

New Orleans after Katrina: Where's the recovery?

Workday Minnesota

By Mark Gruenberg

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NEW ORLEANS - The buildings sit gaping. They're solid, even, some would say, stately. But their windows were blown out, and many are boarded up. They're fenced in, but the grass is cut. Half the people -- there used to be 960 occupied apartments in the two-story St. Bernard public housing project -- are elsewhere in New Orleans. The other half are in Houston. And that's not even the worst part of town.

This is New Orleans, two years and two months after Katrina.

The traffic on the expressway zips along, moving more quickly than the signs that read "minimum speed, 40 mph." In a residential neighborhood, a divided four-lane boulevard sees a few cars, a truck or two -- and a lone Postal Service van, driven by a Letter Carrier. There are no buses.

The catch is that this scene is during evening rush hour when, in other cities, traffic is gridlocked, bumper-to-bumper and buses are jammed with commuters. Why? There are few jobs to come home from in New Orleans and fewer residents coming home to them, says Plumbers Local 60 member Dana Colombo.

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Some homes are spic and span. Others are hollow shells. And in the Lower 9th Ward, the worst-hit part of town, many are just now concrete foundation slabs behind curb cuts opening onto the street.

Tiny mobile homes are parked in front of some of the damaged houses. Those are trailer homes, provided by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which tried to sell them -- including their toxic formaldehyde inside -- to residents for \$500-\$1,000 each.

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Plans for replacement housing

Unions' plans for steel-framed manufactured housing -- homes that are nicer than the trailers, being built by union labor in the architectural style of New Orleans' famed "shotgun houses" -- are going ahead, even though FEMA turned a deaf ear to such housing that would survive the next Katrina.

Meanwhile a 1,000-square-foot apartment that used to rent for \$700 a month now rents for \$1,000-\$2,000, if you can find it, and if you can afford it in a city where high-paying jobs are tough to get, explains Alec Revels, a high-schooler working with his friends on repairing a car in his old Gentilly neighborhood.

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Southern University, one of the nation's historically black colleges, was closed for two years. Tulane, Xavier and Loyola Universities, all private, reopened quickly. Why? Leadership failure, says Colombo –just like the failure of leadership symbolized by President Bush's infamous praise of his incompetent FEMA director: "You're doing a good job, Brownie."

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Labor journalists tell the story

Union journalists, in New Orleans for the International Labor Communications Association convention Oct. 18-20, toured the city, then went out in teams to interview local union members, community activists, educators and others. Their aim: Getting the word out to the country about the state of New Orleans and how the policies being implemented there are connected to the rest of the country. The coverage is posted at www.neworleanslabormedia.org

Almost half a million people, 62 percent of them African-American, lived in the Crescent City before the devastating hurricane hit. Estimates of those who left and have not returned range officially from one-third to 40 percent. Colombo and Margaret Trotter, a former resident of the public housing development, say the figure is closer to half.

The hurricane in late August 2005 was the most devastating disaster in U.S. history. It wrecked the historic city on the Gulf Coast and did incredible damage to surrounding areas of Louisiana and Mississippi.

Some sectors - the higher ground along the Mississippi River, such as Uptown and the old French Quarter – were relatively unscathed. But most other structures had up to 13 feet of swampy, stinky mud inside and around them.

Combined with Hurricane Rita, which roared in several weeks later, Katrina left the area prostrate. Trotter says conditions are so bad that "nothing is going to change before 5 to 10 years, to get New Orleans up and running again."

Why the delay?

Two years and two months after the devastation, why like this? Explanations vary:

Some say it's a case of race, class or both. "Those that had cars were able to get out. Those that did not, could not," Colombo said.

Others say that New Orleans is still wrecked due to sheer incompetence.

Trotter, asked which politicians were to blame — GOP President Bush, or Louisiana Gov. Kathleen Blanco and New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin, both Democrats -- answered "Yes."

Robert "Tiger" Hammond, president of the Greater New Orleans AFL-CIO, is one of many who sees an ideological agenda to the continuing disarray. He said it started with Bush's decision –

immediately after the disaster -- to waive Davis-Bacon prevailing wage rules on the no-bid reconstruction projects the Bush administration awarded to favored contractors.

And the Right, they add, considers New Orleans a "laboratory case" for its schemes for the entire country.

Bush's Davis-Bacon waiver let subcontractors import workers from outside the area, some undocumented, and set low wages, which later went unpaid. When workers demanded their pay, said Saket Soni of the Workers Center for Racial Justice, the contractors called in immigration agents to arrest and deport them.

Bush's Davis-Bacon ruling immediately displaced 85 IBEW electricians who were ready and willing to restore power to businesses and homes in the crippled city. "Your services are no longer needed," is what they told IBEW, Hammond said.

