

From 9/11 to Katrina

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The Editors

ARE THERE WORDS to describe the racism, the stupidity, the sheer overwhelming cynicism of the Bush gang's "response" to the Gulf Coast holocaust? We can't think of any, and we won't even try to find them. Suffice it to say that four years after 9/11, Hurricane Katrina and, in particular, the destruction of the major American city of New Orleans has brought our society face to face with the reality of its condition.

On September 24, hundreds of thousands of marchers in the streets of Washington D.C. and west coast cities confronted that reality and gave an answer: U.S. Out of Iraq. Make Levees Not War. Bring the Troops Home Now! The antiwar movement is back, nearly a year after the debacle of the 2004 election—and now, with polls showing 52% of the U.S. public supporting immediate withdrawal from Iraq, and less than one-third supporting George W. Bush's "handling of the war," this movement represents an antiwar majority at home as well as internationally.

The public's revulsion over the war obviously reflects the general collapse of confidence in the Bush regime, which was elected (sort of) on the strength of the general public's belief that he would "protect us from harm." A brutal joke that's proven to be, at home and abroad.

Remarkably and unexpectedly, the Katrina crisis has become a microcosm of the viciousness as well as general incompetence of the administration's social and economic far-right governance. The discussion now unfolding is not only about Bush and the disgraced Michael Brown at FEMA. The combined failures of the war in Iraq, Katrina, and deepening poverty and economic insecurity in U.S. society are not only dissected in the radical and alternative press.

The broad contours of a society in general crisis are discussed, in partial form, in mainstream media and are on display in every nightly television news broadcast. Even though only a fraction of what occurred has been reported, the usual filters that blur the pictures were overwhelmed by the reality that Katrina exposed.

The reality is this: The destruction of New Orleans, if it is comparable to anything at all in U.S. history, resembles the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. But not only will New Orleans and the surrounding region take longer to rebuild—but the plans for downsizing and "socially cleansing" the city are already evident.

A SIXTY PERCENT wage cut? That's what 34,000 United Auto Workers members at Delphi face if the company gets what it wants from a bankruptcy court.

Meanwhile GM demanded that the contract be reopened in mid-cycle so that they could push through concessions, including big cuts in health care for retirees. The UAW allowed itself to be bullied into negotiations. Then when a tentative proposal was reached, they (not the company) initiated legal action to block any feisty retirees from suing.

GM spends \$5.6 million a year on healthcare—more than it spends on buying steel. But U.S. corporations opposed a system of universal healthcare, so why are they crying now? Inevitably, Ford will demand similar givebacks.

The Big Three haven't lost market share because workers have luxurious health care coverage and pensions, but because the corporations have made the wrong product decisions. After years of compromising, does the UAW leadership really believe its members are overpaid? Without a fightback, a large sector of the unionized, formerly high-paid working class in the heart of basic industry could be reduced at a stroke to just slightly above the "working poor" level.

Barring popular resistance New Orleans is intended by the elites to be "reinvented" by the market as the ultimate cultural artifact, a trendy tourist town celebrating Black music and cuisine without most of its actual lower-income African-American population. It's the universal neoliberal agenda (not only in America but globally): Shove the poor out of the way, especially where the real estate is desirable. And an added twist: Create an enhanced role for the military in "domestic disasters," taking advantage of the lurid (and, it turns out, 90% mythical) accounts of rampant predatory crime during the New Orleans flooding.

Unlike the San Francisco earthquake a century ago, this disaster was the most anticipated, down to the details, in our history. It was produced by generations of misguided engineering, dubious strategic planning and egregious environmental racism—and in the past decade, the federal government's starving the budget for the basic needs of levee maintenance, let alone longterm investment in desperately needed coastal restoration.

The terror of storms striking coastal regions with growing fury caused by global warming is, of course, just a "theory." We are told this by some of the same forces who instruct us that evolution is just a "theory." Indeed, global warming and evolution are both theories. So is gravity. That doesn't mean they go away if you deny them.

By the time the impact of climate change is "conclusively proven" when coastal zones are essentially uninhabitable, the summertime Arctic ice sheet has disappeared, the Gulf Stream has shut down and catastrophic global warming is irreversible, it might be just a bit late in the day to respond effectively.

Globally, the detailed consequences of environmental destruction can't be predicted. But in the specific case of New Orleans, the hurricane's effects were exactly as advance studies stated: A city not just drowned in floodwater but poisoned by its petrochemical and biological toxic waste; the poorest sectors of the population choking in shit with no evacuation plan after those with cars drove out of town; hospitals without medicine or electricity and pumping stations helpless without power. All this in addition to hundreds of thousands displaced and made destitute throughout the Gulf Coast.

Almost all the victim-blaming sensational stories reported during the crisis—murder and rape by armed looting gangs at the Superdome and Convention Center, etc.—turned out to be bogus. But the revelations of real atrocities perpetrated during the flooding multiply by the day.

