

Former New Orleans mayor Ray Nagin found guilty of corruption

Tom Hall
17 February 2014

On Wednesday, former mayor of New Orleans Ray Nagin was found guilty in federal court of 20 of 21 charges related to corruption and abuse of office. Mayor Nagin came to national and international notoriety for his incompetent, bungling mismanagement of evacuation and rescue efforts during Hurricane Katrina in 2005, and for his use of race-baiting to forestall any criticism.

The charges for which he was convicted, including conspiracy, bribery, wire fraud, money laundering, and filing false tax returns, carry a maximum sentence of 257 years, although his actual sentence will likely be significantly less. Nagin has vowed to appeal, but in the meantime has been placed under house arrest.

The trial was wide-ranging and included testimony from over 30 witnesses, many of them businessmen who pled guilty to bribery and testified against Nagin as part of their plea deal. The centerpiece, however, was Nagin's soliciting work worth hundreds of thousands of dollars from Home Depot for Stone Age LLC, a business owned by Nagin and his sons, in exchange for helping the company establish a new store in the aftermath of Katrina.

In the run-up to the testimony of Nagin himself at the end of the trial, commentators speculated about how Nagin would try to use his "charm" to persuade the jury. As anyone who has seen Nagin in action can attest, however, the former corporate executive generally exudes contempt for the intelligence of everyone around him.

The forewoman, in a later interview, specifically singled out Nagin's evasive performance during seven hours on the stand as a contributing factor in the jury's decision. "It put doubt in your mind," she said, "He didn't really directly answer questions, and tiptoed around a lot of things."

Nagin's conviction came the same day as Peter Galvan, former coroner from neighboring St. Tammany Parish, was sentenced to two years in prison for corruption. At one point the local official was the highest paid "public servant" in the state.

These cases have been presented in the media as a sign that the New Orleans area is moving on from its history of corruption. It is nothing of the sort. In fact, many in the city's business community clearly wish to bring corruption in the city more in line with national standards; that is, they want local politicians to do their bidding without so brazenly and publicly accumulating personal wealth.

The state of Louisiana historically has been one of the most openly corrupt states in the union going back over a century. Huey Long's "deduct box," filled with the "deductions" he skimmed off of the salaries of state employees for his own personal use, is remembered to this day.

Since that time, efforts by capitalist politicians to roll back progressive-era reforms and shift politics to the right have historically been couched hypocritically in terms of "fighting corruption." This is the context in which the Nagin conviction must be understood.

It was significant that relatively little attention was paid to Nagin's offer to Home Depot to "help [them] with the community groups causing [them] problems," in the words of Home Depot CEO Frank Blake, or his successful attempt to quash proposals from the city council requiring Home Depot to pay its workers in the city higher wages.

Instead, the focus was on his frank demands for no-bid contracts for his granite company from business executives. An email presented at the trial by Home Depot's top lobbyist admits frankly, "Knowing how New Orleans operates, the mayor will be certain to plug

his family business.”

Nagin, a Democrat, was elected mayor of New Orleans in 2002 running as a non-politician and “outsider” with the support of the business establishment, to which he belonged, as a high-level executive in the Cox cable system. He won despite overwhelming opposition among working class black voters, even though his major opponent was fellow Democrat Richard Pennington, superintendent of the city’s notoriously brutal and corrupt police department.

As Katrina loomed, the mayor ordered an evacuation on August 28, only a day before the hurricane reached the city, leaving many people with neither the time nor the resources to evacuate; meanwhile, buses meant for a rescue effort were left to flood in low-elevation areas. In the days after the storm and with tens of thousands still trapped within the city, Nagin took to the airwaves to denounce the victims he had left behind with unhinged, hysterical accusations of rape, murder, armed gangs firing at rescue helicopters, etc.

After Katrina, Nagin employed racial demagoguery to cover up his own responsibility in the disaster, and declared his goal of restoring the black population to majority status in a rebuilt New Orleans. He won reelection in March 2006 over Mitch Landrieu, in an election marked by dismal turnout. It was Landrieu who ultimately succeeded Nagin in office four years later, when Nagin was term-limited.

Throughout his second term, Nagin worked with big business to dismantle the city’s crumbling social services. Public housing projects were demolished and replaced with “mixed-income” developments, the city’s public schools were converted wholesale into charter schools, the public transportation system was thoroughly gutted, and the state-run Charity Hospital in the downtown area was permanently closed in favor of a new “public-private” hospital, built over a working class neighborhood whose residents had just returned to their homes, that has yet to be completed.

Nagin, like Kwame Kilpatrick in Detroit, personified not just individual corruption, but a corrupt social layer, a section of the black upper-middle class which was entrusted by Corporate America with the responsibility for enforcing the continuous impoverishment of millions of working class families in the major cities of the United States, an impoverishment from which they enthusiastically profited.

In the end, Nagin was convicted not for this social role, or his specific responsibility for the death of 1,500 citizens of New Orleans during Katrina, but for making excessive demands on his corporate paymasters.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact