

Five years since Hurricane Katrina

Part 1: A manmade disaster

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The following is the first in a series of articles on the fifth anniversary of the Hurricane Katrina disaster.

On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina made landfall on the Gulf Coast of the United States. The world looked on in horror as New Orleans, Louisiana, was struck by storm surges that breached nearly every levee in the low-lying city's dilapidated system. Tens of thousands of mostly poor, black residents who had been unable to evacuate were trapped by floodwaters without food, drinking water, or rescue.

More than 80 percent of New Orleans, a city of 500,000 people, was submerged. The storm destroyed communities across more than 95,000 square miles of Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama. At least 1,836 residents of the region were killed by the hurricane and its immediate aftermath, and many more were never to be found.

As staggering as these figures are, they cannot in themselves reveal the full scale of the catastrophe and its aftermath. Across the region, over one million people were displaced, many never to return, including hundreds of thousands who lost all of their possessions.

For weeks after Katrina's landfall, a social disaster continued to unfold. Stranded victims continued to die of drowning, dehydration, and exhaustion. Tens of thousands of survivors were forced into wretched conditions—hot, overcrowded makeshift emergency centers—deprived of the most fundamental provisions. Without food, water, medical care, diapers, or toilets, more victims succumbed to the catastrophe.

Negligent and unprepared government authorities met the disaster with a military lockdown, curfews, and rampant police violence. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) turned relief trucks away, cut emergency lines, and survivors were

prevented from leaving the city. Victims were vilified and blamed for the social anarchy. Police and armed mercenaries were given the nod to gun down unarmed “looters” or residents desperately seeking higher ground in the affluent neighborhoods. As the situation grew more desperate, the Bush administration ordered in the military.

Katrina marked a milestone in political life in the United States. Before the eyes of billions around the world, the true face of American capitalism stood exposed. In the midst of “the richest country in the world,” a major American city, already deeply distressed, with its critical infrastructure in ruins, was being allowed to die. The experience of Katrina was burned into social consciousness. Debacles which reveal the rot of US politics and the nature of class society—the BP oil disaster, the collapse of Detroit—are invariably referred to as “Katrinas.”

Every aspect of the catastrophe expressed the class chasm long reinforced in the policies of the ruling class: masses of New Orleans residents, many without transportation to evacuate, living out their lives in poverty and want, their suffering and pleas unacknowledged, were treated as expendable. Behind lies of politicians that the disaster was unpredictable and unavoidable stood the decades' worth of warnings by scientists and engineers, and long-term neglect of levees and other infrastructure for the working class areas.

The complete absence of a coordinated plan for rescue and recovery was the product of a ruling class determined to impose the costs on the generosity of the American people. The official response focused above all on the protection of profit and property; the list goes on. Not least, an indifferent ruling class oversaw the abandonment of a major center of jazz, blues, and

American cultural life in the working class areas of the city.

The lives of ordinary Americans were subordinated in every aspect to the pursuit of profit by a handful of wealthy elite. Indeed, even the disaster itself was seized on as an occasion to carry out privatizations, gentrification, and other policies that have further widened the social inequality in the region. Among the first to benefit from federal aid were billion-dollar casino operations, luxury hotel chains, yacht clubs, and the oil industry.

For the region's working class and small businesses, however, billions of dollars in promised aid never arrived. Even after one of the worst disasters in US history, the cost of rebuilding of infrastructure to prevent it from happening again was considered prohibitive.

Under Bush and now Obama, meanwhile, billions of dollars have been burned up in the illegal occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan each month. For fiscal year 2010 alone, the Obama administration has authorized Pentagon and military spending of more than \$1 trillion. The federal government's bailout of Wall Street and the banks may cost \$23.7 trillion.

Five years on, the region remains wracked by a widening social divide. New Orleans, which after the hurricane saw its residents decimated and dispersed across the country to emergency shelters, is still 20 percent smaller than its pre-Katrina population.

The mostly black working poor bore the brunt of this displacement; many whose homes were destroyed were never given promised funds to rebuild their lives. Some remain in Houston, Washington, DC, and other cities to which Gulf Coast residents were evacuated or found their way. Suburban parishes are now home to the majority of the metro area's poor. Home and flood insurance rates soared by hundreds of dollars, and at the same time rent rates have spiked.

Many want to return to former neighborhoods but cannot for lack of work. Families are split apart, with one spouse returning in hopes of reclaiming their former lives. Other families continue living in ramshackle trailers purchased from FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) on blighted properties. Some New Orleans homeowners in areas most devastated by flooding, unable to secure funding for repairs, simply live in their ruined homes. At least

12,000 residents within the city are homeless.

For those residents remaining, grants and low interest loans are scant and buried in bureaucratic red tape. Basic public agencies and works projects are similarly met with the claim that there is "no money." The government of New Orleans, itself under the shadow of a \$68 million budget deficit and facing the loss of federal stimulus funds, has only \$1.2 billion to spend on hundreds of urgently needed repairs.

Residents in the eastern portion of the city, including the Lower 9th Ward and neighboring areas like St. Bernard Parish, still have no hospital and very little in the way of other essential services. At the same time, health care needs have grown, including among children, who continue to suffer psychological trauma from Katrina.

In the coming days, the *World Socialist Web Site* will publish further articles examining these and other aspects of social conditions in New Orleans in greater detail.

"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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