

Five years since Hurricane Katrina

Part 3: The gutting of social infrastructure

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The following is the third in a series of articles on the fifth anniversary of the Hurricane Katrina disaster. Part 1, which focused on the political implications of the event, was published August 28; Part 2, an examination of the housing crisis in New Orleans, was published August 30.

In the weeks after Hurricane Katrina struck the US Gulf Coast, the political establishment used the disaster to carry out long sought after privatizations and cuts to basic public infrastructure. For the wealthy elite, the destruction of working class neighborhoods and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people from New Orleans were seen as a lucrative opportunity to remake the city, at public expense, in its own interests.

While real estate firms, speculators, luxury hotels and the gambling industry were given access to government aid and no-bid contracts, residents of the low-lying, poor neighborhoods were denied significant help. After five years, wide swaths of the city remain crippled by blight—a state of affairs that is being exploited to further gut social services.

Speaking recently in Washington, New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu referred to the city as the country's "laboratory for innovation and change"—a phrase that reveals perhaps more than he intended about the class character of the policies shaping the city. Landrieu declared, "With the fifth anniversary of Katrina approaching, it's especially important that we stop thinking about rebuilding the city we were and start creating the city we want to become."

Following the storm, public housing was among the first targets of this agenda. In 2007, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) ordered the destruction of a great deal of heavily damaged housing. That year, HUD razed 4,500 housing units, displacing some 3,000 families who lived there before Katrina. Other remaining housing projects are currently slated for demolition, including some that are still occupied. The number of newly built housing units has not made up for the quantity that was removed, and many of these establishments are slated as

"mixed-income," which means that the poorest residents will be denied access.

The public school system has also been dismantled. Since 2005, three-quarters of New Orleans public schools have been handed over to charter operations. In the immediate aftermath of the disaster, 107 schools were taken over by the Recovery School District in order to fast-track the transformation of the public school system into a patchwork of privately-run facilities. Today, 60 percent of students attend charter schools.

On August 25, Mary Landrieu, the Louisiana senator and sister of mayor Mitch Landrieu, announced that the New Orleans school system would receive \$1.8 billion in FEMA funds. The FEMA grant lifts requirements that stated that school officials had to rebuild schools that were destroyed by the hurricane, paving the way for even more charter schools. The grant, announced a day after Louisiana was denied \$175 million from federal education funds, was "worth the wait," according to the senator.

The city's two school districts have had plans for the funds since 2008, when the Recovery School District and the Orleans Parish school boards announced a \$1.8 billion plan to "landbank" at least 43 of the 128 still-existing public schools. In the 2010-2011 school year, four new charter schools will open and six public schools will be turned over to charter management. Other public schools are slated to close and merge. As a result, by the end of the year, charter schools will outnumber public schools by 2 to 1.

Predictably, advocates of privatizing education have touted test score improvements between 2005—when students had their lives utterly uprooted and many did not even attend school for long periods in the state—and 2009. However, the replacement of public schools by charters has splintered oversight of quality, conditions at facilities, curriculum, and fair-enrollment standards. Charters are managed by independent boards and operate outside of many of the regulations public schools must follow. New Orleans' charter schools are managed by more than 30 separate operators.

The health care system in the city also remains in tatters. Three weeks after the disaster, then Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco ordered Charity Hospital permanently closed, despite the tremendous social need for medical care by hurricane victims and the fact that it was structurally intact. In fact, the building had been fully cleaned by the military and was ready for use.

The hospital was the primary provider of medical care for the city's large poor and uninsured population. After five years, eastern New Orleans still has no hospital and over 80,000 residents are at least a 30-minute drive away from an emergency room. The Louisiana State University hospital that now serves the whole city is small and cannot provide a full range of medical services. According to a report by local ABC news affiliate WAPT, the university hospital is serving far more residents than before with far fewer resources, including half of the 550 beds it had before Katrina.

Last week, the city purchased Methodist Hospital, another facility that was also closed following Katrina. City officials have made clear that it will be at least two to three years before it will reopen, and it will have only 80 beds. By the time Methodist Hospital is scheduled to reopen under new management, it is estimated that many poor and uninsured residents will have gone at least eight years without access to regular medical care.

The city's physical infrastructure is likewise in disrepair. The Sewerage and Water Board is short \$1 billion in funds needed for urgent projects. The Department of Public Works needs an additional \$1.4 billion to repair streets in "poor to failed condition" and to fix the city's drainage system. According to a *Times Picayune* report, however, "the department isn't sure it can even pay for \$400 million in capital projects it hopes to complete by 2016."

A multitude of other departments are in similar straits, including the juvenile court system and the coroner's office. Facilities owned by the city, including jails and City Hall itself, are in need of repair or replacement. Community centers, parks, homeless shelters, mental health facilities, and countless other services are woefully underfunded and in many cases, have been abandoned.

Significantly, after five years, even the rebuilding of the city's levee system has not been completed. The Army Corps of Engineers estimates that a ring of levees and floodwalls—a \$15 billion project—will not be finished until the beginning of the 2011 hurricane season. Some experts have warned that the new system is not enough to prevent massive flooding from happening again.

An August 25 *New York Times* article cited Robert Bea, a professor at the University of California, Berkeley, who

authored a 2006 report on the New Orleans levee failures. In his report, Bea pointed out that Katrina "grew to a full blown catastrophe ... principally due to the massive and repeated failure of the regional flood protection system and consequent flooding." Bea stated that what the Army Corps defines as 100-year protection for the city "is not even close to what is needed."

Every aspect of the "market-driven recovery" exposes the priorities of a ruling class concerned only with its own enrichment. The lives of the working class are subordinated, and sacrificed, to the "free market" interests of the wealthy few. While trillions of dollars can be poured into the banks and illegal wars, the cost of rebuilding hospitals, schools and basic infrastructure is considered prohibitively expensive. Like the disaster itself, the current condition of New Orleans reveals this social chasm.

The entire Gulf Coast requires the infusion of billions of dollars in aid for repairs, proper storm protection, cleanup, and the expansion of public services. The population, living on the edge of an economic precipice, should be employed in a massive emergency public works program, paid decently and provided proper housing and health care.

These necessities, however, are incompatible with a system that subjects all of social life to the pursuit of profit. Fundamentally, the anarchic character of capitalism is incompatible with mass society and modern life. What is required to meet the social needs of the vast majority of the population is a political movement of the working class, independent of the capitalist parties, and based on a democratic, socialist program.

Concluded

Hurricane Katrina: Social Consequences & Political Lessons, a pamphlet from Mehring Books that brings together articles and statements posted on the WSWS in the immediate aftermath of the Katrina disaster, is also available for purchase online.



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