

Ten years since Hurricane Katrina: Part one

The catastrophe unfolds

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This is the first article of a four-part series on the ongoing impact of Hurricane Katrina ten years after the storm devastated New Orleans and other parts of the US Gulf Coast, exposing pervasive poverty, inequality, and government indifference to the collapse of basic infrastructure in America.

The official observations a month ago of the tenth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina shed little light on the roots of the tragedy or the social and political issues it starkly raised.

The hurricane, which flooded much of New Orleans and other parts of the Gulf of Mexico coast and took hundreds of lives, has often been referred to as “the unthinkable.” Hurricane Katrina, however, was the furthest thing from an “unthinkable” event. The danger of precisely such a disaster had been known to national and local authorities for decades. While the storm itself was a natural event, the scale of the death and destruction was the result of man-made conditions, rooted in the contradictions and crisis of American capitalism.

Why New Orleans flooded: historical questions

The hurricane caught the city of New Orleans in a defenseless state. The city’s infrastructure was in a state of utter disrepair. There were structural flaws in the design of the levee system that compromised the safety of the city.

The coastal wetlands had historically provided a natural barrier protecting the city from storm surges. Due to coastal erosion, however, the city had become much more vulnerable than it was a century ago. The disappearance of natural wetlands had largely been caused by rising sea levels.

In addition, transportation canals cut through the wetlands over the course of the 20th century, many constructed for use by the oil and gas industry, greatly exacerbated the rate of erosion. The canals, which connect various coastal port cities, introduced salt water into the fresh water marshes, killing marsh grasses that anchor the soil. An average of 34 square miles of South Louisiana wetlands have disappeared each year over the past 50 years, according to the US Geological Survey (USGS). From 1932 to 2000, the state lost 1,900 square miles of land to the Gulf of Mexico.

The Flood Control Act of 1965, passed by Congress in the wake of Hurricane Betsy, mandated that the Army Corps of Engineers work in tandem with the Sewage and Water Board (SWB) and Orleans Levee Board (OLB) to fortify the city’s hurricane protection at its outfall canals. The Corps was responsible for 30 percent of the funding and, according to spokespersons for the American Society of Civil Engineers, sought to “cut costs each step of the way.”

The Corps had initially examined two options: to raise the height of the canal walls or install gates at the canal mouths. It was estimated that installing gates would be five times cheaper than raising the walls. The design for the gates option did not include any auxiliary pumps to dispel potential flood waters.

According to a report by Levees.org, instead of installing gates at the 17th Street and London Avenue canals as had been intended, the Corps installed peripheral gates because the cost of construction was cheaper. As early as the 1990s, minutes of meetings between the Corps and the OLB showed that serious concerns over the viability of the design plan had already emerged. The OLB noted that “in the event of overtopping of the levees of these canals, many businesses and an estimated 56,000 residents of Orleans Parish would be flooded.”

In addition, under the Corps’ design, the underground sheet pilings of the system’s walls were too short. Using findings from erroneous research conducted in the 1980s, the Corps concluded that deeper sheet pilings in poor soils did not increase wall stability and were “a wasteful expenditure.” The system’s sheet pilings were shortened to the point that when the hurricane hit, the outfall drainage canal walls slid laterally and collapsed, despite the fact that the storm surge was still more than four feet below the tops of the flood walls where levee failures occurred. Due to legal immunity established by the Flood Control Act of 1928, the Corps could not be found financially liable for any of the \$27 billion in damages caused by the hurricane.

Since the hurricane, the Corps has rebuilt and modified much of the city’s flood control system, but the city is essentially just as vulnerable as it was in 2005. Many other coastal cities are similarly vulnerable to flooding.

In addition to the levee failures, the city had no means in place to deal with a large influx of flood waters. The city of New Orleans relies extensively on a 100-year-old network of underground pipes, pump houses and power plants to dispel flood waters from rain and storm surges—one of the oldest systems in the United States. During heavy rains, the city regularly floods. When the levee breaches occurred, flood waters swiftly rendered the entire pump system inoperable. Many pump station operators left their post, leaving sections of the system unmanned during the storm.

Katrina makes landfall: 80 percent of city is flooded, thousands die

Hurricane Katrina made landfall on the Gulf Coast as a Category 3 the morning of August 29, 2005, wreaking havoc along large sections of coastal Louisiana and Mississippi. The storm surge caused 53 breaches in the levee system protecting New Orleans as well as the failure of the 40 Arpent Canal levee.

