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Eight Months After Katrina

By Bill Quigley
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Don't come back to New Orleans unless you intend to join the fight for Justice!

On Monday, April 17, 2006, two bodies were found buried beneath what used to be a home in the Lower 9th Ward. Their discovery raised to 17 the number of Hurricane Katrina fatalities that have been discovered in New Orleans in the past month and a half. Katrina is now directly blamed for the deaths of 1,282 Louisiana residents. Eight months after Katrina, the state reports 987 people are still missing.

Chief Steve Glynn, who oversees the New Orleans Fire Department search effort that found the latest two bodies, told CNN: "You want to put it to rest at some point. You want to feel like it's over and it's just not, yet."

Eight months after Katrina, there are still nearly 300,000 people who have not returned to New Orleans. While we can hope that our community is nearing the end of finding bodies, the struggle for justice for the hundreds of thousands of displaced people continues.

Election Blues

The right to vote remains displaced from New Orleans.

In what was billed as "the most important election in the history of New Orleans," only 36 percent of those registered voted in the recent city elections. Turnout was heavy and high in the mostly prosperous

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and white areas of Uptown, where little damage occurred, and exceptionally low in the heavily damaged and mostly black areas of the New Orleans East, Gentilly and the Ninth Ward - where some precincts reported as few as 15% voter participation.

The state refusal to set up satellite voting for those displaced outside the state resulted in exactly the disenfranchisement predicted.

While Iraqis who had not lived in Iraq in years were helped to vote in the US by our government, people forced out of state by Katrina for seven months were not allowed to vote where they are temporarily living. This has national implications. The New Orleans Times-Picayune reported that in the 2002 US Senate seat runoff between incumbent Democrat Mary Landrieu and Republican Suzanne Haik Terrell, the Orleans factor made the difference for Landrieu. The senator won Orleans by 78,900 votes, compared with her statewide lead of 42,012. In the 2003 gubernatorial runoff between Democrat Kathleen Blanco and Republican Bobby Jindal, Blanco won statewide by 54,874 votes. She won by a margin of 49,741 votes in New Orleans.

Worse, the systematic exclusion of the displaced gives fuel to those who do not want the poor to return and helps create a self-fulfilling prophecy. Low turnout in poor neighborhoods where the displaced could not drive back in to vote can now be taken as an indication of lack of interest and an excuse to further silence their voices. As the Washington Post noted: "How many people turned out to vote in each precinct was being viewed as an indicator of which neighborhoods are likely to be rebuilt; in many abandoned neighborhoods, people fear that residents who have left for good would not vote, revealing their lack of interest in the neighborhood and the city. Turnout could offer clues to the future racial makeup of the city."

Healthcare Crisis

New Orleans has lost 77% of its primary care doctors, 70% of its dentists and 89% of its psychiatrists since Katrina.

National Public Radio reported that the few hospitals in New Orleans are dangerously overburdened, especially emergency rooms. Nationally, it takes an average of 20 minutes to take a patient from an ambulance waiting in front of a hospital to the emergency room. In the New Orleans area, according to one surgeon at the East Jefferson Hospital, load times are usually 2 hours, but sometimes more. The longest time he's seen is 6 hours, 40 minutes, of a patient waiting in ER driveway to receive care.

Non-emergency care in New Orleans is also in crisis. With the closure of Charity Hospital and most public health clinics, it is very difficult to get a child tested for lead poisoning or other toxins - even though recent reports indicate there are 46 environmental "hot spots" in the city. One corner, Magnolia and First in Central City, showed lead levels of 3,960 parts per million - nearly 10 times the acceptable level. Dr. Howard Mielke, of Xavier University, says 40 percent of the city soil has elevated lead levels.

Among the displaced, the healthcare situation is much worse. The Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health surveyed hundreds of the thousands of families living in FEMA trailers and found: nearly half of the parents surveyed reported that at least one of their children had emotional or behavioral difficulties that the child didn't have before the hurricane; more than half the women caregivers showed evidence of clinically-diagnosed psychiatric problems, such as depression or anxiety disorders; on average, households have moved 3.5 times since the hurricane, some as many as nine times, often across state lines; more than one-fifth of the school-age children who were displaced were either not in school or had missed 10 or more days of school in the past month.

Public Education Phase Out

New Orleans has become the national experiment for charter schools. Pre-Katrina, 60,000 students attended over 115 New Orleans public schools. Now, about 12,000 students attend public school in New Orleans. However, only four public schools are operated by the elected school board - the rest are now privately operated public charter schools or operated directly by the state. State authorities recently approved opening 22 more charter schools in the fall. Still, many children in New Orleans are not in school at all because no schools have opened in their neighborhoods.

Where Has All the Money Gone - Robin Hood in Reverse

People who visit New Orleans are amazed at how devastated it still is. Where has all the money gone, they ask? Follow the money. "How many contractors does it take to haul a pile of tree branches?" asked the Washington Post. If it's government work, at least four: a contractor, his subcontractor, the subcontractor's subcontractor, and finally, the local man with a truck and chainsaw. The big contractors typically receive between \$28 to \$30 a cubic yard for the debris. By the time they subcontract the work out to smaller and smaller companies, the guy in the truck receives about \$6 to \$8 per cubic yard.

