

# Five years since Hurricane Katrina

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## A manmade 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 homeowners in New Orleans parishes 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 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.

### Ongoing social dispossession

The immense destruction that Hurricane Katrina inflicted upon New Orleans in August of 2005, the outcome of decrepit infrastructure and government indifference, turned out to be only the beginning of the city's ordeal. In the years since, the catastrophe has been compounded by a lack of funding for rebuilding and a conscious effort to prevent the urban poor from returning to their neighborhoods.

The failure to rebuild New Orleans is reflected in its staggering population decline. Five years on, the city's population remains substantially smaller than its pre-Katrina level of 500,000 residents, with 125,000 fewer residents than before.

As dramatic as this statistic is, it actually understates the level of displacement of the working poor. The high cost of securing housing and rebuilding ruined homes has resulted in a reversal of metropolitan residential patterns. Now the majority of low-income families reside in the suburban areas, about 93,000 in all, while 68,000 poor residents live in the city proper.

At the same time, the share of high-income residents in the city has grown, many of these settling in the trendy French Quarter. This is reflected in the growth of median household incomes in the city, according to a recent Brookings Institution report, in sharp contrast to falling median incomes nationwide resulting from the economic crisis.

Current home prices are out of reach for poor residents. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) estimates that Katrina rendered uninhabitable fully three quarters of the city's housing stock. Since that time, the housing market has remained tight, and median home prices have increased substantially, from \$137,400 before the storm to \$160,000 as of last year, according to National Association of Realtors data. The increase is, once again, the opposite of national home value trends, which have plummeted over the past three years.

Insurance premiums for homeowners also soared after Katrina. Major insurers State Farm and Allstate severely tightened the criteria for homes they would cover, while other companies such as AAA withdrew their business from Louisiana after catastrophic losses. Denied by major insurers, homeowners wanting to rebuild in devastated areas have little choice but to take out policies with smaller companies that charge arbitrarily high rates.

Overall, home insurance rates in New Orleans rose by 48 percent in the year after Katrina, and by 3-5 percent each year since then. Louisiana Insurance Commissioner James Donelon told *Newsweek* in a recent interview that annual insurance premiums in the state average more than \$1,000. Flood insurance adds an additional \$570 on average. "Only 40 percent of victims of Rita and Katrina had flood insurance in place, and though there's been a slight increase since then, it's still only about 30 percent of properties that have it now," Donelon said.

Rent rates are also a heavy burden on the poor, thousands of whom are employed in the city's low-wage tourism and service industries. Sixty percent of all renters in the city now spend at least 35 percent of their monthly income on housing costs—up from 43 percent who were burdened by unaffordable rent before Katrina.

Much of the Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward and St. Bernard Parish, which were the worst affected in the disaster, remains uninhabited. According to the non-

profit LowerNine.org, the Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward is only about 20 percent repopulated.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has been steadily pulling out its housing aid. In the weeks after Katrina, FEMA brought in 120,000 trailers to house displaced families throughout the Gulf Coast. (Building material used in the trailers, it was later discovered, had unsafe levels of formaldehyde, causing a number of health conditions for residents living in them. See: "US: FEMA trailers caused at least 17,000 illnesses among Katrina survivors")

By 2007, there were still 45,000 families living in the FEMA trailers. Then, earlier this year, the agency held a massive auction, selling off the majority of its trailers to the public—including to families who were still living in them. Currently, FEMA counts only 860 families in Louisiana using the trailers, *Newsweek* reported August 20. However, this estimate does not include families who purchased their trailers, according to Zack Rosenburg, a co-founder of the St. Bernard Project, an organization that assists residents in rebuilding their homes.

"There's been more pressure over the last two years where the government has threatened to take [the trailers] away," Rosenburg told *Newsweek*. "So what happened? Instead of facing imminent homelessness, some people decided to take control and move into apartments that they couldn't afford while others bought the FEMA trailers."