By the time the storm had passed, nearly every levee in the greater metropolitan area had broken, flooding 80 percent of the city. Flood waters reached dangerously high levels in many parts of the city. Parts of the Lower Ninth Ward, Lakeview, Gentilly and New Orleans East experienced levels as high as anywhere between 8.5 to 15.6 feet deep. The city at large was subjected to flooding that damaged homes and trapped thousands on rooftops. The Coast Guard estimates that 60,000 people were stranded on rooftops and flooded homes. At least 1,833 died in the storm and its subsequent aftermath.

The storm's northeastern path subjected the city of New Orleans to four hours of hurricane conditions. Hurricane-force winds blew out windows on most of the high-rise buildings in the city's Central Business District. The Hyatt Regency New Orleans was so badly damaged that beds had reportedly flown out of its windows and that insulation tubes lay exposed after the building's glass exterior had been ripped off.

The Superdome, which was being used as a shelter for residents who had not been able to evacuate, was severely damaged. Winds breached two sections of the building's roof and tore off the waterproof membrane which covered the dome. For the more than 10,000 people that sought refuge from the storm in the Superdome, living conditions were inhumane and miserable.

Many prisoners in Orleans Parish Prison were left in their cells unattended during the storm as the guards and personnel sought shelter. Prisoners interviewed by Human Rights Watch told grisly stories of seeing the bodies of drowned inmates floating in the surrounding waters. Those who survived the flood were left for several days without food, water or medical attention. Hundreds were later registered "unaccounted for."

Reports and images began flowing out of the media, showing a picture of utter desperation. Pictures taken from helicopters showed families trapped on top of flooded homes, arms outstretched, with cries for help scrawled out on their rooftops. Others showed a still body of water stretching across the city as far as the eye could see. Survivors described scenes of corpses that lay floating in the flood waters, rotting in the August heat.

On August 31, two days after the hurricane, President Bush flew over New Orleans to view the wreckage. Bush, who had been on vacation for 29 days at his 1,600-acre ranch in Crawford, Texas, used the flyover as a brief photo-op for the press. Air Force One did not stop, however. It continued on to Washington D.C.

Ruling class defends property over people

The city, state and federal governments were completely unprepared for the disaster. Initially, they waited under the false assumption that the hurricane would change its path at the last minute and strike Florida. No preparations had been made for mass evacuations. Those that were organized after the storm struck were carried out hastily and with insufficient resources. All major highways leading out of the city came to a complete standstill as a result of the uncoordinated evacuation, making it impossible for some time to evacuate residents by bus.

The Bush administration initially adopted an "every man for himself" attitude with regard to the storm. Significant federal aid was denied. President Bush called on individuals to provide support by donating to charitable organizations. Meanwhile, the federal government blocked many attempts to supply the city's residents with basic necessities such as food, clothing and water, and prevented many residents from leaving the city.

In particular, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) blocked aid offers from Chicago Mayor Richard Daley, New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson and others. The agency also held up aid from both public and private agencies, withheld approval to allow the US Forest Service to use its helicopters to put out fires in the city, and blocked Amtrak trains from arriving to evacuate those still in the city. Reports later emerged that FEMA initially had not allowed the Red Cross to enter the city and refused to allow the unloading of food, water and medical supplies at the city harbor.

Thousands of survivors remained trapped inside the flood-ravaged city without access to food, water or clothing. The ensuing social crisis, magnified by the lack of any serious response from the federal government, forced many desperate local residents to take matters into their own hands. Stores such as the Super Walmart on Tchoupitoulas

Street in the Lower Garden district, initially reopened to supply food to rescue workers, were soon overrun by local residents in search of food, water and clothing.

The American media instantly seized on the crisis, creating a sensationalized picture of widespread looting and violence. The coverage focused on a handful of people who stole television sets and other electronic devices. Stations broadcast and rebroadcast the same footage of looters emerging from flood-damaged stores, goods in hand.

A mere three days after the hurricane had wrought havoc on the city, New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin ordered the police to abandon rescue operations and focus its efforts on ending looting. He said looters were "starting to get closer to heavily populated areas—hotels, hospitals," and declared, "we're going to stop it now." He reassigned 1,500 police, "virtually the entire police force in New Orleans," as the Associated Press noted at the time, from search-and-rescue to anti-looting duty.

Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco vowed to redeploy National Guardsmen to stop looters once federal emergency personnel had arrived to take over evacuations and rescues. "We will restore law and order," the Democratic governor proclaimed. Expressing callous disregard for the desperate plight and suffering of thousands of people abandoned by herself and other government officials to the fury of the storm, she added, "What angers me the most is that disasters like this often bring out the worst in people. I will not tolerate this kind of behavior."

