

Trying To Make It Home: New Orleans One Year After Katrina  
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Bernice Mosely is 82 and lives alone in New Orleans in a shotgun double. On August 29, 2005, as Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, the levees constructed by the U.S. Corps of Engineers failed in five places and New Orleans filled with water.

One year ago, Ms. Mosely was on the second floor of her neighborhood church. Days later, she was helicoptered out. She was so dehydrated she spent eight days in a hospital. Her next-door neighbor, 89 years old, stayed behind to care for his dog. He drowned in the eight feet of floodwaters that covered their neighborhood.

Ms. Mosely now lives in her half-gutted house. She has no stove, no refrigerator, and no air-conditioning. The bottom half of her walls have been stripped of sheetrock and are bare wooden slats from the floor halfway up the wall. Her food is stored in a styrofoam cooler. Two small fans push the hot air around.

Two plaster Madonnas are in her tiny well-kept front yard. On a blazing hot summer day, Ms. Mosely used her crutches to gingerly come down off her porch to open the padlock on her fence. She has had hip and knee replacement surgery. Ms. Mosely worked in a New Orleans factory for over thirty years sewing uniforms. When she retired, she was making less than \$4 an hour. "Retirement benefits?" she laughs. She lives off Social Security. Her house had never flooded before. Because of her tight budget, Ms. Mosely did not have flood insurance.

Thousands of people like Ms. Mosely are back in their houses on the Gulf Coast. They are living in houses that most people would consider, at best, still under construction, or, at worst, uninhabitable. Like Ms. Mosely, they are trying to make their damaged houses into homes.

New Orleans is still in intensive care. If you have seen recent television footage of New Orleans, you probably have a picture of how bad our housing situation is. What you cannot see is that the rest of our institutions, our water, our electricity, our health care, our jobs, our educational system, our criminal justice systems - are all just as broken as our housing. We remain in serious trouble. Like us, you probably wonder: where has the promised money gone?

Ms. Mosely, who lives in the Upper Ninth Ward, does not feel sorry for herself at all. "Lots of people have it worse," she says. "You should see those people in the Lower Ninth and in St. Bernard and in the East. I am one of the lucky ones."

## **Housing**

Hard as it is to believe, Ms. Mosely is right. Lots of people do have it worse. Hundreds of thousands of people from the Gulf Coast remain displaced. In New Orleans alone, over two hundred thousand people have not been able to make it home.

Homeowners in Louisiana, like Ms. Mosely, have not yet received a single dollar of federal housing rebuilding assistance to rebuild their severely damaged houses back into homes. Over 100,000 homeowners in Louisiana are on a waiting list for billions in federal rebuilding assistance through the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program. So far, no money has been distributed.

Renters, who comprised most of the people of New Orleans before Katrina, are much worse off than homeowners. New Orleans lost more than 43,000 rental units to the storm. Rents have skyrocketed in the undamaged parts of the area, pricing regular working people out of the market. The official rate of increase in rents is 39%. In lower income neighborhoods, working people and the elderly report rents are up much higher than that. Amy Liu, of the Brookings Institution, said "Even people who are working temporarily for the rebuilding effort are having trouble finding housing."

Renters in Louisiana are not even scheduled to receive assistance through the Louisiana CDBG program. Some developers will receive assistance at some point, and when they do, some apartments will be made available, but that is years away.

In the face of the worst affordable housing shortage since the end of the Civil War, the federal government announced that it refused to allow thousands of families to return to their public housing units and was going to bulldoze 5000 apartments. Before Katrina, over 5000 families lived in public housing - 88 percent women-headed households, nearly all African-American.

These policies result in hundreds of thousands of people still displaced from their homes. Though all ages, incomes and races are displaced, some groups are impacted much more than others. The working poor, renters, moms with kids, African-Americans, the elderly and disabled - all are suffering disproportionately from displacement. Race, poverty, age and physical ability are great indicators of who has and who has not made it home.

The statistics tell some of the story. The City of New Orleans says it is half its pre-Katrina size - around 225,000 people. But the U.S. Post Office estimates that only about 170,000 people have returned to the city and 400,000 people have not returned to the metropolitan area. The local electricity company reports only about 80,000 of its previous 190,000 customers have returned.

