

Post-Katrina New Orleans: A Third Reconstruction?

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WHEN UNION ARMY troops under the command of Gen. Benjamin F. Butler entered and occupied New Orleans in April of 1862, so began the first Reconstruction of the city and the state of Louisiana. The rise and then the defeat of the historic democratic struggle known as the first Reconstruction — discussed in the accompanying sidebar [as well as reviews by Robert Caldwell and Jim Toweill elsewhere in this issue] — sets the context in which we find today's New Orleans, four years after the levee collapse.

What is required for New Orleans and the Gulf Coast stretching from Florida through Alabama, Mississippi, and over to Texas is a new Reconstruction — a third Reconstruction (the first one followed the Civil War, the second was the modern Civil Rights movement). But is the present political, social and economic system capable of giving birth to the effort? The balance sheet since Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Rita in August and September of 2005 does not look good. The Times-Picayune, the New Orleans daily that is the mouthpiece of big business interests, ran a front page article in the September 5, 2009 edition headlined, "Delgado is forced to reject students." The sub-headline was "Impasse with FEMA over repairs leaves campus short on space." Staff writer John Pope began, "For the first time in Delgado Community College's 88-year history, the area's most populous institution of higher education has turned away 1,500 applicants because it ran out of building space."

Pope continued, "The needed rooms are there, but they are in buildings that are still awaiting repairs from the damage that Hurricane Katrina's floodwaters inflicted four years ago. Educators are furious that they had to reject students this fall. In Louisiana and elsewhere, community colleges traditionally have an open policy." Pope quotes Delgado Chancellor Ron Wright, "This is my 39th year in community colleges, and I never turned away a student."

According to the article, Delgado has 16,715 registered students. But at the main campus in City Park, eight of 21 buildings are totally unusable, representing 40% of the square footage of the City Park campus — Tulane University, a very rich private college across town, is getting its FEMA bucks. The same writer, John Pope, reported in the September 3 Times-Picayune, "Tulane University will receive \$16 million from FEMA to replace mechanical, plumbing, and electrical equipment that drowned under eight feet of Hurricane Katrina's floodwater in the Library basement."

Big bucks for the few, none for the many: That is the essence of federal, Louisiana state, and New Orleans city government policy. After Hurricane Katrina hit on August 31, 2005, the policy of all three levels of government has been open war on public housing, schools and health care.

Before that date, there were over 4,600 rental units in four of the biggest public housing developments. Of the total, low-income workers and their families occupied over 3,000 apartment homes (figures from a front-page article in the December 3, 2008 Times-Picayune). Despite the greatest need for living quarters after a catastrophe unrivalled in New Orleans history, the Mayor and the City Council voted unanimously to demolish the four big developments in December of 2007, after police had tasered, pepper sprayed and beaten protesters inside and outside the Council Chamber.

This anti-working-class measure was actively backed by the federal and state governments. Big business, government and media successfully turned higher-income workers and middle strata against low-income workers. Public housing residents who participated in protests were threatened with reprisals by government agencies. The brick buildings that were public housing could clearly have been renovated rather than torn down.

Charterizing the Schools

On public education, the picture is mixed. The Louisiana state government of Democratic Governor Kathleen Blanco used the disarray after Hurricane Katrina to fire or push into early retirement all the public school teachers and workers in Orleans Parish (New Orleans). A class action suit by eight fired employees revealed the number of workers terminated was over 8,500 (December 12, 2008 Times-Picayune). The State school board took over most of the schools and proceeded to “charterize” them — that is, hand them over to private organizations, both nonprofit and for-profit.

Charter schools are publicly owned and government-funded, but privately managed. The State school board has 38 schools privately run and 30 publicly run. It hopes to charterize the remaining 30. The Parish school board runs four schools directly and oversees 12 charter schools (July 25, 2009 Times-Picayune). New Orleans has the highest percentage of charter schools of any city.

Many parents believe their children will get a better education in the privately-run schools. But reports have surfaced of high rates of student expulsion, especially students with disabilities. The end result will be a balkanized school system, with each school a little island competing against other schools for funds and students — a real dog-eat-dog existence.

Proponents of this model contend this introduces “free market” principles into education. With each school principal hiring and firing at will, the organization of a union by school employees is extremely difficult. But the United Teachers of New Orleans (UTNO), the local affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers, continues the struggle — fighting for a contract with the Parish school board and beginning to attract dissatisfied charter school teachers.

Fighting for Charity Hospital

The struggle for public health care, while similar to that for public housing and public schools, rides on a different level of public consciousness and sentiment. The depth and breadth of support for the demand to reopen the Rev. Avery C. Alexander Charity Hospital (Rev. Alexander was a local civil rights leader and state legislator) is nothing short of amazing.