Five hundred prisoners in the New Orleans jail abandoned behind locked doors as waters rose—still

unaccounted for, Human Rights Watch reports, as of the end of September. Blackwater and other private “security” formations roaming the streets, a law of their own, acting on unknown authority. People fleeing the city over a bridge on foot pushed back by armed suburban police. Xavier University, the leading Black medical school in the country, left not only physically inundated but destitute as the Education Department withdrew the funding that pays the salaries of faculty and staff.

Much of the relief and practically the entire recovery effort is being “privatized,” which is to say “cronyized”—from subsidizing churches to handing out plum contracts to Halliburton. The government’s main contribution lies in re-fusing to extend Medicaid to uprooted survivors in the most desperate need (childless adults need not apply), and suspending not only the prevailing-wage requirements of the Davis-Bacon Act but also all affirmative action and minority set-aside regulations. This assures not only that wages in the rebuilding operation will be suppressed, but—even more important and cruel—that many New Orleans residents who lost their homes and livelihoods won’t be able to return even to the available low-wage jobs. That would be unwarranted interference with private enterprise.

Speaking of private enterprise, all along the Gulf Coast the insurance industry is engaged in its normal ideal free-market behavior—namely, collecting people’s premiums for hurricane insurance and then refusing claims on the grounds that the homes were destroyed “by flooding, not wind damage.” You can trust the government for one thing, at least: The insurance corporations will come out OK, the oil industry will do fine, the airlines will shed as many jobs and pensions as they need through the magic of bankruptcy while ordinary people whose lives were wrecked remain saddled with debt.

The other costs that American working people will bear in the price of gasoline and every commodity shipped by land, air and water will dwarf our pitiful share of the “savings” from George W. Bush’s tax cuts for the rich. Meanwhile the price tag for rebuilding from this mostly-preventable calamity will be in the hundreds of billions, rivaling the expense of Bush’s already-lost-but-far-from-over Iraq war. Overall, the human and material damage entailed by Katrina and the government’s negligence is considerably greater than any terrorist attack Osama bin Laden could have dreamed, let alone executed.

At least the Katrina catastrophe can’t be used as a pretext to invade some other country (at least, not as far as we can imagine). But it’s now clear to everyone that the so-called “war on terror” proclaimed after 9/11, from the massive Homeland Security bureaucracy to the invasion of Iraq, fatally undercut the government’s preparations for actual natural and social emergencies.

What Next?

Most of the above, and more, is well known. The liberal, mainstream and even right-wing media are filled with critiques of the mess the Bush administration has made of handling Katrina and its aftermath—far more damning than anything coming from the ostensible Democratic opposition. What are the deeper implications and how can the social movements respond? We will offer some immediate and provisional observations.

If 9/11 and Katrina represent the worst disasters to strike the U.S. homeland since Pearl Harbor, they have coincided with the worst presidency in well over a century—since Rutherford B. Hayes took office in a crooked political deal after the deadlocked 1876 election (sound familiar?), ended post-Civil War Reconstruction and allowed the consolidation of white supremacy throughout the South by legislation and racist terror.

Today, by measures ranging from stacking the courts with anti-labor, anti-civil rights and pro-corporate judicial cadres to the USA PATRIOT Act and the “war on terror,” the present administration has been waging an assault on basic democratic and human rights of truly historic proportions. The biggest question on many people’s minds is whether its blunders in the staggering Gulf Coast catastrophe will finally destroy the Bush administration.

Beyond that lie deeper questions of whether the realities exposed by Katrina will force a serious alteration of the country’s agendas on racial, social and environmental crises; and whether the tightening of energy supplies and soaring prices will throw the economy into severe decline.

To the first question, the possible destruction of the Bush regime, our guess is: not necessarily. Certainly this regime deserves to be thrown out en masse and in disgrace. The combination of pre-9/11 negligence, and the twin disasters of Iraq and Katrina, are vastly worse than the Watergate break-in/coverup scandals that brought down Richard Nixon 32 years ago. This is not even to mention the corrupt dealings of the Republican leadership of both the House and Senate (Delay and Frist); illegal White House payoffs to right-wing commentator Armstrong Williams to hype the Bush education agenda; the Vice Presidential chief-of-staff’s criminal conduct in leaking Valerie Plame’s CIA employment; and the public political backlash against Bush and the religious right over their obscene intervention in the tragic case of Terri Schiavo.

The difference is that the Democrats, who controlled Congress under Nixon, finally and reluctantly used their power after elite confidence in Nixon had disintegrated. The Democrats today, as a minority out of power, seem to think that they can exploit Bush’s vulnerable status by simply waiting for the 2006 election, without having to present a serious alternative program, which they don’t have in any case. The acquiescence of nearly half the Senate Democrats in the John Roberts Supreme Court appointment is hardly an indicator of all-out struggle.

