makeshift emergency shelters without any supplies.

As the situation grew more dire, the city was locked down, patrolled by thousands of combat-armed National Guard troops, federal and police units. Victims desperate for supplies and seeking shelter in higher-elevation quarters were demonized by the government and media.

At least 1,836 people died, with many more missing and never accounted for. A quarter of a million homes were destroyed and essential infrastructure—bridges, hospitals, schools, sewer, electric and communication lines—was left in ruins. Current official estimates place the cost of storm and flooding damage at \$89.6 billion, with billions more in uninsured losses. Yet, as grim as these figures are, they cannot convey the scope of social catastrophe that continues to be felt in the region.

Currently the region is confronted with the possibility of another large hurricane, as Tropical Storm Gustav builds strength in the Caribbean. At this writing, Gulf Coast authorities are hastily laying preparations for evacuations and have scheduled the deployment of 3,000 National Guard troops to the area to act as security.

However, reflecting the fact that no substantive improvements in safety procedures were implemented after Katrina, no emergency shelters are scheduled to open in New Orleans—nor are there any even designated. In fact, city officials have described the decision as a deliberate attempt to discourage residents from staying.

As of Friday, press reports indicate only 150 of 700 promised buses have been secured for the anticipated evacuation of 30,000 city residents. No shelter arrangements have been made for the nearly 7,000 families still consigned to living in flimsy, storm-vulnerable federal trailers within the New Orleans metro area.

Federal emergency planning has been no better. In an editorial Friday, the *New York Times* noted that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) had not fulfilled promises of having an emergency housing plan in place for the inevitable further hurricane damage along the Gulf Coast.

According to the *Times*, FEMA officials presented “a skimpy draft proposal” for such preparations a full year past Congress’s mandated deadline. Noting that FEMA officials qualified the draft as “a precursor to a plan” rather than a plan, the paper commented: “Most of its required topic specialties—including how to house the poor and the disabled, how to house victims close to their jobs, and how to manage large camps for evacuees—were left blank. Instead, the proposal called for handing those plans off to a task force of experts. And, oh yes, that task force has yet to be formed.”

The lack of preparation at all levels of government represents yet another invitation for disaster. This negligence further testifies to the fraudulent, profiteering character of the Gulf Coast reconstruction over the past several years and to its utter disregard for the plight of the working class.

On August 24, the Associated Press reported that federal construction on the levee system has been compromised by “a pattern of public misperception, political jockeying and legal fighting, along with economic and engineering miscalculations,” since 2005 that exposes New Orleans to the threat of another catastrophic flood.

The levees are being rebuilt as “100-year” walls. According to the AP, however, “experts say that every house being rebuilt in New Orleans has a 26 percent chance of being flooded again over a 30-year mortgage...” Moreover, “every child born in New Orleans would have nearly a 60 percent chance of seeing a major flood in his or her life.” The Army Corps of Engineers, responsible for the \$14.8 billion levee reconstruction project, has pushed back its completion date to at least 2011.

On August 29, 2005, under the storm surge, levees surrounding New Orleans breached in more than 50 places. Some 107,000 occupied housing units in the city were flooded. Another 27,000 housing units were damaged by wind, according to FEMA estimates. In total, 71 percent of occupied residences in New Orleans were damaged.

Population regrowth has slowed substantially in 2008. Over the last three years, the city has recovered slightly less than three-

quarters of its pre-Katrina population, according to a survey by the Greater New Orleans Community Data Center of the Brookings Institution.

While the city continued to grow in population, the rate of return in the past year was only three percent, compared to a rate of 20 percent in 2006. Over the past year, the metro area added 8,000 jobs, less than a quarter of the number added in 2006. This slowing suggests that the city will not return to its former size, and that many displaced residents have given up trying to rebuild their lives.

Significantly, more affluent areas—the higher-elevation tourist districts such as the French Quarter and surrounding neighborhoods—have seen their populations grow beyond 2005 levels. Neighborhoods that were inundated by floodwaters, by contrast, remain largely uninhabitable and in advanced decay. As of January 2008, the city's 8th planning district—containing the destroyed Lower 9th Ward—had recovered only 19 percent of its pre-storm inhabited residences.

Brookings Institution data revealed that as of March 2008, more than 71,600 residences in the city may be vacant or blighted. Post office data suggests that of these, 65,000 residences are uninhabitable buildings or empty lots.

In spite of the huge number of blighted properties in need of work or removal, City Hall has issued only 10,541 permits for demolition of uninhabitable structures in the past three years. Heavily damaged parishes have still received less than half of promised FEMA funds earmarked for debris removal and infrastructure repairs.

While the tourism-based economy of New Orleans has regrouped to a great extent, the growth in jobs is concentrated heavily in low-wage retail and hospitality sectors. At the same time, rent rates are now 46 percent higher than pre-Katrina rates. In 2008, an average two-bedroom apartment rents for \$990 in the city.

The homeless population in the city stands at 12,000 in 2008. In spite of the immense need both of the homeless and the thousands of families still subsisting in temporary FEMA trailers, New Orleans has 8,000 fewer low-income public housing units, and the city is pressing ahead to close remaining subsidized apartment complexes. In addition, nearly 14,000 families depend on Disaster Housing Assistance Program vouchers, which expire in March 2009. According to Brookings Institution data, 86 percent of these households are living in hard-hit Orleans and Jefferson parishes.

Beyond the burden of repairing homes, homeowners also face growing housing burdens in the form of insurance rates. Following Katrina, insurance premiums for Gulf Coast homeowners more than quadrupled.

As a result of the housing inflation, many workers have been priced out of living in the city proper, leading to a shortage of workers in childcare, education, maintenance, and other critical occupations. Many working class families, who lost everything in the storm and were unable to secure insurance and funds to rebuild, had no choice but to pull up roots.

Public infrastructure in the city continues to languish. In the last year, the public transit system saw a 45 percent increase in ridership—adding more than 8,000 new riders. The increase reflects

both the economic growth of the city and the low-wage, exploited labor force driving it.

Yet in spite of sharply increased need for public transit, the city government added no new buses or routes. According to Brookings Institution figures, as of June 2008, the number of public transportation routes remained at half that of summer 2005, and the number of buses remained at a mere 19 percent of those operated pre-Katrina.

Other social infrastructure also operates at a fraction of its former capacity. Most childcare facilities have not reopened and the public school system has hemorrhaged, replaced with privately managed charter school operations.

This year's public school student population numbers less than 33,500, and according to an August 17 report by the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, more than 75 percent of the city's public school buildings are listed in "poor" or "very poor" condition. Prior to the storm, the school system was made up of 128 schools throughout the city; currently 88 schools are slated to open for the fall, 50 of which are charter schools. The Orleans Parish School Board plans have only 17 high schools—down from 28 pre-Katrina—operable by 2013.

By public health measures, the city has not recovered. Charity Hospital, which cared for two-thirds of the city's uninsured population, closed after Katrina and has not been replaced or reopened. At the same time, thousands more residents became uninsured after losing their jobs and employer-covered health plans.

A survey of 1,294 adults living in Orleans parish earlier this year, published August 13, revealed that the vast majority of residents contend with serious physical or mental health problems as well as lack of health care coverage. The survey, conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation between early March and late April, found that 84 percent of respondents suffered health problems; 65 percent reported suffering from chronic conditions or disabilities and flagging health.

"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.



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