Texas also tells part of the story. It is difficult to understand the impact of Katrina without understanding the role of Texas - home to many of our displaced. Houston officials say their city is still home to about 150,000 storm evacuees - 90,000 in FEMA assisted housing. Texas recently surveyed the displaced and reported that over 250,000

displaced people live in the state and 41 percent of these households report income of less than \$500 per month. Eighty-one percent are black, 59 percent are still jobless, most have at least one child at home, and many have serious health issues.

Another 100,000 people displaced by Katrina are in Georgia, more than 80,000 in metro Atlanta - most of whom also need long-term housing and mental health services.

In Louisiana, there are 73,000 families in FEMA trailers. Most of these trailers are 240 square feet of living space. More than 1600 families are still waiting for trailers in St. Bernard Parish. FEMA trailers did not arrive in the Lower Ninth Ward until June - while the displaced waited for water and electricity to resume. Aloyd Edinburgh, 75, lives in the Lower Ninth Ward and just moved into a FEMA trailer. His home flooded, as did the homes of all five of his children. "Everybody lost their homes," he told the Times-Picayune, "They just got trailers. All are rebuilding. They all have mortgages. What else are they going to do?"

Until challenged, FEMA barred reporters from talking with people in FEMA trailer parks without prior permission - forcing a reporter out of a trailer in one park and residents back into their trailer in another, in order to stop interviews.

One person displaced into a FEMA village in Baton Rouge has been organizing with her new neighbors. Air conditioners in two trailers for the elderly have been out for over two weeks, yet no one will fix them. The contractor who ran the village has been terminated and another one is coming - no one knows who. She tells me, "My neighbors are dismayed that no one in the city has stepped forward to speak for us. We are 'gone.' Who will speak for us? Does anyone care?"

Trailers are visible signs of the displaced. Tens of thousands of other displaced families are living in apartments across the country month to month under continuous threats of FEMA cutoffs.

Numbers say something. But please remember: behind every number, there is a Ms. Mosely. Tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of people, each with a personal story like Ms. Mosely, are struggling to return, trying to make it home.

### **Water and Electricity**

New Orleans continues to lose more water than it uses. The Times-Picayune discovered that the local water system has to pump over 130 million gallons a day so that 50 million gallons will come out. The rest runs away in thousands of leaks in broken water lines, costing the water system \$2,000,000 a day. The lack of water pressure, half that of other cities, creates significant problems in consumption, sanitation, air-conditioning, and fire prevention. In the Lower Ninth Ward, the water has still not been certified as safe to drink - one year later.

Only half the homes in New Orleans have electricity. Power outages are common, as hundreds of millions of dollars in repairs have not been made because Entergy New Orleans is in bankruptcy. Entergy is asking for a 25 percent increase in rates to help it become solvent. Yet Entergy New Orleans' parent company, Entergy Corporation, reported earnings of \$282 million last year on revenue of \$2.6 billion.

## **Health and Health Care**

Early this month, on August 1, 2006, another Katrina victim was found in her home in New Orleans, buried under debris. The woman was the 28th person found dead since March 2006. A total of 1577 died in Louisiana as a result of Katrina.

A friend of mine, a lawyer with health insurance and a family physician, went for an appointment recently at 11 a.m. The office was so crowded he had to sit out in the hall on the floor to wait his turn for a seat in the waiting room. Three hours later he met his doctor. The doctor thought he might have a gallstone. The doctor tried to set up an ultrasound. None were available. He ordered my friend to the emergency room for an ultrasound. At 4 p.m., my friend went to the hospital emergency room, which was jammed with people: stroke victims, young kids with injuries, people brought in by the police. At 5 a.m. the next morning, my friend finished his ultrasound and went home. If it takes a lawyer with health insurance that long to get medical attention, consider what poor people without health insurance are up against.