Compare and Contrast

AS YET ANOTHER hurricane plows through the Caribbean toward the Gulf of Mexico—Wilma, the most violent hurricane since measurements began in 1851—Cuba and Florida once again braced for the impact. The contrasts are instructive.

In Cuba, evacuation is a social and collective operation for which the government takes direct responsibility. So is rebuilding. Whatever one thinks of the regime’s authoritarian politics and practice, Cubans don’t depend on private means of transport to escape the storm—and don’t worry about whether they’ll be allowed to return home or whether essential services will depend on individual ability to pay.

Cubans are generally poor, but they aren’t abandoned in convention centers without drinking water. They won’t be stuck without health care. And while officials in charge of the evacuation are no doubt Party loyalists, it’s safe to say they aren’t people without enough experience in “emergency management” to rescue a kitten from a tree.

Socialized disaster management is why the death toll in Cuba from tropical storms is remarkably small—and why Cuba had 1,100 doctors prepared to assist U.S. Gulf Coast communities, aid that the U.S. government refused to allow.

The Democrats in any case are a deeply divided party. They rely on the votes of everyone who hates the war and loathes everything in the right-wing Bush agenda; but many of them in fact support huge chunks of that agenda, whether it’s supporting the war (until it’s conclusively lost and overwhelmingly unpopular), gutting social security and welfare in the name of “reform” or slashing

wages and what remains of union power in the name of “competing in the global marketplace.” Call it corporate neoliberalism with a human face—the Democrats’ program not only comes nowhere near addressing the real crisis, it represents a formula for political impotence and probably more electoral failure.

A New Movement?

The Katrina catastrophe screams out for a serious alternative program for democratic reconstruction, with social justice, not only of the Gulf Coast and New Orleans but our entire society. Nothing could so dramatically highlight the need for universal single-payer health coverage. Nothing so urgently demonstrates the need for efficient mass public transit. Nothing so clearly illustrates the urgency of full-employment programs and decent housing for all. And nothing so demonstrates the importance not only of a FEMA that actually works, but a 180-degree reversal of the death-to-the-environment politics that threaten the future of life on the planet.

Above all let’s be clear—the realities of New Orleans show how absurd is the myth that the United States has achieved anything remotely resembling “a color-blind society,” and how affirmative action must be preserved and extended.

Even to outline such a program is to instantly see that the Democratic Party—particularly after Bill Clinton proclaimed “the era of big government is over”—can’t and won’t have anything to do with the solution. An entirely new movement is required to carry it forward, which brings us to our second question regarding the potential for a transformed agenda. In fact, we think the potential for such a change is real—depending first and foremost on a powerful democratic grassroots mobilization against the facts of social neglect and racism exposed in the catastrophe.

In such a mobilization, African-American communities and leadership are obviously central, but by no means is this their struggle alone. In this struggle, especially, social alliances for democratically controlled relief and reconstruction are possible because (1) Black anger is so obviously justified, (2) non-affluent sectors of the Gulf Coast white population have also been severely affected and share the same basic need for immediate help and democratically controlled reconstruction, (3) all working people can identify with those who have suffered such losses and such miserable treatment from the government.

This requires that the social movements in all their manifestations—antiwar, global justice and environmental—rally behind popular initiatives like Community Labor United (CLU) in New Orleans. The logical demand is that the city and the Gulf Coast communities must be rebuilt not by bureaucratic edicts “for” the residents, but under their control.

Meltdown Coming?

Finally, the longer-term economic implications are murky for multiple reasons, including the unreliability of information. The relatively optimistic official predictions of a fourth-quarter slowdown in growth, followed by a spurt of economic activity as reconstruction begins, may be accurate. This depends to a great degree on whether the disruptions of oil supply and refining are as short-term as we’re being told.

Can an economy fueled by consumer spending and debt, an overheated housing market and massive borrowing from foreign countries (most of all China) survive, say, a year of three-dollar-per-gallon gasoline prices and the addition of \$100-150 billion to the federal budget deficit caused by Katrina?

How far can a bubble expand before it bursts? Are we about to find out? We don't know, the officials and pundits who promise that the energy supply and price shocks are temporary may not know, and they may or may not be revealing what they do know.

It's not that federal budget deficits are at crisis levels in themselves. They are historically low in relation to the size of the economy and could be easily managed, assuming reasonably responsible tax policies on corporations and the affluent and elimination of bloated war spending. It's precisely the combination of deficits with ideological fanaticism and greed—expressed in the refusal to consider reversing the Bush tax cuts in light of hurricane reconstruction costs, and the absurd continuing pretense that somehow the war in Iraq doesn't have to be paid for—that could bring a meltdown of lender confidence in the U.S. debt.

It's not only the survivors of Katrina and New Orleans who found themselves rowing through dark waters with submerged dangers. Look closer: Tomorrow or the day after, we are all living on the Gulf Coast.

P.S.

* From *Against the Current*.