

Ten Years after Katrina: Natural Disaster or Forced Removals and Mass Impoverishment?

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National oppression and mass impoverishment continues in the Gulf and around the U.S.

It has been a decade since the people of New Orleans and the Gulf coast were dislocated due to the failure of the federal government to both protect their communities and to rebuild them after the hurricane.

An undetermined number of people died, officially said to be approximately 1,800 just in New Orleans, during and in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina which struck the last week of August 2005. Many others suffered severe injuries while the municipal and health care systems in the area were overwhelmed.

Thousands of homes were damaged due to the storm causing mass evacuations to convention centers, stadiums, building roofs and in the streets of New Orleans as well as other cities and towns. Later people were transported out of the region along the Gulf Coast in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama.

Families, neighborhoods, churches, organizations, schools, social clubs and a centuries-long culture were wiped out in a matter of days. Although the federal government under the leadership of the-then President George W. Bush told media outlets that they were working to provide assistance to the impacted cities, towns and rural areas, these falsehoods were soon revealed.

White armed militias prevented African Americans from fleeing into their neighborhoods amid reports of outright racially motivated murders. Police and law-enforcement personnel disappeared in the disaster creating an atmosphere of lawlessness and abandonment.

Domestic Warfare While the Middle East and Afghanistan Burned

The aftermath of the Katrina disaster exposed the Bush administration for both its domestic and international failures. With the deployment of hundreds of thousands of U.S. troops in the Middle East, and the invasion of Iraq in 2003, it drained the ranks of the military reserves and National Guard personnel.

Domestic military forces were in short supply and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) demonstrated its racist character and administrative incompetence. The images of hundreds of thousands dislocated African Americans in public areas, buses and on warships awaiting removal illustrated the national oppressive and class contradictions within the world's leading capitalist and imperialist state.

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, which began in October 2001, resulted in the deaths of thousands of U.S. and NATO troops along with hundreds of thousands of civilians in these countries. Nonetheless, the Bush administration along with the Congress was determined to continue these occupations which were based on fabricated allegations of a “war on terrorism” and destroying “weapons of mass destruction.”

When several other states such as Cuba, Venezuela and France offered material assistance to the people of the region, the Bush administration declined saying that the U.S. was a wealthy country and could take care of its own people. Cuban physicians were prepared to deploy to the Gulf and Venezuela was willing to send ships with fuel in a gesture of solidarity with the African American people and others in the region.

Therefore, by not providing assistance to the people and preventing others from doing so, the government was in effect intensifying a war against the oppressed. Over the next two years, the economic crisis within the U.S. mounted as jobless rates skyrocketed along with massive home foreclosures and evictions.

Impact of Federal Policy on the People of the Region

Estimates suggest that over 1 million people were forced to relocate while untold numbers perished and suffered even deeper levels of poverty and social neglect. The African American communities of Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama along the Gulf were disproportionately impacted.

The damage done to the eighth and ninth wards provided a rationale for mass removals in New Orleans. Public housing complexes shuttered and neighborhood housing residents were not provided with any assistance to relocate and rebuild.

Thousands were placed in makeshift government housing where they suffered further injury and isolation. In cities as far away as Detroit, dislocated African Americans and others were warehoused in hotels for months until they were told by the government that they could no longer house them.

After ten years most African Americans are still living outside Louisiana and the Gulf region with no prospects of returning to their homes. Whole neighborhoods remain in ruins with damaged homes, churches, schools and businesses that have not been able to reopen. The New Orleans public schools were turned over to a charter system leaving teachers and other educational workers unemployed.

In a recent article published by the German newspaper Deutsche Welle (DW), a woman named Meghan Sullivan, who works as an ultrasound technician now living in Houston, Texas, told the media outlet that her family could not afford to relocate in New Orleans. (August 30)

She explained to DW that “We had to evacuate quite suddenly and leave everything behind that didn’t fit in the car. We didn’t realize it was going to be this bad, but we lost everything in the storm.”

Sullivan went on to say “A year later, we decided to move to Houston. We were pretty much priced out of buying a new home in New Orleans at that point already. There simply weren’t enough properties around. And now, people, who have never lived in New Orleans before,

are spending insane amounts of money to buy tiny condos and miserable plots of land, while no one knows how long it will take until the next natural disaster hits the city.”

Rebuilding Without the Black Masses

Corporate news reports about a rebirth of New Orleans are taking place with the current domination of the political structures by whites and the further oppression of African Americans.

Whereas assistance was made available through grants and insurance companies for those impacted in white communities, the same was not true in the African American neighborhoods. Many in the ninth ward were falsely told that if they lived close to the levee one did not need insurance and that the federal government would cover their expenses in the case of a disaster.

At the same time thousands of African Americans in the ninth ward were either denied flood insurance or could not afford the coverage. Consequently, they were left with no resources to relocate and reconstruct damaged and destroyed homes and communities.

In another article published by Deutsche Welle written by Richard Walker from New Orleans, he interviews a local housing activist Cashauna Hill of Greater New Orleans Fair Housing. Hill

told Walker how “Our counselors began to notice that white homeowners in white neighborhoods were slated to receive larger grants than those for black homeowners in African-American neighborhoods – even when their homes were of similar age and similar square footage.” (August 28)

Grants were allocated not based on the cost of reconstruction, but instead on the market value of the residence before Katrina. Such a formula must always take into account the racist history of how housing values are determined for insurance and real estate assessment purposes.

Hill noted that “Because of this country’s history of government-sanctioned and sponsored racial segregation and discrimination, African-Americans’ homes in African-American neighborhoods are valued lower than the homes of white people in white neighborhoods.”

Rents have soared in the last decade and low-income African Americans have been largely price out of the market. Landlords often discriminate against people who are allocated housing vouchers as opposed to those who pay cash.

These developments in New Orleans and along the Gulf coast have been replicated socially throughout the U.S. The so-called “sub-prime” mortgage crisis of the late 2000s had the same impact in numerous cities such as Detroit, Cleveland, Chicago, Los Angeles, Baltimore, Atlanta, Boston and others areas.

Despite the fines paid to the federal government by the banks which engineered the housing crisis, most of the monies have not reached the people who were adversely impacted by the dislocations absent of a natural disaster. Until housing is considered a fundamental human right in the U.S. this problem will only worsen in the years to come.

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