

LABORnotes

Katrina's Aftermath Transforms Work in the Gulf Region

by Mark Brenner

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Six months after Hurricane



Non-union water and sewer workers work on the water supply in New Orleans East after the hurricane. While the politically-connected contractors are doing well, conditions are challenging for many of those doing the cleanup. Photo: [Jim West](#).

Katrina, the Gulf Coast struggles with a new challenge—who will do the rebuilding? The region is awash in clean-up and reconstruction projects, but with more than 1.5 million people displaced by the hurricane, ready hands are in short supply.

In many areas, the tight post-Katrina labor market has already had stunning effects—construction jobs regularly advertise starting pay of \$15 an hour or more, and a gig at Burger King might land you a \$6,000 bonus.

But even with tight labor markets, workers in the region are finding conditions—and organizing against those conditions—challenging.

UNDER THE GUN

The hurricane has created enormous problems for the Gulf Coast's union workers. Waste Management Inc.—one of the largest waste services companies in the United States—is one such example. The company handled trash pick-ups for the city of New Orleans before Katrina.

But after the storm, FEMA took over garbage collection for the city and Waste Management secured several lucrative subcontracts for debris removal. In the process, the company dumped its unionized workers and replaced them with temps. Waste Management even set up a camp just north of the Huey Long Bridge for its temp laborers.

Similar problems have emerged for bus drivers in New Orleans, where service remains at less than 20 percent of what it was before the hurricane and at least 500 employees are expected to be permanently laid off.

"We've got so many issues down here," remarked Mike Parker, a 13-year streetcar operator and Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1560 member who has been driving a bus since he returned home. "Since FEMA is paying the bill the company says we're emergency workers. We've got no seniority, and whenever it benefits them the company says we have to follow their policy. But when it benefits the operators against the company, then they say FEMA controls it and they hold up their hands like they can't do anything."

Meanwhile shipyard workers in Avondale, Louisiana and Pascagoula, Mississippi have been pressured by Northrop Grumman to re-open their contracts, not due to expire until 2007.

Although the Pascagoula workers refused to reopen, Avondale workers agreed, hoping to close the wage and benefit gaps that exist between the two sites. Pascagoula shipyard workers currently earn more, largely because Avondale was organized more recently, after a bitter struggle with shipyard owners.

Avondale workers voted four to one February 7 against a proposal that would have shifted health care costs to members, substituted bonuses for increases in base pay, and extended the life of the agreement by several years.

MIGRANT WORKERS SUFFER

Conditions across the Gulf Coast have also prompted an unprecedented influx of Latino workers into the region. This largely immigrant workforce has frequently been shortchanged by the tangled web of contracting and subcontracting that emerged in the cleanup effort.

"It's really survival of the fittest out there—the raging, unregulated free market," noted Bill Quigley, lawyer with the New Orleans-based Loyola Law School Legal Clinic. "Since the hurricane we've really seen a meltdown of wage and hour laws, OSHA laws, and practically every other standard that exists for work in this country."

Quigley's colleague Luz Molina has been involved in several lawsuits trying to reclaim unpaid wages and help workers injured on the job. She agreed with Quigley's assessment. "It's a feeding frenzy. The money is going to the big corporations and not to the workers. There is no quality control and no oversight of who they are contracting with."

With more than 30,000 Latino workers flocking to the Gulf Coast after the hurricane, tensions with local residents have been running high.

"Certainly, people are upset because the money that is being spent on housing out-of-state workers could be used for rebuilding housing and housing local folks who want to return to the area and work,"

commented Stephen Bradberry, the head organizer for New Orleans Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now.

"But there is no side of this 'blame game' that benefits the local worker being locked out of the job," continued Bradberry, "or the undocumented worker getting mistreated, all for the sake of these contractors putting a few more dollars in their pocket."

DISASTER PROFITEERING

Indeed, employers on all sides of the rebuilding efforts are doing all they can to line their pockets. Northrop Grumman's demands for concessions, for example, have nothing to do with offsetting the cost of post-Katrina rebuilding. Although Grumman estimates damage to its Gulf Coast facilities in excess of \$1 billion, the company stands to receive more than \$2 billion of FEMA relief under President Bush's plan.

In October Bush asked Congress to redirect \$17 billion in FEMA funds to other federal agencies to assist in disaster recovery. With its slice of that money, the Navy has already promised to increase the payments on Grumman's existing contracts to cover reconstruction costs.

It is not surprising that Northrop Grumman is being tended to so well, given the fact that the company and its executives contributed more than a million dollars to Republican causes during the last election. And the pattern of political payback stretches well beyond the defense industry. The list of large contractors for hurricane clean-up and temporary housing is a Who's Who of politically connected corporations.

"There is an outlandish amount of money coming into the region," noted Ishmael Muhammad, organizer with the People's Hurricane Relief Fund. "But the money is not getting to people who have really suffered."

"I see it every day when I'm driving my bus," Parker said. "When I go by the casinos, they are breaking up perfectly good concrete and paving to put down this fancy brick. Go down another mile and it looks like the hurricane just hit yesterday."

"They find money to break good ground up and can't find money to get the power turned back on."

SURVIVORS' PLAN

But amidst the chaos and corporate giveaways, grassroots activists continue to fight for a different vision of the Gulf Coast.

"They are really building a huge problem for themselves by not letting people come home," Muhammad said. "They aren't funding a redevelopment plan that includes poor folks or people of color."

"But the survivors are developing a plan, and their plan is focusing on the communities that the city is saying don't need to come back."