Low-income and high-income workers; middle strata like lawyers, doctors, managers and shopkeepers; all support reopening the biggest public hospital in the state of Louisiana. And the organized movement reflects that — embracing groups from the Foundation for Historical Louisiana (FHL) in Baton Rouge down to street radicals organized in the New Orleans Committee to Reopen

Charity Hospital.

Recent revelations by top U.S. military officers offer a damning indictment of state officials. “(T)hen-Gov. Kathleen Blanco said the publicly run Charity Hospital would not reopen even though the military had scrubbed the building to medical-ready standards....,” wrote Cain Burdeau in a July 14, 2009 Associated Press article. He continued, “...Lt. Gen. Russel Honore said Blanco told him in late September 2005 the 20-story building that served the region’s poor residents would not reopen. ‘Ma’am, we got the hospital clean, my people report...if you want to use it,’ Honore recalled telling Blanco. ‘Her reply to me: Well general, we’re not going to open it, we’re working on a different plan.’”

Closing Charity is not just myopia, it’s madness, it’s dollar signs blinding state officials to the needs of the vast majority.

The existence of a public hospital is deeply ingrained in the Louisiana psyche. Charity in New Orleans was founded in 1736. Under the impact of Huey P. Long — whom some consider a most eloquent populist and the greatest ever Louisiana governor — a state-wide system of Charity hospitals was developed in the late 1930s and early 1940s. The present New Orleans Charity Hospital was built in 1938, with federal funds from the New Deal.

The depth of this legacy explains why a March 2006 demonstration by a couple hundred people — led by the doctors and nurses of Charity who had helped clean the hospital — resulted in the New Orleans City Council unanimously passing a resolution the following month “...urging the state to...repair and reopen Charity Hospital,” and why the following month in May, the Louisiana Senate and House also unanimously passed a resolution to “hereby urge and request the governor...to develop and implement a plan to use a portion of the Medical Center of New Orleans (Big Charity Hospital) to provide medical services to the New Orleans community and region on an interim basis....”

This legacy, coupled with the health care crisis gripping post-Katrina New Orleans, has sustained an ever-widening movement to reopen Charity. In the January 23, 2006 New York Times an article was headlined, “Long After the Storm, Shortages Overwhelm New Orleans’s Few Hospitals.” This was obvious to everyone except Governor Blanco and the Louisiana State University (LSU) officials who run the Charity system for the state.

Right now, all metro area hospitals — the for-profits and nonprofits — are bleeding red ink due to the overload. The April 2, 2009 Times-Picayune reported, “Since 2005 East Jefferson...has lost \$104 million, while West Jefferson...has lost \$66 million.... Other hospitals in the area also posted hefty operation losses.... Ochsner Health System lost \$137 million, Touro Infirmary lost \$87 million, and Tulane University Hospital lost \$96 million.”

In January 2008, a group of lawyers filed a class-action suit embracing former Charity patients against LSU officials for illegally closing Charity — LSU hadn’t gotten the approval of the State Legislature. This case is still in the court system. The biggest bombshell to explode in the faces of the state and LSU was an announcement in August 2008, when the FHL preservationist group unveiled a study by an architect firm showing that Charity could be renovated and reopen as a 21st century hospital.

The world-renowned architect firm RMJM Hillier concluded in the summary of the feasibility study “that there are no fatal flaws in the building structural integrity and capacity that would impede the rehabilitation of Charity Hospital into a state-of-the art healthcare facility.” The Hillier group spent two months inside Charity during the summer of 2008 conducting their study. No LSU study of the

building was this intensive and extensive.

We activists had been demanding an interim reopening of the hospital to relieve the worst aspects of the healthcare crisis for the physically and mentally ill. After Hillier, we were now armed with a 248-page report detailing the total renovation of the facility. (The plan can be found at fhl.org.)

LSU officials have partnered with the Veterans Administration to propose destroying 70 acres of homes and businesses in an area called Lower Mid City to build a new state hospital and a new VA hospital. Residents of Lower Mid City came back after Katrina, rebuilt their homes and now face an LSU-VA wrecking ball. They are organizing to oppose the destruction of the neighborhood.

Since the heady days of 2006, the State Legislature and the City Council are now backing the LSU plan. Still, these elected officials and LSU have no substantial support in the metro area. All polls and surveys show overwhelming public support for renovating Charity. On Aug 31, 2009, a “Save Charity Hospital” parade with two brass bands attracted over 1200 people in a march from the hospital through parts of Lower Mid City.

Because New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin went behind the backs of the people to serve up Lower Mid City to the VA, he has been slapped with a lawsuit, filed in July 2009, charging violation of the City Charter.

Resisting Privatization

The preservationist groups and community organizations have called for public hearings before the City Planning Commission and the City Council on the hospital proposals — the LSU-VA plan and the Hillier plan. Meanwhile Governor Bobby Jindal, a Republican, is intent on privatizing all public health care. In July 2009 he shut down the only public mental health hospital — NOAH, New Orleans Adolescent Hospital. The hospital treated both young people and adults.