Half the hospitals open before Katrina are still closed. The state's biggest public health care provider, Charity Hospital, remains closed and there are no current plans to reopen it anytime soon. Healthcare could actually get worse. Dr. Mark Peters, board chair of the Metropolitan Hospital Council of New Orleans said that within the next two to three months, "all the hospitals" will be looking seriously at cutbacks. Why? Doctors and health care workers have gone, and there is surging demand from the uninsured, who before Katrina went through now non-existent public health care. There is a shortage of nurses. Blue Cross Blue Shield officials reported, "About three-quarters of the physicians who had been practicing in New Orleans are no longer submitting claims."

There is no hospital at all in the city for psychiatric patients. While the metropolitan area had about 450 psychiatric beds before the storm, 80 are now available. The police are the first to encounter those with mental illness. One recent Friday afternoon, police dealt with two mental patients - one was throwing bricks through a bar window, the other was found wandering naked on the interstate.

The elderly are particularly vulnerable. Over 70 percent of the deaths from Katrina were people over 60 years old. No one knows how many seniors have not made it back home. Esther Bass, 69, told the New York Times, after months of searching for a place to come home to New Orleans, "If there are apartments, I can't afford them. And they say there

will be senior centers, but they're still being built. They can't even tell you what year they'll be finished." As of late July 2006, most nursing homes in the 12 parish Gulf Coast area of Louisiana are still not fully prepared to evacuate residents in the face of a hurricane.

The health care community has been rocked by the arrest of a doctor and two nurses after the Louisiana Attorney General accused them of intentionally ending the lives of four patients trapped in a now-closed local hospital. The accusations now go before a local grand jury, which is not expected to make a decision on charges for several more months. The case is complicated for several reasons - most important, that the doctor and nurses are regarded as some of the most patient-oriented and caring people of the entire hospital staff. It is undisputed that they worked day and night to save hundreds of patients from the hospital during the days it was without water, electricity or food. Others say that entire hospital and many others were abandoned by the government and that is what the attorney general should be investigating. The gravity of the charges, though, is giving everyone in the community pause. This, like so much else, will go on for years before there is any resolution.

## **Jobs**

Before Katrina, there were over 630,000 workers in the metropolitan New Orleans area - now there are slightly over 400,000. Over 18,000 businesses suffered "catastrophic" damage in Louisiana. Nearly one in four of the displaced workers is still unemployed. Education and health care have lost the most employees. Most cannot return because there is little affordable housing, child care, public transportation and public health care.

Women workers, especially African-American women workers, continue to bear the heaviest burden of harm from the storm. The Institute for Women's Policy Research reports that the percentage of women in the New Orleans workforce has dropped. The number of single mother families in New Orleans has dropped from 51,000 to 17,000. Low-income women remain displaced because of the lack of affordable housing and traditional discrimination against women in the construction industry.

Tens of thousands of migrant workers, roughly half of them undocumented, have come to the Gulf Coast to work in the recovery. Many were recruited. Most workers tell of being promised good wages and working conditions and plenty of work. Some paid money up front for the chance to come to the area to work. Most of these promises were broken. A tour of the area reveals many Latino workers live in houses without electricity; other live out of cars. At various places in the city, whole families are living in tents. Two recently released human rights reports document the problems of these workers. Immigrant workers are doing the dirtiest, most dangerous work, in the worst working conditions. Toxic mold, lead paint, fiberglass, and who knows what other chemicals are part of daily work. Safety equipment is not always provided. Day laborers, a new category of workers in New Orleans, are harassed by the police and periodic immigration raids. Wage theft is widespread as employers often do not pay living wages and sometimes do not pay at all.

Some of the powers try to pit local workers against new arrivals - despite the fact that our broken Gulf Coast clearly needs all the workers we can get.

Public transportation to and from low-wage jobs is more difficult. Over 200 more public transit employees have been terminated - cutting employment from over 1300 people pre-Katrina to about 700 now.

Single working parents seeking child care are in trouble. Before Katrina, New Orleans had 266 licensed day care centers. Mississippi State University surveyed the city in July 2006 and found 80 percent of the day care centers and over 75 percent of the 1912 day care spots are gone. Only one-third of the Head Start centers that were open pre-Katrina survived.

