

One week after widespread flooding

## New Orleans drainage system in shambles with more rain on the way

**Tom Hall**  
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A week after low-lying neighborhoods in New Orleans experienced severe flooding following heavy thunderstorms, it is becoming apparent that the city's drainage system is teetering on the edge of collapse.

Workers and residents have been left to cope with the consequences of what is being called a "mini-Katrina." Ten inches of rainfall within three hours led to hundreds of homes, businesses and automobiles being flooded out in low-lying neighborhoods. Several schools have been closed. An opioid detox clinic has been forced to shutter indefinitely.

With rain and thunderstorms expected through the rest of the week and a drainage system that is now barely functional, the city is bracing for a potential repeat of last week's flooding, which itself followed severe flooding in late July. Louisiana's Democratic governor, John Bel Edwards, has declared a state of emergency for New Orleans lasting through the end of the month and into September.

Saturday's floods were described as a "100 year event," that is, a level of rainfall expected to occur on average once every century. However, it follows by less than a year a 1,000 year flooding event in the nearby state capital of Baton Rouge, where thousands of people were forced to abandon their homes. It also follows floods in late 2015 along the Mississippi River in Missouri which killed 59 people. Such events are expected to become more frequent as a result of man-made climate change.

Because of the city's unusual "bowl"-like geography, with most of the city lying below sea level, New Orleans relies upon a system of drainage pumps, operated by the city's Sewerage and Water Board (SWB), to push rainwater out of the city. When this pump system fails, the results can be catastrophic because water will accumulate in low-lying, predominantly poorer areas with nowhere to go. One of the major factors behind the widespread flooding in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina in 2005 was the loss of power to the city's pumps, leaving the floodwaters which poured through breaches in the city's levee system to sit for

weeks before being drained.

This system, which is more than a century old, cannot be operated with electricity provided from the city's power grid, because its pumps operate on an unusual alternating current frequency of 25 hertz, which fell out of widespread use after the end of World War II. Instead, it relies upon its own power source of five turbine generators which power the entire system.

When homes and vehicles were inundated under feet of water last Saturday in the Mid-City, Treme and Lakeview neighborhoods, located towards the bottom of the "bowl," SWB officials assured residents that the pump system was operating normally and that the sole reason for the flooding was the unprecedented character of Saturday's storms. "We have the largest drainage pumps anywhere. To double them would be billions of dollars," SWB Executive Director Cedric Grant told reporters. "We have a fairly significant system, one of the most significant in the world."

While it is true that the system as designed is unable to cope with this level of rainfall, itself an indictment of the inadequate infrastructure planning in one of the wettest and most flood-prone cities in the United States, it quickly became clear that claims that the pumping system was operating normally were complete lies. In fact, as is now acknowledged, at least 16 of the system's 121 pumps were not functioning.

In a performance of government evasion that recalls the attempts by the Obama administration to suppress the full extent of the BP oil spill in 2010, the worst environmental catastrophe in American history which occurred virtually on New Orleans' doorstep in the Gulf of Mexico, this figure was upwardly revised from seven, to eight, 14, and finally to 16 pumps over the past few days. It may increase even further after this article is published.

A picture is now emerging of a system that has been in serious disrepair since Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005. At the time of last week's floods, three of the SWB's five power-

generating turbines were not functioning, including one that has not worked for five years.

A fire which broke out Thursday night knocked out one of the two remaining turbines (it has since been repaired, but has not yet returned to full operational status as of this writing), leaving only a single working turbine. This left enough resources to power only 38 of the 58 operational pumps serving the area of New Orleans on the east bank of the Mississippi River and between the 17th Street and Industrial Canals, where the vast majority of the city's residents live. Twenty-six generators were ordered as an emergency stopgap measure, which will remain in use until the end of hurricane season in November.

Complicating this is the fact that thousands of storm drains throughout the city are choked with leaves, dirt and trash. City efforts to clean these clogged storm drains are woefully inadequate, and City Hall currently has a backlog of 2,500 requests for storm drain cleanings from residents, according to the *Times-Picayune*.

The real condition of the pump system has been kept hidden from the city's nearly 400,000 residents for years. One possible motivation for this campaign of silence, aside from the politically explosive character that such revelations could and have had, is to avoid dampening the surge in real estate prices the city has experienced in recent years, affecting in particular the neighborhoods hardest hit by last week's flooding. City-wide, rent in New Orleans increased a staggering 14 percent last year alone, according to the web site Curbed.

Democratic Mayor Mitch Landrieu responded to the public outrage by demanding the resignation of four high-ranking officials with the SWB, including Executive Director Grant, who will officially retire at the end of the hurricane season and receive a \$175,000 per year pension. However, Landrieu's attempts to distance himself from the developing scandal over the SWB's cover-up are simply not credible. There is no way that Landrieu, who is in the last year of his second four-year term as mayor, was unaware of the actual state of the city's pumps. Neither he nor anyone in his administration made any attempt to warn residents that there were serious problems with the city's drainage system in advance of Saturday's storms.

Significantly, Landrieu has seized upon the crisis atmosphere created by the floods to rapidly hand off SWB to private operators. This was portrayed by a spokesman for City Hall "as a temporary arrangement, for a finite time frame to be determined to allow for the stabilization of the system." Landrieu's proposal has received the unanimous endorsement of the city's Democratic Party-dominated political establishment.

Landrieu is following the playbook established by the

ruling class in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, when another disaster made inevitable by decades of neglect of flood protection infrastructure was seized upon to convert the city into a testbed of privatization and pro-corporate restructuring. This policy of plunder and the callous indifference of the ruling class was summed up several years later by President Barack Obama's first Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel, who famously declared, "Never let a good crisis go to waste."

The most infamous aspect of this was the laying off of all of the city's public school teachers and the conversion of all public schools into privately-run charters. As with Landrieu's privatization plan today, the charterization of New Orleans' school system was justified at the time by extraordinary circumstances which supposedly required these drastic measures. In fact, this had nothing to do with rebuilding the city's schools, which are as bad as they were before Katrina, if not worse, and everything to do with opening up the city to an emerging charter industry which is estimated by Wall Street to be potentially worth half a trillion dollars nationally.

There is no reason to believe the Landrieu administration that the latest privatization measures would be temporary. In fact, the complete privatization of the SWB has been a goal of the ruling class for 20 years. It was first proposed in 1998, and in 2002 was voted down by the city council in the face of overwhelming popular opposition.

Claims that such measures would be oriented towards "stabilizing" the situation in the drainage system is belied by the fact that the most likely candidate for the contract, French conglomerate Veolia, which already operates the city's wastewater treatment plants, played a leading role in the Flint water crisis.

Landrieu's proposal follows a national policy of deregulation, privatization and budget cuts under successive Democratic and Republican administrations, intensifying under the Obama administration, which bore a major responsibility for the water crisis in Flint and promoted the creation of record numbers of new charter schools throughout the country. It is now being escalated by the administration of Donald Trump, who personifies the domination of finance and criminal speculation over every aspect of American political life.



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