When the Governor revealed his plans for NOAH in the spring of 2009, the Mayor, the whole City Council, and area state legislators came out in opposition. The pro-Charity movement joined with these forces in organizing two evening community speak-outs in the City Council Chamber. Around 200 people attended both events. A lawsuit demanding the reopening of NOAH has been filed against Jindal.

Even though the pro-Charity movement commands majority public support, the public is tied down in all the issues of the recovery: rebuilding their housing; fighting to tear down flooded, ruined properties in their neighborhood; finding a school for their kids; searching for adequate mental and physical healthcare; and dealing with job loss stemming from the national recession.

The federal administration under President George W. Bush dispensed aid with an eyedropper. The reality under President Barack H. Obama is not substantially different. His VA has not dropped the plans to destroy Lower Mid City.

During the protests over NOAH, the movement did draw support from an SEIU local. But the union leadership made clear its support of the big business plan for the State and VA hospitals. Reports have it that the construction unions are also onboard with LSU and the big land developers. Only the small local of Orleans Parish teachers, UTNO, have supported and stood with the public majority on Charity and NOAH.

What New Orleans and the Gulf Coast need is a massive public works program, a new New Deal.

The outcome of the struggle remains in the balance.

Derrick Morrison

From Reconstruction to Capitalist Crisis

THE OUTCOME OF the Civil War registered the defeat of the Army of the Confederate states, the defeat of the army of the slaveholders, and a victory for the army of the owners of the railroads and big industrial enterprises committed to free, or wage labor. The political party of the big property holders, the Republican party, was supported by the mass of small farmers, urban workers, small business owners and the abolitionist movement.

The Civil War was an argument over who would run the country: Southern slaveholders or the Northern owners of the new industrial enterprises — railroads, machine manufacture and textile mills. Both systems had to expand, and when the election victory of Abraham Lincoln and the Republican party in 1860 signaled a halt to the expansion of slavery, the slaveholders sought to decide the matter on the battlefield.

They lost, and to seal and consolidate the victory, the government of big industrial property passed the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments — outlawing slavery, elevating the ex-slaves to citizenship, and granting Black male suffrage.

Once the owners of big business had settled in as the undisputed masters of the United States, however, they retreated politically from the ex-slaves' demand for "forty acres and a mule," i.e. land. Forty acres — or 160 acres as called for in the Homestead Act — would have signified the real integration of Black people into the U.S. political, social and economic order.

Instead, Black people were relegated to the bottom of the heap as super-exploited agricultural sharecroppers with no right to exercise what they had newly won.

As this new peonage system was set up and operated, the industrial rulers of the country sent their battle-hardened army out West to clear the land of the indigenous Native Americans, and make way for the expansion of the railroads, and rise of big agriculture and manufacturing plants. This corresponded with the imperial period of European big business, where the yoke of colonization was fastened onto the peoples of Africa, Asia and Latin America.

The brief taste of political democracy that Black people experienced, Reconstruction, was deposited in their memory bank. That memory, combined with global wars, revolutions and working class upheavals in the first half of the 20th century, laid the basis for the rise of the Civil Rights movement in the late 1950s and early 1960s. This movement overthrew the system of segregation, a form of apartheid, called Jim Crow. Thus began the "Second Reconstruction," a period of great political, social and economic mobility.

The post-Civil War rulers who owned railroads, factories, and mills had now become imperial. The big business interests of the United States ran the world economy, dominating the control of raw materials such as oil, rewarding the friends of imperialism and disciplining, i.e. waging war, on those who step out of line.

The imperial masters had no strategic problem in dispensing with Jim Crow, as long as the movement for Black rights stayed within the two-party system. No matter how many elected officials you accumulate, as long as they are Democrats and Republicans there is no threat to the worldwide business empires of corporations like Bank of America and ExxonMobil. Every two-party President, Senator and Congressperson is ultimately responsible to mega-business and financial interests.

Now, of course, that system is in serious crisis. The collapse of powerful financial institutions like Bear Stearns and Lehman Brothers points to deep-seated problems in the global economy. Banks have fallen like dominoes, and those who work for wages and salaries are losing jobs and homes due to the mistaken calculations of a powerful and super-rich few.

Our movement in New Orleans has served as an important example in the fight to defend public health care, no matter the outcome. Ultimately, however, decisive victory in the struggle to defend public housing, public schools and public health care can only be mounted with a fighting and mobilized trade union movement that would spearhead the rise of a mass workers' party, fighting against the Democratic and Republican parties to replace the big business government with one based on the workers, farmers and all oppressed and exploited groups.

Such a movement and party could end the imperialist wars that drain the country and the anarchy of the profit-driven economy, and bring about the real rebuilding and reconstruction of New Orleans, the Gulf Coast, and the rest of the United States. For some of us, the movement in New Orleans is a small contribution toward that end.

Derrick Morrison

P.S.

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