Others live in their gutted former houses, doubled up with relatives in overcrowded housing, or simply live on the streets. At least 12,000 New Orleans residents are homeless, double the number pre-Katrina.

Many poor black residents have been denied rebuilding funds by the Disaster Recovery Unit. The agency based its funding formula on a calculation of "repair value," which was determined by the value of a home prior to Katrina, rather than on the extent of damage to the home. As a result, aid has been disproportionately funneled to families in wealthier neighborhoods where damage was less severe, and neighborhoods most damaged received far less money than required. A federal ruling recently found the disbursement process discriminatory against black families.

Billions of dollars in grants and other aid promised to Katrina victims were never distributed. Of the \$20 billion in federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Community Development Block Grants, more than a quarter of it is undistributed. The Road Home program has nearly \$800 million more in undistributed funds. According to an MSNBC report, the funds "have sat around for so long that they've outlived the state agency that initially ran the program," and there is no longer any staff to process applications.

At least 50,000 houses stand vacant citywide. Many of these are collapsed or overgrown with weeds. According to the Greater New Orleans Community Data Center, there are at least 7,400 other houses that are vacant, but habitable, and another 5,200 vacant commercial structures. Scores of parks, playgrounds, community centers, libraries, and other public assets have also been abandoned to blight.

All of this is the result of a deliberate policy of driving away the poorest, mostly black, layers of the population by pricing them out and by making their former neighborhoods unlivable. Local officials have pushed a policy of "shrinking the footprint"—i.e., forced reduction in the city's size, especially targeting the lower-lying neighborhoods that were destroyed in the floods.

### The gutting of social infrastructure

In the weeks after Hurricane Katrina struck the US Gulf Coast, the

political establishment used the disaster to carry out long sought after privatizations and cuts to basic public infrastructure. For the wealthy elite, the destruction of working class neighborhoods and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people from New Orleans were seen as a lucrative opportunity to remake the city, at public expense, in its own interests.

While real estate firms, speculators, luxury hotels and the gambling industry were given access to government aid and no-bid contracts, residents of the low-lying, poor neighborhoods were denied significant help. After five years, wide swaths of the city remain crippled by blight—a state of affairs that is being exploited to further gut social services.

Speaking recently in Washington, New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu referred to the city as the country's "laboratory for innovation and change"—a phrase that reveals perhaps more than he intended about the class character of the policies shaping the city. Landrieu declared, "With the fifth anniversary of Katrina approaching, it's especially important that we stop thinking about rebuilding the city we were and start creating the city we want to become."

Following the storm, public housing was among the first targets of this agenda. In 2007, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) ordered the destruction of a great deal of heavily damaged housing. That year, HUD razed 4,500 housing units, displacing some 3,000 families who lived there before Katrina. Other remaining housing projects are currently slated for demolition, including some that are still occupied. The number of newly built housing units has not made up for the quantity that was removed, and many of these establishments are slated as "mixed-income," which means that the poorest residents will be denied access.

The public school system has also been dismantled. Since 2005, three-quarters of New Orleans public schools have been handed over to charter operations. In the immediate aftermath of the disaster, 107 schools were taken over by the Recovery School District in order to fast-track the transformation of the public school system into a patchwork of privately-run facilities. Today, 60 percent of students attend charter schools.

On August 25, Mary Landrieu, the Louisiana senator and sister of mayor Mitch Landrieu, announced that the New Orleans school system would receive \$1.8 billion in FEMA funds. The FEMA grant lifts requirements that stated that school officials had to rebuild schools that were destroyed by the hurricane, paving the way for even more charter schools. The grant, announced a day after Louisiana was denied \$175 million from federal education funds, was "worth the wait," according to the senator.

The city's two school districts have had plans for the funds since 2008, when the Recovery School District and the Orleans Parish school boards announced a \$1.8 billion plan to "landbank" at least 43 of the 128 still-existing public schools. In the 2010-2011 school year, four new charter schools will open and six public schools will be turned over to charter management. Other public schools are slated to close and merge. As a result, by the end of the year, charter schools will outnumber public schools by 2 to 1.