### **Public Education**

Before Katrina, 56,000 students were enrolled in over 100 public schools in New Orleans. At the end of the school year there were only 12,500. Right after the storm, the local school board gave many of the best public schools to charter groups. The State took over almost all the rest. By the end of the school year, four schools were operated by the pre-Katrina school board, three by the State, and eighteen were new charter schools.

After thirty-two years of collective bargaining, the union contract with the New Orleans public school teachers elapsed and was not renewed and 7500 employees were terminated.

For this academic year, no one knows for certain how many students will enroll in New Orleans public schools. Official estimates vary between a low of 22,000 and a high of 34,000. There will be five traditional locally-supervised public schools, eighteen schools operated by the State, and thirty-four charter schools. As of July 1, not a single teacher had been hired for fifteen of the state-run schools. As of August 9, 2006, the Times-Picayune reported there are no staff at all identified to educate students with discipline problems or other educational issues that require special attention.

Whatever the enrollment in the new public school system is in the fall, it will not give an accurate indication of how many children have returned. Why? Many students in the public charter schools were in private schools before the hurricane.

### **Criminal Legal System**

Consider also our criminal legal system. Chaka Davis was arrested on misdemeanor charges in October 2005 and jailed at the Greyhound station in New Orleans in October of 2005. Under Louisiana law, he was required to be formally charged within 30 days of arrest or released from custody. Because of a filing error he was lost in the system. He was never charged, never went to court, and never saw a lawyer in over 8 months - even though the maximum penalty for conviction for one of his misdemeanors was only 6

months. His mother found him in an out of town jail and brought his situation to the attention of the public defenders. He was released the next day.

Crime is increasingly a problem. In July, New Orleans lost almost as many people to murder as in July of 2005, with only 40 percent of the population back. There are many young people back in town while their parents have not returned. State and local officials called in the National Guard to patrol lightly populated areas so local police could concentrate on high-crime, low-income neighborhoods. Arrests have soared, but the number of murders remain high. Unfortunately, several of the National Guard have been arrested for criminal behavior as well - two for looting liquor from a home, two others for armed robbery at a traffic stop.

Criminal Court District Judge Arthur Hunter has declared the current criminal justice system shameful and unconstitutional, and promises to start releasing inmates awaiting trial on recognizance bonds on the one-year anniversary of Katrina. The system is nearly paralyzed by a backlog of over 6,000 cases. There are serious evidence problems because of resigned police officers, displaced victims, displaced witnesses, and flooded evidence rooms. The public defender system, which was down to 4 trial attorneys for months, is starting to rebuild.

"After 11 months of waiting, 11 months of meetings, 11 months of idle talk, 11 months without a sensible recovery plan and 11 months tolerating those who have the authority to solve, correct and fix the problem but either refuse, fail or are just inept, then necessary action must be taken to protect the Constitutional rights of people," said Hunter.

In the suburbs across the lake, Sheriff Jack Strain told the media on TV that he was going to protect his jurisdiction from "thugs" and "trash" migrating from closed public housing projects in New Orleans. He went on to promise that every person who wore "dreadlocks or che-wee hairstyles" could expect to be stopped by law enforcement. The NAACP and the ACLU called in the U.S. Justice Department and held a revival-like rally at a small church just down the road from the jail. Though the area is over 80 percent white, the small group promised to continue to challenge injustice no matter how powerful the person committing the injustice. Recently, the same law enforcement people set up a roadblock and were stopping only Latino people to check IDs and insurance. I guess to prove they were not only harassing black people?

Finally, a grand jury has started looking into actions by other suburban police officers that blocked a group of people, mostly black, from escaping the floodwaters of New Orleans by walking across the Mississippi River Bridge. The suburban police forced the crowd to flee back across the two-mile bridge by firing weapons into the air.

This is the criminal legal system in the New Orleans area in 2006. None dare call it criminal justice.

## **International Human Rights**

The Gulf Coast has gained new respect for international human rights because they provide a more appropriate way to look at what should be happening. The fact that there is an international human right of internally displaced people to return to their homes, and a responsibility on government to help, is heartening, even though yet unfulfilled.

