

On 10-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina

Obama hails “entrepreneurial” transformation of New Orleans

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President Obama traveled to New Orleans Thursday for a series of media events on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the flooding of the city after Hurricane Katrina, including a walking tour of several neighborhoods and a speech at the new community center in the Lower Ninth Ward, one of the focal points of devastation in 2005.

Obama’s remarks paid little heed to the solemnity of the occasion, the worst natural disaster in American history, with more than 1,800 killed in five states, and one of the country’s iconic cities, a historical center of both culture and commerce, virtually destroyed.

Instead, Obama used the occasion to celebrate, in an unseemly, even grotesque fashion, the supposed successes of the capitalist system, both in America as a whole, and in New Orleans in particular.

He began by claiming a “presidential privilege” to talk about the supposed economic recovery of the United States, seven years after the worst financial crash since the Great Depression. He cited economic reports released Thursday morning, showing a 3.7 percent rise in GDP in the second quarter.

“The United States of America remains an anchor of global strength and stability in the world,” he claimed. “It’s important for us to remember that strength. It’s been a volatile few weeks around the world. There’s been a lot of reports in the news: stock market swinging; worries about China, and about Europe. But the United States of America, for all the problems we still have, continues to have the best cards. We just have to play them right. Our economy has been moving, and continues to grow, and unemployment continues to come down.”

This paints a picture of the American economy

unrecognizable to the vast majority of working people, who face a continuing desperate struggle for economic survival. But Obama used it as the preamble for a banal appeal to the Republican-controlled Congress to “protect the momentum” by meeting the September 30 deadline for funding the US government for the next fiscal year, and thus avoiding a partial federal shutdown.

Obama then went on to cite the supposed across-the-board success of New Orleans. While the inundation of the city in 2005 and the initial response of local, state and federal government were “an example of what happens when government fails,” he said, “the recovery shows what can happen when government works together.”

He hailed the work of Democratic and Republican politicians who intervened to replace the shattered infrastructure of the city, not by rebuilding public services like the schools, hospitals and public housing, but by privatizing these services and turning them into a source of profit.

“After the storm, this city became a laboratory for urban innovation,” Obama said, citing “cutting red tape” to ensure that “New Orleans is as entrepreneurial as any place in the country.”

New Orleans did indeed become a “laboratory,” but one in which the working people of New Orleans were the targets of free-market experiments of unprecedented savagery.

All 7,500 public school teachers, most of them city residents and victims of Katrina, were fired from their jobs as the public school system was dismantled and replaced entirely by charter schools. The residents of public housing were displaced, first by the hurricane,

then by bulldozing most of the structures that remained. The city's main health care facility for the poor, Charity Hospital, was shut down.

Obama cherry-picked a few statistics in an effort to present conditions in New Orleans as improving, or even as “better and stronger” than before the storm. Here are some figures that he neglected to mention:

- In the Lower Ninth Ward, where he gave his speech, only 36 percent of the pre-Katrina population has returned.

- An estimated 100,000 of the city's poorest African-American working class residents have not returned, unable to find jobs or replacement housing.

- Half of all working-age black men in New Orleans are unemployed, and a quarter of all working-age white men.

- Half of all black children in New Orleans live in poverty.

- Rents in New Orleans have doubled from an average of \$488 a month before Katrina to \$926 today, making the city increasingly unaffordable for working class families of all races.

The ten-year anniversary coverage of New Orleans in the corporate-controlled media has largely portrayed the city as a rousing success, with a booming economy and a resurgent tourist industry centered on areas like the French Quarter and the Superdome, which escaped the flooding in 2005.

Obama played his part in the celebrations Thursday, to be followed—incredibly enough—by George W. Bush on Friday. The former president who presided over the devastation of New Orleans will be welcomed to the city by Democratic Mayor Mitch Landrieu and other dignitaries.

Based on the account given by Obama and the media, perhaps Bush should be congratulated or given a medal for creating the conditions—through the criminal negligence that led to the deaths of 1,800 people—for the great capitalist “success story” of New Orleans 2015.



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