Predictably, advocates of privatizing education have touted test score improvements between 2005—when students had their lives utterly uprooted and many did not even attend school for long periods in the state—and 2009. However, the replacement of public schools by charters has splintered oversight of quality, conditions at facilities, curriculum, and fair-enrollment standards. Charters are managed by independent boards and operate outside of many of the regulations public schools must follow. New Orleans' charter schools are managed by more than 30 separate operators.

The health care system in the city also remains in tatters. Three weeks after the disaster, then Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco ordered Charity Hospital permanently closed, despite the tremendous social need for medical care by hurricane victims and the fact that it was structurally

intact. In fact, the building had been fully cleaned by the military and was ready for use.

The hospital was the primary provider of medical care for the city's large poor and uninsured population. After five years, eastern New Orleans still has no hospital and over 80,000 residents are at least a 30-minute drive away from an emergency room. The Louisiana State University hospital that now serves the whole city is small and cannot provide a full range of medical services. According to a report by local ABC news affiliate WAPT, the university hospital is serving far more residents than before with far fewer resources, including half of the 550 beds it had before Katrina.

Last week, the city purchased Methodist Hospital, another facility that was also closed following Katrina. City officials have made clear that it will be at least two to three years before it will reopen, and it will have only 80 beds. By the time Methodist Hospital is scheduled to reopen under new management, it is estimated that many poor and uninsured residents will have gone at least eight years without access to regular medical care.

The city's physical infrastructure is likewise in disrepair. The Sewerage and Water Board is short \$1 billion in funds needed for urgent projects. The Department of Public Works needs an additional \$1.4 billion to repair streets in "poor to failed condition" and to fix the city's drainage system. According to a *Times Picayune* report, however, "the department isn't sure it can even pay for \$400 million in capital projects it hopes to complete by 2016."

A multitude of other departments are in similar straits, including the juvenile court system and the coroner's office. Facilities owned by the city, including jails and City Hall itself, are in need of repair or replacement. Community centers, parks, homeless shelters, mental health facilities, and countless other services are woefully underfunded and in many cases, have been abandoned.

Significantly, after five years, even the rebuilding of the city's levee system has not been completed. The Army Corps of Engineers estimates that a ring of levees and floodwalls—a \$15 billion project—will not be finished until the beginning of the 2011 hurricane season. Some experts have warned that the new system is not enough to prevent massive flooding from happening again.

An August 25 *New York Times* article cited Robert Bea, a professor at the University of California, Berkeley, who authored a 2006 report on the New Orleans levee failures. In his report, Bea pointed out that Katrina "grew to a full blown catastrophe ... principally due to the massive and repeated failure of the regional flood protection system and consequent flooding." Bea stated that what the Army Corps defines as 100-year protection for the city "is not even close to what is needed."

Every aspect of the "market-driven recovery" exposes the priorities of a ruling class concerned only with its own enrichment. The lives of the working class are subordinated, and sacrificed, to the "free market" interests of the wealthy few. While trillions of dollars can be poured into the banks and illegal wars, the cost of rebuilding hospitals, schools and basic infrastructure is considered prohibitively expensive. Like the disaster itself, the current condition of New Orleans reveals this social chasm.

The entire Gulf Coast requires the infusion of billions of dollars in aid for repairs, proper storm protection, cleanup, and the expansion of public services. The population, living on the edge of an economic precipice, should be employed in a massive emergency public works program, paid decently and provided proper housing and health care.

These necessities, however, are incompatible with a system that subjects all of social life to the pursuit of profit. Fundamentally, the anarchic character of capitalism is incompatible with mass society and modern life. What is required to meet the social needs of the vast majority of the

population is a political movement of the working class, independent of the capitalist parties, and based on a democratic, socialist program.

*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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