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Ten Months After Katrina: Gutting New Orleans

By Bill Quigley

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Saturday I joined some volunteers and helped gut the home of one of my best friends. Two months after she finished paying off her mortgage, her one-story brick home was engulfed in 7 feet of water. Because she was underinsured and remains worried about a repeat of the floods, my friend, a grandmother, has not yet decided if she is going to rebuild.

Though it is Saturday morning, on my friend's block no children play and no one is cutting the grass. Most of her neighbors' homes are still abandoned. Three older women neighbors have died since Katrina.

We are still finding dead bodies. Ten days ago, workers cleaning a house in New Orleans found a body of a man who died in the flood. He is the twenty-third person found dead from the storm since March.

Over two hundred thousand people have not yet made it back to New Orleans. Vacant houses stretch mile after mile, neighborhood after neighborhood. Thousands of buildings remain marked with brown ribbons where floodwaters settled. Of the thousands of homes and businesses in eastern New Orleans, thirteen percent have been re-connected to electricity.

The mass displacement of people has left New Orleans older, whiter and more affluent. African-Americans, children and the poor have not made it back - primarily because of severe shortages of affordable

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Thousands of homes remain just as they were when the floodwaters receded - ghost-like houses with open doors, upturned furniture, and walls covered with growing mold.

Not a single dollar of federal housing repair or home reconstruction money has made it to New Orleans yet. Tens of thousands are waiting. Many wait because a full third of homeowners in the New Orleans area had no flood insurance. Others wait because the levees surrounding New Orleans are not yet as strong as they were before Katrina, and they fear re-building until flood protection is more likely. Fights over the federal housing money still loom because Louisiana refuses to clearly state a commitment to direct 50% of the billions to low and moderate income families.

Meanwhile, seventy thousand families in Louisiana live in 240-square-foot FEMA trailers - three on my friend's street. As homeowners, their trailer is in front of their own battered home. Renters are not so fortunate and are placed in gravel strewn FEMA-villes across the state. With rents skyrocketing, thousands have moved into houses without electricity.

Meanwhile, privatization of public services continues to accelerate.

Public education in New Orleans is mostly demolished, and what remains is being privatized. The city is now the nation's laboratory for charter schools - publicly funded schools run by private bodies. Before Katrina, the local elected school board had control over 115 schools - they now control 4. The majority of the remaining schools are now charters. The metro area public schools will get \$213 million less next school year in state money because tens of thousands of public school students were displaced last year. At the same time, the federal government announced a special allocation of \$23.9 million which can only be used for charter schools in Louisiana. The teachers' union, the largest in the state, has been told there will be no collective bargaining because, as one board member stated, "I think we all realize the world has changed around us."

Public housing has been boarded up and fenced off as HUD announced plans to demolish 5,000 apartments - despite the greatest shortage of affordable housing in the region's history. HUD plans to let private companies develop the sites. In the meantime, the 4,000 families locked out since Katrina are not allowed to return.

The broken city water system is losing about 85 million gallons of water in leaks every day. That is not a typo, 85 million gallons of water a day, at a cost of \$200,000 a day, are still leaking out of the system even after over 17,000 leaks have been plugged. Michelle Krupa, of the Times-Picayune, reports that the city pumps 135 million gallons a day through 80 miles of pipe in order for 50 million gallons to be used. We are losing more than we are using; the repair bill is estimated to be \$1 billion - money the city does not have.

Public health care is in crisis. Our big public hospital has remained closed, and there are no serious plans to reopen it. A neighbor with cancer who has no car was told that she has to go 68 miles away to the closest public hospital for her chemotherapy.

Mental health may be worse. In the crumbling city and in the shelters of the displaced, depression and worse reign. Despite a suicide rate triple what it was a year ago, the New York Times reports we have lost half of our psychiatrists, social workers, psychologists and other mental health care workers. Mental health clinics remain closed. The psych unit of the big public hospital has not been replaced in the private sector as most are too poor to pay. The primary residence for people with mental health problems are our jails and prisons.