The United Nations has blasted the poor U.S. response to Katrina. The UN Human Rights Committee in Geneva accepted a report from Special Reporter Arjun Sengupta, who visited New Orleans in fall of 2005 and concluded: "The Committee ... remains concerned about information that poor people, and in particular African-Americans, were disadvantaged by the rescue and evacuation plans implemented when Hurricane Katrina hit the United States of America, and continue to be disadvantaged under the reconstruction plans."

Asian tsunami relief workers who visited New Orleans over the summer were shocked at the lack of recovery. Somsook Boonyabancha, director of the Community Organizations Development Institute in Thailand, told Reuters she was shocked at the lack of progress in New Orleans. "I'm surprised to see why the reconstruction work is so slow, because this is supposed to be one of the most rich and efficient countries in the world. It is starting at such a slow speed, incredibly slow speed."

## **Warnings to the Displaced**

Local United Way officials see the lack of housing, health care and jobs and conclude that low-income people should seriously consider not returning to New Orleans anytime soon.

United Way wrote: "Most of these people want to come home, but if they do not have a recovery plan they need to stay where they are. Some of these evacuees think that they can come back and stay with families and in a few weeks have a place of their own. But the reality is that they may end up living with those relatives for years. Sending people back without a realistic plan may have serious consequences: the crowding of families into small apartments/homes/FEMA trailers is causing mental health problems - stress, abuse, violence, and even death - and this problem is going to get worse, not better. Also, when the elderly (and others) are those returning and living in these conditions, their health is impacted and then the lack of medical facilities and hospital beds is a problem. Again the result may be death.... Basically if an evacuee says they have a place to stay - like with relatives - those communities will give them bus fare back or pay for U-hauls. If an evacuee was a renter here and they want to return they should be told to plan on returning in 3-7 years, and in the meantime stay there, get a job, and be much better off."

FEMA officials in Austin are also warning people about returning to New Orleans. They wrote: "Before you return ... New Orleans is a changing place ... you should consider the conditions you may be returning to. Many neighborhood schools will not be open by August. Your children may have to travel some distance to get to school ... Grocery and supermarkets have been slow to return to many neighborhoods. Sometimes there aren't enough residents back in your neighborhood for a store to open and be profitable. You may have to travel a large distance to groceries. Walking to the store might not be an option ... If you or your family members require regular medical attention, or if you are pregnant or nursing, the services you received before the storm may be scattered and in very different and distant locations. Depending on your medical needs, you may have to drive across the river or even as far away as Baton Rouge ... If you or your family members have allergies, remember that there is lots of dust and mold still in the city. While you may have suffered from allergies before the storm, please consider that being in the city will only worsen your allergies. If you have asthma, other respiratory or cardiac conditions, or immune system problems, you would be safer staying out of flooded areas due to the mold, particles and dust in the air. If you must return to the city, wear an approved respirator when working in moldy or dusty areas.... Additionally, police, fire and emergency personnel are stretched to their limits ... If you own a car, gas and service stations are limited in many areas. You may need to purchase a gas can in the event you cannot get gas near your home ... Public transportation (buses) are also limited and do not operate in all areas.... Available and affordable housing is extremely rare. Waiting lists for apartments are as large as 300 on the list, depending on how many bedrooms you need. Living inside your home could be dangerous if mold has set in or if your utilities are not in top working condition! ... Living in New Orleans may be easier said than done until we have fully recovered from the storm."

This is New Orleans, one year after Katrina.

### **Where Did the Money Go?**

Everyone who visits New Orleans asks the same question that locals ask - where is the money? Congress reportedly appropriated over \$100 billion to rebuild the Gulf Coast. Over \$50 billion was allocated to temporary and long-term housing. Just under \$30 billion was for emergency response and Department of Defense spending. Over \$18 billion was for State and local response and the rebuilding of infrastructure. \$3.6 billion was for health, social services and job training and \$3.2 for non-housing cash assistance. \$1.9 billion was allocated for education and \$1.2 billion for agriculture.

One hour in New Orleans shows the check must still be in the mail.

Not a single dollar in federal housing rehab money has made it into a hand in Louisiana. Though Congress has allocated nearly \$10 billion in Community Development Block Grants, the State of Louisiana is still testing the program and has not yet distributed dollar number one.

