

Fight to Reopen New Orleans Public Housing “Horrible Slow and Tragic”

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By Amy Goodman

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We speak with Tracie Washington, a lifelong New Orleans resident and civil rights attorney who has sued the city over its housing policies. “Somehow we’ve got to get to a critical mass of people where they are all telling the government that it’s wrong, so that the government will stop on its own,” Washington said. “We just can’t keep suing every single day. They’ll wear us out.” [includes rush transcript]

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AMY GOODMAN: Tracie Washington also took part. She’s a lifelong New Orleans resident and civil rights attorney who has sued New Orleans over its housing policies. She’s President of the Louisiana Justice Institute.

TRACIE WASHINGTON: Housing in New Orleans, no matter what sector and what you’re talking about with housing, we have horrible stagnation for those individuals who own homes and are trying to get back home. The slowness of the Road Home program that the state is administering is killing them. I mean, it really is.

Renters, you know, 57% of those homes that were destroyed by Katrina were being used by renters. That’s what our population was a little upside-down with that. There was no relief really provided by the federal government that went directly into the hands of renters, and so they’re just stuck out, and that’s the vast majority of the population that we had.

And then, probably some of the most tragic stories come from our public housing residents, because their homes remain shuttered, and they are perfectly usable, habitable—I mean, they’re going to need some work now, it’s been two years, and they’ve been shuttered for two years—but good buildings, and they have been locked out of their homes.

And so, between all of that, the skyrocketing homeowner’s and flood insurance that homeowners are dealing with, I mean, it’s a stressful, horribly stressful situation for individuals seeking housing in New Orleans.

AMY GOODMAN: Why aren’t they opening up the public housing, for the most part? How many houses, how many apartments haven’t been opened up? How many people have gone back?

TRACIE WASHINGTON: We had a little over 5,100 units of public housing occupied prior to Hurricane Katrina. Right now, depending upon whose numbers you really want to use, we have somewhere in the neighborhood of 1,200 occupied public housing units, and that’s, you know, the 31st of August, 2007.

And, you know, there is a move, and there a feeling by our government that we need to have mixed-income developments and that public housing of old, how it was run before, whatever, needs to be dismantled, and until they get their way, they're going to keep these buildings shut. We have litigation going right now to change that, but it's horribly slow, and it's tragic.

AMY GOODMAN: So it's not because the housing is unusable, if they fixed it up?

TRACIE WASHINGTON: Oh, no. No, not at all. We've got experts from MIT, all over the country, who have looked at the housing. I mean, that—and, you know, the proof is in the pudding, really, quite frankly. They wanted to close down all of the housing, and immediately after Katrina, some of the residents got word of this, and they went and they took over one of the developments, Iberville. And so, they were able to get Iberville open.

Some of these developments that are closed down took in no water. I mean, they were not damaged at all. Lafitte? No water. C.J. Peete? No water. But the decision was made to take advantage of an opportunity. Hurricane Katrina came. Look what we can do. We can keep these people away from here, bring in the bulldozers, tear down this housing, cut the unit space and occupancy by two-thirds, call it mixed-income, take that one-third that's left and divide it into three, so we have a third of that space for public housing residents, and the rest we will use for market rate and, you know, a little bit below market rate. And that has always been the plan.

I will tell you this one funny anecdote. Before we decided to take on the public housing litigation, some of the residents at the St. Bernard development said, "You know that they are just trying to take over our St. Bernard to put in golf courses," which at the time seemed to me sort of like they intentionally blew up the levees. And I'm like, "OK, sure. Alright. Yeah, they want to put golf courses right in the middle of the hood." And you'd hear it, and you'd basically dismiss it. They're my clients, but I dismissed it. Just this summer, the plans were announced for what the developers plan to do with St. Bernard, and guess what. Two championship golf courses in that development. And all I could do was go back to my clients and say, "OK. OK. You were right. You were right." You know—excuse me. Now I guess we just fight to get them on the back nine. I don't know. But it's just crazy. It's just crazy.

AMY GOODMAN: And so, what power do you have to change this? How can you challenge this legally?

TRACIE WASHINGTON: Legally, we go to court. That's how we've been challenging every wrong in the city of New Orleans, every violation of civil rights. But at the end of the day, Amy, at some point we've got to challenge the hearts and the morals of these folks, because there are not enough of us to keep running to court. So somehow we've got to get to, you know, a critical mass of people, where they are all telling the government that it's wrong, so that the government will stop on its own. I mean, at the end of the day, that's what's going to have to happen in the city, so that we can have social justice and equity. Otherwise—you know, we just can't keep suing every single day. They'll wear us out.

AMY GOODMAN: So where do the people go who don't get home?

TRACIE WASHINGTON: I worry about it. For public housing residents, there is a safety net, as it were, but that safety net doesn't mean you get back to home. It means that wherever they put you, wherever you landed—Atlanta, Arkansas, Los Angeles, Houston—that, you know, you have housing there. And it is the view of our federal government that as long as we provide you with housing somewhere, then you are covered. It has done its duty. I don't believe that to be the case.

I don't know how long these vouchers are going to last. There are residents who still say that they are having problems with housing. And so, in my assessment, it is this effort and drive by the federal government to take away those safety nets that we think we should have in this society.

AMY GOODMAN: What role does Mayor Nagin play in this?

