

# **Katrina Was Not a ‘Natural Disaster’**

The effects of Hurricane Katrina are not the result of a “natural disaster”. The more than a thousand dead, the tens of thousands of lives ruined, and the severe environmental, social, and economic effects of the disaster are very much the result of our present era of savage economic inequalities, systematized racism and military barbarism. We must organize to challenge and change these realities if we wish to rebuild a society capable of withstanding future onslaughts.

## **The Race and Class Dynamics of a Planned Catastrophe**

The poverty and Blackness of those bearing the brunt of the hurricane and flooding was obvious to anyone watching CNN. Sixty-seven percent of the population of New Orleans is Black and the city has one of the highest rates of poverty, nearly 30%, in the U.S. The Black and working-poor of New Orleans have had to depend for decades on dysfunctional public schools, poverty-wage jobs, crumbling housing and cut-backs in social services. The sustained offensive against all forms of social protection abandoned the urban working-poor, overwhelmingly Black and Latino, in the U.S. long ago.



Beyond making announcements of the oncoming hurricane, no government official made any provisions for evacuation. The working-poor of New Orleans, many of whom live paycheck-to-paycheck and who are without the resources, safety nets, and means of transportation that allowed the wealthier - and overwhelming white - population to escape, were literally trapped in flooding city.

Some of the residents understandably began to obtain essential survival goods. The press inflamed racist panic with repeated video streams of Black “looters” posing a threat to property, while describing white residents as “finding” food and supplies.

With hospitals calling for evacuation of dying patients and tens of thousands of New Orleanians still trapped in the flood, the National Guard poured in to occupy the city. Rescue efforts were suspended in order to “restore order”, while the Guard shut off exits from the city, turning back those trying to get to safety! Louisiana Gov. Kathleen Blanco cheered the entry of the “battle tested” Guard, saying “[they] know how to shoot and kill and I expect they will.”

## **Katrina and the Permanent “War on Terror” – A Direct Connection**

The Southeast Louisiana Urban Flood Control Project, or SELA, was authorized by Congress in the mid-nineties to provide the Army Corps of Engineers with \$430 million to spend on shoring up the levees to protect the city against intensifying hurricanes.

But by the end of 2003, the costs of ‘Homeland Security’ projects and the Iraq war practically ended the project, with \$250 million in crucial repairs remaining.

Also, nearly half of Louisiana’s National Guard was deployed outside the state, with some, like the 3,000 members of the 256<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade, reportedly in Iraq with critical high water equipment.

Responsibility for the death and destruction left in Katrina’s wake thus lies directly with the Bush Administration and Congress, who remain committed to pursuing a murderous and losing war in Iraq - and the shoring up of the racist, anti-immigrant national security state at home - instead of funding projects to help make our cities really secure.

## **Environmental Destruction and Capitalist Development**

Marshes and wetlands help to slow a hurricane’s effect as it approaches the city. But erosion has diminished the size of the coastal marsh and swamp, and weakened its capacity to absorb a hurricane’s

a statement by SOLIDARITY  
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force. This erosion is related to recent and ongoing “development” in the Gulf region. Rich river silt that built the delta is now being excavated to deep waters off the continental shelf to allow for easier, i.e. cheaper, river navigation. Also, salt water intrudes into and destroys the marshes as canals are built for oil and natural gas drilling and pipeline needs.

Studies show a strong correlation between a rise in ocean temperature and a like increase in the duration and intensity of storms. According to MIT scientist Kerry Emmanuel, hurricanes have become 70-80% more powerful over the past 30-50 years, during which time the temperature of the world’s oceans rose 1 full degree F.

But a form of society based upon the fastest and cheapest possible exploitation of both human labor and natural resources cannot heed such warnings. The highest level of calculation possible for the capitalist is where the next dollar is to be made, by which inhuman logic disasters too can be ‘profitable’.



### **What to do next?**

**Right of Return** – We all need to demand the guaranteed right of return for ALL THOSE DISPLACED by Hurricane Katrina and its effects. This right has to be supported with economic and other assistance necessary to guarantee and facilitate their return to New Orleans.

Efforts from the grassroots are ongoing to connect separated families and reunite communities. This work and their right to return is essential to ensure that they are not ‘forgotten’ in the development of the new New Orleans.

**Reconstruction from Below** – Evacuees and the working-poor Black community that suffered the worst of the government’s disgraceful response must be in the lead in the rebuilding of their city. Aid should be organized and collected democratically and the rebuilding led by the grassroots community groups that have been fighting for social, economic and racial justice in New Orleans for years.

The same developers of disaster in New Orleans are now plotting the new New Orleans and gloating over the evacuation of the Black population. Their plans for redeveloping New Orleans as a tourist paradise for the corporate elite at the cost of poverty wages and ethnic cleansing must be vigilantly opposed.

**Changing Society** – The catastrophic effects of Hurricane Katrina, especially the ugly disaster in New Orleans, cannot be explained apart from the racial, social and economic dynamics that govern U.S. capitalist society at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Similar disasters, threatening whole regions and consigning tens of thousands to an unnecessary death, are inevitable unless we win the struggle for a society based on racial justice, cooperation, solidarity, and an end to imperialist wars.

We encourage all who are enraged at the government’s response to Hurricane Katrina, and who are committed to the struggle for a reconstructed New Orleans based on social justice, democracy and the power of the working-poor and oppressed of the Gulf Region to support the People’s Hurricane Fund. The People’s Hurricane Fund was founded by members of Community Labor United and other grassroots organizations led by people of color with years of experience dedicated to the struggle for justice and against racism in New Orleans and the Gulf South.

Please donate to or get involved by contacting:  
Community Labor United  
People’s Hurricane Relief & Reconstruction Fund  
<http://www.communitylaborunited.net>  
601-960-5065

For more information on grassroots relief and rebuilding efforts:  
<http://katrina.mayfirst.org/>

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anti-racist organization***

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