A lot of media attention has gone to the prosecution of people who wrongfully claimed benefits of \$2,000 or more after the storm. Their fraud is despicable. It harms those who are still waiting for assistance from FEMA.

But, let's be clear - these little \$2,000 thieves are minnows swimming on the surface. There are many big savage sharks below. Congress and the national media have so far been frustrated in their quest to get real answers to where the millions and billions went. How much was actually spent on FEMA trailers? How much did the big contractors take off the top and then subcontract out the work? Who were the subcontractors for the multi-million dollar debris removal and reconstruction contracts?

As Corpwatch says in their recent report, "Many of the same 'disaster profiteers' and government agencies that mishandled the reconstruction of Afghanistan and Iraq are responsible for the failure of 'reconstruction' of the Gulf Coast region. The Army Corps, Bechtel and Halliburton are using the very same 'contract vehicles' in the Gulf Coast as they did in Afghanistan and Iraq. These are 'indefinite delivery, indefinite quantity,' open-ended 'contingency' contracts that are being abused by the contractors on the Gulf Coast to squeeze out local companies. These are also 'cost-plus' contracts that allow them to collect a profit on everything they spend, which is an incentive to overspend."

We do know billions of dollars in no-bid FEMA contracts went to Bechtel Corporation, the Shaw Group, CH2M Hill, and Fluor immediately after Katrina hit. Riley Bechtel, CEO of Bechtel Corporation, served on President Bush's Export Council during 2003-2004. A lobbyist for the Shaw Group, Joe Allbaugh, is a former FEMA Director and friend of President Bush. The president and group chief executive of the International Group at CH2MHill is Robert Card, appointed by President Bush as under secretary to the U.S. Department of Energy until 2004. Card also worked at CH2M Hill before signing up with President Bush. Fluor, whose work in Iraq was slowing down, is one of the big winners of FEMA work, and its stock is up 65 percent since it started Katrina work.

Senator Byron Dorgan, of North Dakota, has raised many protests and questions over inflated prices. "It is hard to overstate the incompetence involved in all of these contracts - we have repeatedly asked them for information and you get nothing." Republican U.S. Representative Charles Bustany, who represents an area heavily damaged by Hurricane Rita, asked FEMA for reasons why the decision was made to stop funding 100 percent of the cost of debris removal in his district. FEMA refused to tell him. He then filed a Freedom of Information request to get the information, and was again refused. When he asked to appeal their denial, he was told that there were many appeals ahead of his and he would have to wait.

If a U.S. Senator and a local U.S. Republican congressman cannot get answers from FEMA, how much accountability can the people of the Gulf Coast expect? There are many other examples of fraud, waste and patronage.

How did a company that did not own a truck get a contract for debris removal worth hundreds of millions of dollars? The Miami Herald reported that the single biggest receiver of early Katrina federal contracts was Ashbritt Inc. of Pompano Beach, Florida, which received over \$579 million in contracts for debris removal in Mississippi from the Army Corps of Engineers. The paper reported that the company does not own a single dump truck! All they do is subcontract out the work. Ashbritt, however, had recently dumped \$40,000 into the lobbying firm of Barbour, Griffith & Rogers, which had been run by Mississippi Governor and former national GOP chair Haley Barbour. The owners of Ashbritt also trucked \$50,000 over to the Republican National Committee in 2004.

How did a company that filed for bankruptcy the year before and was not licensed to build trailers get a \$200 million contract for trailers? Circle B Enterprises of Georgia was awarded \$287 million in contracts by FEMA for temporary housing. At the time, that was the seventh highest award of Katrina money in the country. According to the Washington Post, Circle B was not even being licensed to build homes in its own state of Georgia and filed for bankruptcy in 2003. The company does not even have a web site.

FEMA spent \$7 million to build a park for 198 trailers in Morgan City, Louisiana - almost 2 hours away from New Orleans. Construction was completed in April. Three months later, only 20 of the trailers were occupied. One displaced New Orleans resident who lives there has to walk three miles to the nearest grocery.