'Blatant assault on workers rights'

Tracie Washington, CEO of the Louisiana Justice Institute, called all the developments since Katrina "a blatant assault on workers rights," starting with that Davis-Bacon waiver.

In another case Washington cites, her institute got pulled into a lawsuit over demolition of damaged homes. The Bush administration slapped red stickers on houses, ordering their demolition, without telling the residents -- in or out of the city. "They come home and they won't have a house. Where is due process or law in this?" she asks.

"The one thing the city didn't bank on was federal judge Marty Feldman. He's very conservative. When he heard that, he ruled: 'Don't mess with somebody's property rights,'" stopping demolitions. Many of the houses are salvageable.

The Bush ideology continued through the "Road Home" program, a federal effort supposed to help area residents with funds. Instead Bush used the money for, among other things, \$500,000 for an outside consultant just to do accounting of the funds.

Meanwhile, insurance companies refused to pay area residents for damages to their homes, including cases where they would pay nothing unless the home was more than 50% damaged, residents said

"People are trying to come back and they can't get housing," says Head Start worker Kim Butler, who adds that happened to two of her co-workers.

Attack on public education

It continued in the schools. Louisiana stripped the Orleans Parish (County) school board of control over all but 5 of New Orleans' 120-plus schools. They were split between a "charter school" district, a new state-run district, and the board's five.

"The federal government sent money not to the teachers, but to the state," added Head Start worker Butler. Head Start got so little it had to lay off teachers.

The real aim, said Brenda Mitchell, president of the United Teachers of New Orleans, one of AFT's oldest affiliates and once one of the largest union locals in the South, was to destroy the union. Before Katrina, the teachers' union had 4,700 members. It now has 1,100.

"In a city of working poor, those that were assaulted first" were members of the middle class, Washington said. "The teachers were most of the middle class. They were the first. The bus drivers were next."

Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1560 represents the bus drivers -- and Nagin first cut the buses by 80 percent. They're now at only half their pre-Katrina levels, if that. There's a bus stop on that 4-lane boulevard running past the St. Bernard housing project. There was no bus in sight while journalists were in the area for more than an hour.

Rays of hope

In all the devastation and the lack of reconstruction, the union movement has been a ray of hope.

In a right-to-work state, in the non-union South, the nation's unions are investing \$750 million from the AFL-CIO Housing Investment Trust and Building Investment Trust in reconstruction. That includes building manufactured housing, and constructing retail and health care facilities. It also includes training local people -- some of whom were jobless beforehand — in skilled construction trades.

A pre-apprenticeship program established by the AFL-CIO Building Trades at the Gulf Coast Construction Career Center has trained 103 people so far to prepare for careers in the Building Trades. They'll be apprentices with the Electrical Workers, the Sheet Metal Workers, the Plumbers, the Painters, the Ironworkers and the Carpenters, among others. The apprentices will be future union workers in a city whose construction union market share is below 12 percent.

The alternative, said Orleans Parish Sheriff Marlon Gusman, who addressed the latest group of graduates, may be unemployment, or jail. "This is the positive story about people getting training, moving on and helping our recovery," he says.

The federation's commitment to reconstruction of housing has led the Metal Trades to sponsor the manufactured housing plant, along the Mississippi midway between New Orleans and Baton Rouge. Its workers can assemble the steel frame in modules for a 523-square-foot efficiency-apartment/house, with a full kitchen, bedroom/living room, full bath, storage space and a front porch, in a matter of hours.

With additional work by other crafts, the frame becomes a house, New Orleans style, in a few days and without the hazards of warping associated with wood or collapse associated with hurricanes.

Ray Taylor, president of the firm, Housing International Gulfcoast, Inc., of Reserve, says their year-old operation has hit resistance from traditionalists, despite the aim to help area residents come back to homes.

In a meeting in Mississippi on providing affordable housing to the 36,000 families who lost their homes to Katrina there, the state was unresponsive.

"Why would you want to change what we've designed? And why use steel at all?" Taylor quoted Mississippi officials as saying. "They had the opportunity to replace those FEMA trailers that are reeking of formaldehyde with something that is wider, longer, nicer and give some dignity to people trying to come back home. And they rejected it," he added.

Meanwhile much of the United States seems to have forgotten Katrina's victims. The net result, as Trotter said, is a 5-year to 10-year recovery time, at best.

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Mark Gruenberg writes for Press Associates, Inc., news service. He reported this story as part of a team at the convention of the International Labor Communications Association convention in New Orleans Oct. 18-20. View more articles, video, audio and photos from New Orleans at www.neworleanslabormedia.org

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