

Two years later, public housing suffers another blow in New Orleans

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BY AMY GOODMAN

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During the second anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, several dozen public-housing residents and activists marched to the headquarters of the Housing Authority of New Orleans. The marchers occupied the offices for hours. As the military and police surrounded the building, Sharon Sears Jasper, a displaced resident of the St. Bernard housing project, spoke: "We are not going to stop. We refuse to let you tear our homes down and destroy our lives. The government, the president of the United States, you all have failed us. Our people have been displaced too long. Our people are dying of stress, depression and broken families. We demand that you open all public housing. Bring our families home now."

In contrast, the day before, I had asked Mayor Ray Nagin if he made any demands of President Bush as they dined together the previous night. Bush had just spoken at a school named for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., whose issues of race and poverty are starkly laid bare in New Orleans. Unlike those who had lost their homes, the mayor replied, "It wasn't a time for demands."

Tracie Washington is the president of The Louisiana Justice Institute and a lifelong resident of New Orleans. She says only a quarter of the more than 5,000 affordable housing units in New Orleans are filled. "There is a feeling by our government that public housing of old needs to be dismantled, buildings shut. We have litigation going right now to change that, but it's horribly slow, and it's tragic."

She describes the plan by which public housing will be converted to "mixed-income" developments: "Some of these developments that are closed down took in 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.' "

It is not just renters. Private housing is being demolished as well. Washington described how the city instituted a stunning policy to allow the legal demolition of homes. Where once homeowners would have at least 120 days and several layers of appeals to prevent their homes from being demolished, Nagin instituted an "Imminent Health Threat Demolition" ordinance. He now gives residents only 30 days to stop demolition.

To the tens of thousands of New Orleanians scattered across the country, the city's scant notice -- a sticker attached to the property plus mentions on a city Web site and in *The Times-Picayune* newspaper -- is clearly insufficient. According to *The Times-Picayune*, in addition to having their homes destroyed, the owners have a lien placed on the property for the cost of the demolition, setting the stage for the displaced owners to lose their property to the city.

That is why groups like Common Ground Collective, Louisiana Justice Institute and People's Hurricane Relief Fund and Oversight Coalition are taking action, on the streets and in the courts.

According to Common Ground's founder, Malik Rahim, of the more than 12,000 people in the lower 9th Ward, only about 400 live there now. Where once there was a dense, vibrant African-American neighborhood, I walked with Rahim through the tall marsh grass, vacant lots and destroyed churches and schools. A few isolated, damaged brick homes remain.

Curtis Muhammad, a longtime resident of New Orleans and a member of People's Organizing Committee, believes the economic interests driving the failing reconstruction must be investigated. "People see (Donald) Trump down here trying to buy real estate, the big tycoons. The gated communities are growing faster and faster. Look at public housing. They could have knocked that out in a week if they wanted to, cleaned it up. That's a lot of people that they could have just brought home. You can't explain that."

Two years after Katrina, as Bush flew from the Bayou to Baghdad, a People's Hurricane tribunal -- putting every level of government on trial -- was ending in New Orleans. A group was selling a T-shirt there that reads: "Don't believe the hype. Gulf Coast recovery is not 'slow' -- it is a privatization scheme that takes away our homes, schools, hospitals and human rights." Mission accomplished?

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