Hurricanes are now a booming billion dollar business. No wonder there is a National Hurricane Conference for private companies to show off their wares - from RVs to portable cell phone towers to port-a-potties. One longtime provider was quoted by the Miami Herald at the conference as saying that there are all kinds of new people in the field: "Some folks here said, 'Man, this is huge business; this is my new business. I'm not in the landscaping business anymore, I'm going to be a hurricane debris contractor.'"

On the local level, we are not any better. One year after Katrina, the City of New Orleans still does not have a comprehensive rebuilding plan. The first plan by advisors to the Mayor was shelved before the election. A city council plan was then started and the state and federal government mandated yet another process that may or may not include some of the recommendations of the prior two processes. One of the early advisors from the Urban Land Institute, John McIlwain, blasted the delays in late July. "It's virtually a city with a city administration and it's worse than ever ... You need a politician, a leader that is willing to make tough decisions and articulate to people why these decisions are made, which means everyone is not going to be happy." Without major changes at City Hall, the city will have miles of neglected neighborhoods for decades. "We're talking Dresden after World War II."

## **Signs of Hope**

Despite the tragedies that continue to plague our Gulf Coast, there is hope. Between the rocks of hardship, green life continues to sprout defiantly.

Fifteen feet of water washed through Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School for Science and Technology in the Lower Ninth Ward. When people were finally able to get into the building, the bodies of fish were found on the second floor. Parents and over 90% of the teachers organized a grass-roots effort to put their school back together. Their first attempts to gut and repair the school by locals and volunteers from Common Ground were temporarily stopped by local school officials and the police. Even after the gutting was allowed to resume, the community was told that the school could not reopen due to insufficient water pressure in the neighborhood. But the teachers and parents are pressing ahead anyway in a temporary location until they can get back in their school. Assistant Principal Joseph Recasner told the Times-Picayune: "Rebuilding our school says this is a very special community, tied together by more than location, but by spirituality, by bloodlines, and by a desire to come back."

New Orleans is fortunate to have a working newspaper again. The Times-Picayune won a well-deserved Pulitzer for its Katrina coverage. Its staff continues to provide quality documentation of the Gulf Coast region's efforts to repair and rebuild.

The New Orleans Vietnamese people continue to inspire us. They were among the very first group back and they have joined forces to care for their elders, rebuild their community church, and work together in a most cooperative manner to resurrect their community. Recently they took legal and direct action to successfully stop the placement of a gigantic landfill right next to their community. Their determination and sense of community-building is a good model for us all.

The only Republican running for Congress in New Orleans is blasting President Bush over failed Katrina promises. Joe Lavigne is running radio ads saying, "Sadly, George Bush has forgotten us. He's spending too much time and money on Iraq and not enough living up to his promise to rebuild New Orleans. His priorities are wrong. I'm running for Congress to hold President Bush accountable." Maybe other Republicans will join in.

Tens of thousands of volunteers from every walk of life have joined with the people of the Gulf Coast to help repair and rebuild. Lawyers are giving free help to Katrina victims who need legal help to rebuild their homes. Medical personnel staff free clinics. Thousands of college, high school and even some grade school students have traveled to the area to help families gut their devastated homes. Churches, temples, and mosques from across the world have joined with sisters and brothers in New Orleans to repair and rebuild.

Despite open attempts to divide them, black and brown and white and yellow workers have started to talk to each other. Small groups have started to work together to fight for

living wages and safe jobs for all workers. Thousands came together for a rally for respectful treatment for Latino and immigrant workers. Seasoned civil rights activists welcomed the new movement and pledged to work together.

Ultimately, the people of the Gulf Coast are the greatest sign of hope. Despite setbacks that people in the U.S. rarely suffer, people continue to help each other and fight for their right to return home and the right to live in the city they love.

On Sunday morning, a 70-year-old woman told a friend where her children are. "They are all scattered," she sighed. "One is in Connecticut, one in Rhode Island, one in Austin." When he asked about her, she said, "Me? I am in Texas right now. I am back here to visit my 93-year-old mother and go to the second line of Black Men of Labor on Labor Day. But I'm coming back. Yes indeed. I will return. I'm coming back."