

Opinion

The true face of capitalism: Hurricane Katrina blows off the mask

By Seth Sandronsky

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September 15, 2005—"I'm shocked," my wife told me many times last week, reflecting on the human calamity in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast states from the fury of Hurricane Katrina. "Where was the disaster planning to help those poor people?"

"We're seeing the barbarity of capitalist society," I said.

"You don't have to look far to see that," she said. "It's right in your face."

My wife is a native of New Orleans. The city is near and dear to her.

Her grandfather was a longtime jazz musician who owned a home on Burgundy St. in the French Quarter district of New Orleans. Our family and friends still call that very Catholic city home, though they have fled it currently.

Meanwhile, across the nation and around the globe, the images of impoverished human beings typically seen in Third World nations were being broadcast from the streets of New Orleans. In Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama, the legacy of human bondage set the stage for the region's pre-Katrina poverty.

Following the Civil War, blacks freed from chattel slavery entered the wages system. There, they competed for employment with whites.

Then and now, blacks occupied the lower rungs of the labor market. As the South shifted from agriculture to industry, skin color segregation dovetailed with hostility to labor unions.

After World War II the CIO's 'Operation Dixie' was an effort to organize Southern workers. This unionization campaign fell victim to white racism and anticommunism.

Crucially, this defeat has left generations of working people in the region at-risk to companies moving work to the Third World. Labor there is cheaper than in the former slaveholding states of the U.S.

This process is part of what economist Richard DuBoff has termed "the corporate counter-attack." Begun at the end of the Vietnam War, it has worsened living and working conditions for the U.S. laboring class generally, and the African-American part of it most particularly.

Constitutionally-protected corporations and the well-heeled have strongly shaped federal fiscal policy to boost their bottom lines and harm the public during this attack. One recent example has been the underfunding of levee work in New Orleans while President George W. Bush rammed multiple tax cuts for the upper class through Congress.

Against that backdrop, U.S. corporations occupy Congress with lobbyists to expand market share and profits via "free" trade pacts such as the NAFTA. This legislation has put blue-collar American workers into competition with lower-paid laborers abroad.

As a result of such corporate-government actions, the U.S. upper class has turned perhaps 10 percent of the U.S. populace into paupers. Their ranks, filled disproportionately by blacks, include the people hit most cruelly by the floods and winds from Hurricane Katrina.

It was a force of nature, unlike a social form of life that puts profits first and people last. And there in the face of the world to see.

Such visibility has a life of its own.

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