TRACIE WASHINGTON: The role he plays is that he's not playing a role. A real leader provides some vision, and they take heat regardless. If Mayor Nagin simply came in and said, "You know what? The management of the local housing authority by the federal government must end now. It's been under receivership. It's two years past the time the receivership should have ended. We want our housing authority returned to a local board." Then at least the local population could take control and decide its destiny with public housing. We'd stand a fighting chance. Right now, we are fighting Washington, D.C. A locally run board, where those local officials would be responsible and responsive to the people, would be perfect. But it is Mayor Nagin who has to make that call, and he has not and will not. He doesn't want public housing.

AMY GOODMAN: How does he indicate that?

TRACIE WASHINGTON: He just won't take it over. I mean, he just—it's a call. It is a letter of intent. It is a petition. Public housing went into receivership, because the former mayor allowed it to go into receivership. It needed to go into receivership. But it's a simple—I won't say it's a simple process, but he needs to ask for it to be returned. And he has not.

AMY GOODMAN: You said that the percentages are unusual in New Orleans for renters, the percentage of renters.

TRACIE WASHINGTON: Well, for those damaged homes, and then just generally, yes. I think—and I can't give you the statistics off the top of my head, but generally in communities you find more home ownership than you have renters. Here, we flipped. We were opposite. We had much more—many more renters than we had homeowners, and those were—so they were disproportionately adversely affected by the ravages of the water.

AMY GOODMAN: So they don't get Road Home money.

TRACIE WASHINGTON: No.

AMY GOODMAN: Do they get Red Cross money? Where do they get money?

TRACIE WASHINGTON: FEMA rental assistance, if they're eligible. Red Cross is just a joke, so whatever Red Cross money we all got in the beginning, that \$2,000, you know, they could have gotten that. And then that's it. You know, some of them—those people that we still see in the trailer parks all over the country, those are the former renters here. That's where our population is.

AMY GOODMAN: And do you deal with residents of, for example, the Lower Ninth Ward?

TRACIE WASHINGTON: We continue to represent them, as well as residents in many of the other communities. The mayor and the city have begun this demolition process with houses, and just arbitrarily and capriciously demolishing homes around the city. So just last week—two weeks ago, we filed a suit, myself along with Loyola Law Clinic, Bill Quigley, to stop these demolitions until the city comes up with a rational policy for determining which houses should be demolished.

Right now, we have houses that were demolished that were—I got a call today, Amy, from someone who had to—whose Road Home was being fast-tracked so that her house—she could rebuild her house. She had gotten her closing documents. She had been awarded \$130,000. They had done the evaluations and appraisals and everything. She was doing the process, starting to redo her house. She came home. Her house was gone. She was stuck. This is a sixty-two-year-old woman whose house was demolished, notwithstanding the fact she told them, “Look, the Road Home people called the city and said, you know, it's going to take us another week. Don't—you know, don't do this.” So then they demolished the house, and this senior citizen then had to go back at closing and take the buyout. She had to take the buyout, because she didn't have a house anymore.

AMY GOODMAN: And what was the buyout?

TRACIE WASHINGTON: The buyout was a little bit less than what they would have provided her to rebuild. And even with that—it wound up being somewhere in the neighborhood of \$100,000—the city says, “Well, she was made whole. She got \$100,000.” I'm like, no, you don't get it. She was getting \$130,000. With \$100,000, you can't go and buy land and build a house. When you have to sell to the state, you sell your property. She has no property anymore. It's so tragic. It's just so tragic.

AMY GOODMAN: Don't residents have to approve demolition?

TRACIE WASHINGTON: No. The city passed a health ordinance that allows them to demolish property.

AMY GOODMAN: They don't have to even inform the residents?

TRACIE WASHINGTON: Sure, but informing them means they can send it to what the city considers the last known address, which is in most cases the house that the people aren't living in. So you get a notice at a house that you're not living in that your house is going to be demolished.

AMY GOODMAN: Who profits from this?

TRACIE WASHINGTON: I don't know. I mean, I just don't know. You know, I can go with the theories that my clients give me and say that's crazy, but I did that before, and it wasn't crazy.

AMY GOODMAN: I heard Trump might be coming to town.

TRACIE WASHINGTON: Well, if you look out your window right here, there's a Trump sign right there on the side of a building. He is coming.

The Lower Ninth Ward, in all seriousness, by the Industrial Canal, folks, developers have always wanted that tract, that large tract, for, you know, shipping, industry, big warehouses, things of that nature. So when I say that's the stuff I hear, that's what I hear. And this is even better than eminent domain. You know, that condemnation means court hearings and appeals and this, that, and the other. If you can simply pass a health ordinance that allows you to tear down somebody's house without an opportunity to be heard, without an appeal right, that's the best thing in the world for the city.

AMY GOODMAN: What gives you hope now?

TRACIE WASHINGTON: I wake up every day breathing, so, you know, I'm—I've got a law license, and as long as somebody doesn't take that away, I can keep fighting. I think right now, because, for example, demolitions are happening all over the city and, you know, whites and blacks are getting these letters and notices that more folks are joining forces to fight these things, and I have to think that that's going to help.

AMY GOODMAN: Tracie Washington is the President of the Louisiana Justice Institute, speaking to us in New Orleans this weekend.

This interview is available online at: http://www.democracynow.org/2007/9/4/fight_to_reopen_new_orleans_public.