The Miami Herald reported that the single biggest receiver of federal contracts was Ashbritt Inc. of Pompano Beach, Florida, which received over \$579 million in contracts for debris removal in Mississippi from the Army Corps of Engineers. The paper reported that the company does not own a single dump truck! All they do is subcontract. Ashbritt, however, had recently dumped \$40,000 into the lobbying firm of Barbour, Griffith & Rogers, which had been run by Mississippi Governor and former National GOP Chair Haley Barbour. The owners of Ashbritt also trucked \$50,000 over to the Republican National Committee in 2004. Draw your own conclusions about where the money has gone.

Federal Housing Funds for Rehab of Private Housing

Unfortunately, not a dime of the billions of federal housing reconstruction money from the Community Development Block Grant has yet made it to New Orleans. Seventy percent of CDBG money is usually targeted to low and moderate income families. HUD has already lowered that to 50%, and for poorest among us, there will be little help at all.

Despite the fact that New Orleans was over half renters and that 84,000 rental units were destroyed or damaged, only 6,000 low-income rental units are part of state plan.

People are already living in damaged houses all over the city, many without electricity. A night trip through New Orleans neighborhoods shows people on porches surrounded by candles.

Louisiana calls its CDBG plan the "The Road Home." Obviously, few of the working poor are going to be able to go on this road trip.

Public Housing Closed

In 1996, New Orleans had 13,694 units of public housing. In August 2005, they reported 7,381. Now? Maybe 700. Residents returning to New Orleans who want to move back in their apartments are being told they forfeited their public housing apartments because they abandoned them! Abandoned apartments that have been forcibly closed for months? Many apartments are closed by locked metal shutters and surrounded by chain link fence. The housing authority also has a secret list of 1407 units of housing scheduled to be demolished. The housing authority let go 290 employees, mostly maintenance. Does it sound like they are planning to reopen?

In New Orleans, public housing was occupied by women, mostly working, children and the elderly. How are they supposed to return when private rents have skyrocketed?

HUD Secretary Alphonso Jackson, whose agency is now running the local housing authority, stated clearly that public housing residents should not be allowed to return. In an interview with the Times-Picayune, Jackson said: "Some of the people shouldn't return. The developments were gang-ridden by some of the most notorious gangs in this country. People hid and took care of those persons because they took care of them. Only the best residents should return. Those who paid rent on time, those who held a job and those who worked." The blunt-spoken Jackson, who is black, acknowledged his comments might be seen as racially offensive. He told a white reporter, "If you said this, they would say you were racist."

Signs of Hope

Despite our very serious problems, there are also serious signs of hope. For every campaign of injustice and ugliness, there are people struggling, despite the odds, to create opportunities for justice and beauty. The people of New Orleans, joined with allies from across the nation and indeed the world, continue to resist the forces of injustice and to create opportunities for decency, community and equity. Here are a few examples.

St. Augustine's Church, one of the oldest black catholic churches in the nation, was abruptly closed by the Archdiocese of New Orleans in the months after Katrina. St. Augustine was dedicated in 1842 by the free black citizens of New Orleans and welcomed both free and slave as worshippers. It served both as a multi-racial church and a center of community activities. After continual petitions, vigils and protests by community, neighborhood and church members, including direct action in which some young people locked themselves inside the rectory, the Catholic hierarchy reversed itself. The joyous reopening of St. Augustine is a great cultural, spiritual, community and neighborhood victory.

Lower Ninth Ward residents have had no public schools open since Katrina. They wanted their neighborhood school, Martin Luther King Jr., repaired and fixed up after it took in ten feet of water. Authorities refused to fix it up. So the residents, joined by members of Common Ground and the People's Hurricane Relief Fund, decided to do it themselves. They started gutting the moldy parts and repairing and repainting the school. They continued until the State Superintendent of

Education called the police and stopped the work saying the neighbors were doing more harm than good. After days of public outcry of support of the volunteers, the state backed off. Volunteers went back to work, creating a place for education in the neighborhood as well as a symbol of resistance.

Mildred Battle is 70 and gets around in a wheelchair. She is one of more than 1000 families who have been displaced from their apartment in the St. Bernard Housing Development in New Orleans since Katrina. Despite coming back three times, she was never allowed to retrieve her belongings. Her apartment has heavy metal sheets locked into place over the windows and a new heavy metal door for which she is not allowed a key. The ramp to her building that allowed her to roll up to her apartment is blocked by a block-long chain link fence to keep all residents out. This month, Ms. Battle's wheelchair was the first one through the gate in the chain link fence as dozens of residents passed the lone security guard and broke back into their own homes. Friends of Ms. Battle helped her retrieve a picture of her dead son and a broken glass Martin Luther King award she received in the 1990s. She clutched them to her breast and cried saying, "This has been my home for decades. I want to come home." She and the other residents, along with veteran public housing organizers and activists from C3, a local anti-war organization, vow there will be more direct actions to enforce the rights of public housing residents to return home.

Before this action, veteran organizer Endesha Jukali yelled through a bullhorn to the crowd outside the St. Bernard Housing Development. "Those who attack public housing refuse to understand that we are talking about poor women and children, the poorest of the poor. Why attack them? Some people say do not come back to New Orleans if you don't intend to work. We say something else. Don't come back to New Orleans if you don't intend to fight! The only way that we are going to be able to come back is to fight for justice every step of the way!" He then dropped the bullhorn and started pushing Ms. Battle in her wheelchair across the street and through the gate so she could break into her own home.

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