

20 years since Hurricane Katrina

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Friday marked the 20th anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. On the morning of August 29, 2005, the massive Category 3 storm made landfall in New Orleans, Louisiana. The surge breached the city's levees, flooding 80 percent of the low-lying metropolis, with water reaching depths of more than 15 feet in some areas.

What followed was a catastrophe that claimed nearly 1,400 lives and caused \$125 billion in damage. The world watched in shock as tens of thousands of residents, unable to escape, clung to rooftops or remained trapped in flooded homes without food or water. For days they pleaded for help, but none arrived.

More than 10,000 people were forced to huddle for days in the New Orleans Superdome, amid scenes of hunger, disease and desperation. Survivors recalled corpses floating in the floodwaters, left to rot in the sweltering August heat. In total, more than 1 million people were displaced, scattered to cities across the region.

All of this devastation could have been avoided. Scientists had long warned that New Orleans' levee system was inadequate and would be overtapped by a major storm, causing extensive flooding. Nothing was done, nor was there an evacuation plan in place.

Four days after the hurricane struck, the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote:

Hurricane Katrina has laid bare the awful truths of contemporary America—a country torn by the most intense class divisions, ruled by a corrupt plutocracy that possesses no sense either of social reality or public responsibility, in which millions of its citizens are deemed expendable and cannot depend on any social safety net or public assistance if disaster, in whatever form, strikes.

Washington's response to this human tragedy has been one of gross incompetence and criminal indifference. People have been left to literally die in the streets of a major American city without any assistance for four days. Images of suffering and degradation that resemble the conditions in the most impoverished Third World countries are broadcast daily with virtually no visible response from the government of a country that concentrates the greatest share of wealth in the world.

The official response to the disaster focused on repression rather than saving lives. Fueled by trumped-up media claims of looting and lawlessness, some 65,000 National Guard troops, joined by Blackwater mercenaries, were dispatched to enforce "law and order." For the ruling class and its political representatives, from Republican President George W. Bush to Democratic state and local officials, the overriding concern was not rescuing the population but preventing the human catastrophe from morphing into a social uprising.

The *Army Times* published an article declaring that the military would "fight insurgency in the city," while the US Army's own website boasted that troops "used their experience in Iraq and other operations to bring order to a confused situation." Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco stated, "They have M16s and are locked and loaded. These troops know how to shoot and kill, and I expect they will." In the early days of the flooding, there was a string of murders carried out by police.

President Bush's conduct epitomized the ruling class response to the catastrophe. He stayed on vacation at his ranch in Crawford, Texas, and did not return to Washington D.C. until Wednesday, three days into the disaster. As Air Force One flew over New Orleans, Bush was photographed peering out on the scene of mass suffering through a window on the plane.

For a quarter-century before Katrina, administrations of both parties diverted resources away from social infrastructure and programs and funneled them into the coffers of the corporate oligarchy. Bush and Congress had unlimited funds to wage war in Iraq and Afghanistan and to build up, in the name of "homeland security," the framework of a police state, but offered no federal aid to the victims of Katrina. Instead, the White House urged the population to donate to private charities.

And what are the conditions 20 years later? The "rebuilding" program after Katrina accelerated the nationwide social counterrevolution already underway. The city was held up as a model for the country: Nearly the entire public school system was privatized and turned into for-profit charter schools, housing projects were demolished, and Charity Hospital, founded in 1736 to serve the poor, was permanently closed. The poorest neighborhoods were emptied of large sections of their working class residents, while other areas were gentrified.

Today, the population remains 23 percent smaller than before

the storm, the poverty rate is 22.6 percent—more than double the national average of 11.1 percent—and economic inequality is greater than ever. Public transportation has shrunk to just 35 percent of its pre-Katrina capacity.

As the *New York Times* admitted this week,

New Orleans is smaller, poorer and more unequal than before the storm ... rebuilding programs were little more than corporate bailouts ... used to justify major private-sector takeovers of public services. ... New Orleans now ranks as the most income unequal major city in America. Nearly one in three children live in poverty—and for Black children, the rate is 43 percent.

These conditions are a concentrated expression of broader developments across the United States. Since 2005, the concentration of wealth in the hands of the rich and super-rich has only accelerated: The share of national wealth held by the top 1 percent has risen from 22 percent to more than 30 percent today.

Over the same period, there have been two multitrillion-dollar bailouts of Wall Street, in 2008 and 2020, carried out with bipartisan support, alongside further tax cuts for the wealthy, record military budgets and deep cuts to social programs.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, fueled by the refusal of both parties to adopt public health measures that impinge on corporate profit, has demonstrated that for the American state, “millions of its citizens are deemed expendable.” The pandemic has claimed nearly 1.2 million lives and left 48 million suffering from Long COVID. Meanwhile, global warming, with ocean temperatures at record highs, ensures that further weather-related disasters on the scale of Katrina are inevitable.

With the second Trump administration, these reactionary processes have reached a qualitatively new level. Trump’s war on science and his sweeping cuts to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), including the elimination of its research arm in the fiscal 2026 budget, will reverse significant progress in tracking major storms. At the same time, his administration is dismantling Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

On Tuesday, three days before the Katrina anniversary, Trump’s FEMA administrator suspended more than 20 employees, who had signed an open letter to Congress, called the *Katrina Declaration*, warning that the administration’s cuts would have disastrous consequences.

Science News, citing the cuts at NOAA, wrote on Thursday:

Taken together, it’s not at all clear that the country is better prepared for another Katrina. ... Climate change

will make hazards more frequent and more severe, raising the costs of future disasters. The cost of climate-related hazards for the US Gulf region could double by 2050, a recent study found. ... Hurricanes are becoming more dangerous as Earth’s climate warms: bigger, rainier, penetrating farther inland—and, increasingly, explosively and swiftly intensifying into major storms, fueled by rising ocean water temperatures.

In 2005, the WSWS wrote:

The political establishment and the corporate elite have been exposed as bankrupt, together with their ceaseless insistence that the unfettered development of capitalism is the solution to all of society’s problems.

In the figure of the fascist dictator-in-the-making Donald Trump, and his complicit Democratic Party “opposition,” this assessment is being brutally confirmed. The central lesson of Katrina—that the basic requirements of modern society are incompatible with a system that subordinates everything to the enrichment of a financial oligarchy—must now serve as the starting point for the working class to build its own independent revolutionary and socialist movement against capitalism.



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