



editorial | posted March 23, 2006 (April 10, 2006 issue)

Neglect in New Orleans

More than six months after one of the worst natural disasters to hit the United States, a perfect storm of malign neglect on the federal, state and local levels continues to batter the victims of Hurricane Katrina. The overwhelming scale of destruction wrought by the hurricane required a comprehensive, federally directed plan of reconstruction, including the rebuilding of levees and the restoration of coastal wetlands, yet the record of the past six months is one of promises unkept, funding delayed and denied, and machinations of politicians and their corporate cronies to profit from the catastrophe. The net effect has been the disenfranchisement and continued displacement of the poor and minority population of New Orleans, which suffered disproportionately from the hurricane.

After months of delay, in late March the House approved a \$19.1 billion Gulf Coast aid package, including \$4.2 billion in block grants for housing needs. Yet as Chris Kromm of Gulf Coast Reconstruction Watch (www.reconstructionwatch.org) points out, the bill--passed less than three months before June 1, the official start of hurricane season--comes way too late and is far short of what's needed. The House rejected an amendment that would have provided \$465 million to strengthen levees. And although the bill includes \$1 billion to rebuild rental housing--crucial, since most displaced residents were renters--Congress turned back an amendment that would have prevented FEMA from evicting

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residents from temporary housing until alternatives were found (even as the bill was passed, families were being evicted from hotels in New Orleans).

The House bill does little or nothing to fix other structural problems, including the city's devastated healthcare system (fifteen out of the city's twenty-two hospitals are now closed, including Charity Hospital, which cared for most of the city's uninsured population), its public school system (only twenty of 117 pre-storm schools are functioning, sixteen of them now as charter schools) and its toxin-laden environment. And the Senate doesn't plan to discuss its version of the bill until May.

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At the same time, the city's black and overwhelmingly Democratic electorate has been effectively disenfranchised. The House rejected an amendment that would have provided \$50 million to help storm-ravaged communities organize elections, and the Justice Department approved the first New Orleans municipal elections since the storm, even though the city has no plans to provide out-of-state balloting. Up to two-thirds of the displaced are living out of state, a large majority African-American.

The neglect at the federal level is matched by the hijacking of democratic structures at the local level. As Mike Davis demonstrates in an article that begins on page 11, the city's reconstruction effort has been taken over by a coterie of business elites and real estate developers, who have used mayor-appointed commissions to bypass elected officials in an effort to turn New Orleans into a smaller, whiter, more conservative city.

But the people of New Orleans are fighting back. The community-organizing group ACORN and other grassroots organizations, including the People's Hurricane Relief Fund, the Common Ground collective, the Justice Center and the New Orleans Green Party, are working to repair homes, rebuild communities and fight for the rights of displaced citizens. They've been joined recently by military veterans who make the connection between the destruction of Iraq and the devastation of New Orleans. One Iraq War vet is quoted on *The Nation's* website as saying, "What my country has become sickens me." The

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people of New Orleans need his solidarity--and ours--if the city's second Reconstruction is to avoid going the way of the first.

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protect New Orleans and has yet to rescue its displaced citizens. We need an independent investigation to force accountability. **SUB** 03/6/2006 issue

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