For children, the Washington Post reports, the trauma of the floods has not ended. An LSU mental health screening of nearly 5,000 children in schools and temporary housing in Louisiana found that 96 percent saw hurricane damage to their homes or neighborhoods, 22 percent had relatives or friends who were injured, 14 percent had relatives or friends who died, and 35 percent lost pets. Thirty-four percent were separated from their primary caregivers at some point; 9 percent still are. Little care is directed to the little ones.

The criminal justice system remains shattered. Six thousand cases await trial. There were no jury trials and only 4 public defenders for 9 of the last 10 months. Many people in jail have not seen a lawyer since 2005. The Times-Picayune reported that one defendant, jailed for possession of crack cocaine for almost two years, has not been inside a courtroom since August 2005, despite the fact that a key police witness against him committed suicide during the storm.

You may have seen on the news that we have some new neighbors - the National Guard. We could use the help of our military to set up hospitals and clinics. We could use their help in gutting and building houses or picking up the mountains of debris that remain. But instead they were sent to guard us from ourselves. Crime certainly is a community problem. But many question the Guard helping local police

dramatically increase stops of young black males - who are spread out on the ground while they and their cars are searched. The relationship between crime and the collapse of all of these other systems is a one rarely brought up.

It has occurred to us that our New Orleans is looking more and more like Baghdad.

People in New Orleans wonder, if this is the way the US treats its own citizens, how on earth is the US government treating people around the world? We know our nation could use its money and troops and power to help build up our community instead of trying to extending our economic and corporate reach around the globe. Why has it chosen not to?

We know that what is happening in New Orleans is just a more concentrated, more graphic version of what is going on all over our country. Every city in our country has some serious similarities to New Orleans. Every city has some abandoned neighborhoods. Every city in our country has abandoned some public education, public housing, public health care and criminal justice. Those who do not support public education, health care and housing will continue to turn all of our country into the Lower Ninth Ward, unless we stop them. Why do we allow this?

There are signs of hope and resistance.

Neighborhood groups across the Gulf Coast are meeting and insisting that the voices and wishes of the residents be respected in the planning and rebuilding of their neighborhoods.

Public outrage forced FEMA to cancel the eviction of 3,000 families from trailers in Mississippi.

Country music artists Faith Hill and Tim McGraw blasted the failed federal rebuilding effort, saying: "When you have people dying because they're poor and black or poor and white, or because of whatever they are - if that's a number on a political scale - then that is the most wrong thing. That erases everything that's great about our country."

There is a growing grassroots movement to save the 4,000+ apartments of public housing HUD promises to bulldoze. Residents and allies plan a big July 4 celebration of resistance.

Voluntary groups have continued their active charitable work on the

Gulf Coast. Thousands of houses are being gutted and repaired and even built by Baptist, Catholic, Episcopal, Jewish, Mennonite, Methodist, Muslim, Presbyterian and other faith groups. The AFL-CIO announced plans to invest \$700 million in housing in New Orleans.

Many ask what the future of New Orleans is going to be like? I always give the lawyer's answer, "It depends." The future of New Orleans depends on whether our nation makes a commitment to those who have so far been shut out of the repair of New Orleans. Will the common good prompt the federal government to help the elderly, the children, the disabled and the working poor return to New Orleans? If so, we might get most of our city back. If not, and the signs so far are not so good, then the tens of thousands of people who were left behind when Katrina hit 10 months ago, will again be left behind.

The future of New Orleans depends on those who are willing to fight for the right of every person to return. Many are fighting for that right. Please join in.

Some ask, what can people who care do to help New Orleans and the Gulf Coast? Help us rebuild our communities. Pair up your community, your business, school, church, professional or social organization, with one on the Gulf Coast - and build a relationship where your organization can be a resource for one here and provide opportunities for your groups to come and help and for people here to come and tell their stories in your communities. Most groups here have adopted the theme - Solidarity not Charity. Or as aboriginal activist Lila Watson once said: "If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us struggle together."

For the sake of our nation and for our world, let us struggle together.

In the meantime, I will be joining other volunteers this Saturday, knocking out the mold-covered ceiling of my friend's home and putting it out on the street - 10 months after Katrina.

For more information, see www.justiceforneworleans.org.

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