New Orleans police and other security forces, roaming the streets armed with assault weapons, were given license to shoot to kill. A string of police murders took place in the initial days after the hurricane.

Two unarmed hurricane survivors were killed and four more wounded by police after they sought refuge on the high point of the Danziger Bridge. An unarmed Algiers resident, a father of four, in search of water, charcoal and diapers was shot in the back by a police officer perched atop an abandoned strip mall. With the aide of top New Orleans Police Department (NOPD) officials, these cases were buried for years.

Washington's response to the disaster not only demonstrated the utter bankruptcy of American capitalism, but the growing anti-democratic trend within the ruling elite. It quickly became apparent that the catastrophic delay in relief efforts was due in large part to waiting until the military could be deployed as a "relief force." Within a week, the largest military mobilization on US soil since the Civil War was carried out in the affected region. Nearly 65,000 US military personnel were deployed in the disaster area, transforming New Orleans into a de facto war zone.

The extensive use of the military as the primary means of disaster response indicated a new stage of decay within American democracy, which was deeply bound up with the resurgence of imperialist wars abroad. *Army Times* published an article at the time hailing the military's entrance, declaring it would "fight insurgency in the city." The US Army describes its own role in the Katrina relief effort on their website thusly: "[The troops] used their experience in Iraq and other operations to bring order to a confused situation."

Since Katrina, the ruling class has mobilized the military and police several times during periods of acute crisis—such as the lockdown of the city of Boston following the Marathon bombing, as well as the occupation of the city of Ferguson, Missouri, in response to protests against police violence.

The social catastrophe: Health hazards and human misery

During the initial period following the hurricane, some hospitals were operating on generators, others were completely without electricity. Reports emerged of nurses using hand-held pump respirators for critically ill patients. Facilities experienced indoor temperatures as high as 110 degrees Fahrenheit. Because the city's water and sewage systems were rendered inoperable, hospitals struggled with basic sanitation. Biohazard bags of feces, urine and blood piled up in hospital halls because there was

no way to dispose of them.

The Superdome and Convention Center, packed with evacuees, lacked proper sanitation and quickly became virtual cesspools. Influenza and respiratory illnesses spread quickly, with disastrous effects on the elderly. In some hospitals, officials ordered a lockdown of pharmaceutical supplies. Hospital staff could not access patients' medicines, forcing them to make life and death decisions while rationing out what little supplies they had.

Even as late as September 17, 2005, approximately 90 percent of the tap water in New Orleans was not drinkable, according to a report released by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Numerous leaks had developed from broken water pipes and mains. The flood waters that covered New Orleans contained sewage, the bodies of humans and animals, oil, gasoline and various industrial and household toxic chemicals.

The EPA's initial findings showed that flood waters, as well as the sediments they left behind, contained dangerously high levels of E. Coli and fecal coliform bacteria, and high concentrations of toxic metal lead. Later tests showed hexavalent chromium, a chemical used in metal plating, as well as arsenic, used for wood treatment. There were at least six large oil spills, releasing some 6 million gallons, as well as over 300 smaller spills.

Four hundred and sixty-six facilities that handled hazardous chemicals, as well as 31 hazardous waste "Superfund" sites, were hit by the storm. One waste site within the city was completely submerged during the flood, raising concerns that long-buried chemicals could have been released. The large debris and sediments deposited by the floodwaters also posed serious health risks. The EPA issued a recommendation that returning evacuees avoid any contact with sediment, citing the presence of E. Coli and fuels.

Despite these warnings, the city took in a large number of volunteers who engaged in various forms of cleanup work, without providing them with proper health safeguards. Many were not informed of the lingering health hazards and were not given proper HazMat gear. Residents, cleanup workers and volunteers fell ill due to the various health hazards. Hundreds of people suffered from gastro-intestinal illnesses as a result of the putrid water engulfing the city.

The federal Centers for Disease Control (CDC) issued warnings about the structural integrity of many flooded buildings and homes. Buildings constructed before 1970 likely contained asbestos, and those built before 1978 likely contained lead-based paint. When made airborne, asbestos dust causes various types of cancer. Lead can cause a range of health problems, especially in children. Mold also posed serious health risks, such as lung infections and skin irritation. According to an EPA/CDC report, 80 percent of dwellings were deemed to be "at risk."

To be continued

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