Needed: A People’s Reconstruction

On September 4, six days after Katrina hit, I saw the first glimmer of hope. “The people of New Orleans will not go quietly into the night, scattering across this country to become homeless in countless other cities while federal relief funds are funneled into rebuilding casinos, hotels, chemical plants.... We will not stand idly by while this disaster is used as an opportunity to replace our homes with newly built mansions and condos in a gentrified New Orleans.” The statement came from Community Labor United, a coalition of low-income groups in New Orleans. It went on to demand that a committee made up of evacuees “oversee FEMA, the Red Cross and other organizations collecting resources on behalf of our people.... We are calling for evacuees from our community to actively participate in the rebuilding of New Orleans.” It’s a radical concept: The $10.5 billion released by Congress and the $500 million raised by private charities doesn’t belong to the relief agencies or the government; it belongs to the victims. The agencies entrusted with the money should be accountable to them. Put another way, the people Barbara Bush tactfully described as “underprivileged anyway” just got very rich.

Except relief and reconstruction never seem to work like that. When I was in Sri Lanka six months after the tsunami, many survivors told me that the reconstruction was victimizing them all over again. A council of the country’s most prominent businessmen had been put in charge of the process, and they were handing the coast over to developers at a frantic pace. Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands of poor fishing people were still stuck in sweltering inland camps, patrolled by soldiers with machine guns and entirely dependent on relief agencies. They called it “the second tsunami.”

There are already signs that New Orleans evacuees could face a similarly brutal second storm. Jimmy Reiss, chairman of the New Orleans Business Council, told Newsweek that he has been brainstorming about how “to use this catastrophe as a once-in-an-eon opportunity to change the dynamic.” The Business Council’s wish list is well-known: low wages, low taxes, more luxury condos and hotels. Before the flood these schemes were already displacing poor African-Americans: While their music and culture was for sale in an increasingly corporatized French Quarter (where only 4.3 percent of residents are black), their housing developments were being torn down. “For white tourists and businesspeople, New Orleans’ reputation is ‘a great place to have a vacation but don’t leave the French Quarter or you’ll get shot,’” Jordan Flaherty, a New Orleans–based labor organizer told me the day after he left the city by boat. “Now the developers have their big chance to disperse the obstacle to gentrification—poor people.”

Here’s a better idea: New Orleans could be reconstructed by and for the very people most victimized by the flood. Schools and hospitals that were falling apart before could finally have adequate resources; the reconstruction could create thousands of jobs and provide massive skills training. And the effort could be led by groups like Douglass Community Coalition. Before the hurricane this remarkable assembly of parents, teachers, students and artists was trying to reconstruct the city from the ravages of poverty by transforming Frederick Douglass Senior High School into a model of community learning. They have already done the painstaking work of building consensus around education reform. Now that the funds are flowing, shouldn’t they have the tools to rebuild every ailing public school in the city?

For a people’s reconstruction process to become a reality (and to keep more contracts from going to Halliburton), the evacuees have to be central in all decision-making. According to Curtis Muhammad of Community Labor United, the disaster’s starkest lesson is that African-Americans cannot count on any level of government to protect them. “We had no caretakers,” he says. That means the community groups that do represent African-Americans in Louisiana and Mississippi—many of which lost staff and resources in the flood—need our support now. Only a massive injection of cash and volunteers will enable them to do the crucial work of organizing evacuees—currently scattered through forty-one states—into a powerful political constituency. The most pressing question is where evacuees will live. A dangerous consensus is building that they should collect a little charity and keep moving north. Muhammad and CLU, however, are calling for the right to return: If evacuees are going to have houses and schools to come back to, many will need to return to their home states and fight for them.

These ideas are not without precedent. When Mexico City was struck by a devastating earthquake in 1985, the state also failed the people: Public housing crumbled and the army was ready to bulldoze structures with survivors still in them. A month after the quake 40,000 refugees marched on the government, refusing to be relocated out of their neighborhoods and demanding a “Democratic Reconstruction.” Not only were 50,000 new dwellings for the homeless built in a year; the neighborhood groups that grew out of the rubble launched a movement that is challenging Mexico’s traditional power holders to this day.

And the people I met in Sri Lanka were tired of waiting for the promised relief. Some survivors are now calling for a People’s Planning Commission for Post-Tsunami Recovery. They say the relief agencies should answer to them; it’s their money, after all.

The idea could take hold in the United States, and it must. Because there is only one thing that can compensate the victims of this most human of natural disasters, and that is what has been denied them throughout: power. It will be a difficult battle, but the evacuees should draw strength from the knowledge that they are no longer poor people; they are rich people who have been temporarily locked out of their bank accounts.

Please earmark your check for the People’s Hurricane Relief Fund, and make it out to the Vanguard Public Foundation, 383 Rhode Island St., Suite 301, San Francisco, CA 94103.
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