A few blocks from the badly flooded and still-closed campus of Dillard University, a wind-bent street sign announces the intersection of Humanity and New Orleans. In the nighttime distance, the downtown skyscrapers on Poydras and Canal Streets are already ablaze with light, but a vast northern and eastern swath of the city, including the Gentilly neighborhood around Dillard, remains shrouded in darkness.

The lights have been out for six months now, and no one seems to know when, if ever, they will be turned back on. In greater New Orleans about 125,000 homes remain damaged and unoccupied, a vast ghost city that rots in darkness while les bon temps return to a guilty strip of unflooded and mostly affluent neighborhoods near the river. Such a large portion of the black population is gone that some radio stations are now switching their formats from funk and rap to soft rock.

Mayor Ray Nagin likes to boast that “New Orleans is back,” pointing to the tourists who again prowl the French Quarter and the Tulane students who crowd Magazine Street bistros; but the current population of New Orleans on the west bank of the Mississippi is about the same as that of Disney World on a normal day. More than 60 percent of Nagin’s constituents—including an estimated 80 percent of the African-Americans—are still scattered in exile with no obvious way home.

In their absence, local business elites, advised by conservative think tanks, “New Urbanists” and neo-Democrats, have usurped almost every function of elected government. With the City Council largely shut out of their deliberations, mayor-appointed commissions and outside experts, mostly white and Republican, propose to radically shrink and reshape a majority-black and Democratic city. Without any mandate from local voters, the public-school system has already been virtually abolished, along with the jobs of unionized teachers and school employees. Thousands of other unionized jobs have been lost with the closure of Charity Hospital, formerly the flagship of public medicine in Louisiana. And a proposed oversight board, dominated by appointees of President Bush and Governor Kathleen Babineaux Blanco, would end local control over city finances.

Meanwhile, Bush’s pledge to “get the work done quickly” and mount “one of the largest reconstruction efforts the world has ever seen” has proved to be the same fool’s gold as his earlier guarantee to rebuild Iraq’s bombed-out infrastructure. Instead, the Administration has left the residents of neighborhoods like Gentilly in limbo: largely without jobs, emergency housing, flood protection, mortgage relief, small-business loans or a coordinated plan for reconstruction.

With each passing week of neglect—what Representative Barney Frank has labeled “a policy of ethnic cleansing by inaction”—the likelihood increases that most black Orleanians will never be able to return.
Lie and Stall

After his bungling initial response to Katrina, Bush imper-sonated FDR and Lyndon Johnson when he reassured the nation in his September 15 Jackson Square speech that “we have a duty to confront [New Orleans’s] poverty with bold action…. We will do what it takes, we will stay as long as it takes to help citizens rebuild their communities and their lives.”

In the event, the White House sat on its pledges all autumn, mumbling homilies about the limits of government, while its conservative attack dogs in Congress offset Gulf relief with $40 billion worth of cutbacks in Medicaid, food stamps and student loans. Republicans also rebelled against aid for a state that was depicted as a venal Third World society, a failed state like Haiti, out of step with national values. “Louisiana and New Orleans,” according to Idaho Senator Larry Craig, “are the most corrupt governments in our country and they always have been…. Fraud is in the culture of Iraqis. I believe that is true in the state of Louisiana as well.”

Democrats, apart from the Congressional Black Caucus, did pathetically little to counter this backlash or to hold Bush’s feet to the fire over his Jackson Square pledge. The promised national debate about urban poverty never took place; instead, New Orleans, like a great derelict ship, drifted helplessly in the treacherous currents of White House hypocrisy and conservative contempt.

An early, deadly blow was Treasury Secretary John Snow’s refusal to guarantee New Orleans municipal bonds, forcing Mayor Nagin to lay off 3,000 city employees on top of the thousands of education and medical workers already jobless. The Bush Administration also blocked bipartisan measures to increase Medicaid coverage for Katrina evacuees and to give the State of Louisiana—facing an estimated $8 billion in lost revenues over the next few years—a share of the income generated by its offshore oil and gas leases.

Even more egregious was the flagrant redlining of black neighborhoods by the Small Business Administration (SBA), which rejected a majority of loan applications by local businesses and homeowners. At the same time, a bipartisan Senate bill to save thousands of education and medical workers already jobless.

In stark contrast to its neglect of neighborhood relief, the White House has made hereucent efforts to reward its own base of large corporations and political insiders. Representative Nydia Velazquez, who sits on the House Small Business Committee, pointed out that the SBA has allowed large corporations to get $2 billion in federal contracts while excluding local minority contractors.

The paramount beneficiaries of Katrina relief aid have been the giant engineering firms KBR (a Halliburton subsidiary) and the Shaw Group, which enjoy the services of lobbyist Joe Allbaugh (a former FEMA director and Bush’s 2000 campaign manager). FEMA and the Army Corps of Engineers, while unable to explain to Governor Blanco last fall exactly how they were spending money in Louisiana, have tolerated levels of profiteering that would raise eyebrows even on the war-torn Euphrates. (Some of this largesse, of course, is guaranteed to be recycled as GOP campaign contributions.) FEMA, for example, has paid the Shaw Group $175 per square (100 square feet) to install tarps on storm-damaged roofs in New Orleans. Yet the actual installers earn as little as $2 per square, and the tarps are provided by FEMA. Similarly, the Army Corps pays prime contractors about $20 per cubic yard of storm debris removed, yet some bulldozer operators receive only $1. Every level of the contracting food chain, in other words, is grotesquely overfed except the bottom rung, where the actual work is carried out. While the Friends of Bush mine gold from the wreckage of New Orleans, many disappointed recovery workers—often Mexican or Salvadoran immigrants camped out in city parks and derelict shopping centers—can barely make ends meet.

The Big Kiss-Off

In the fractious, take-no-prisoners world of Louisiana politics, broad solidarity of interest is normally as rare as a boulder in a bayou. Yet Katrina created an unprecedented bipartisan consensus around twin demands for Category 5 hurricane protection and mortgage relief for damaged homes. From conservative Republicans to liberal Democrats, there has been unanimity that the region’s recovery depends on federal investment in new levees and coastal restoration, as well as financial rescue of the estimated 200,000 homeowners whose insurance coverage has failed to cover their actual damage. (There has been no equivalent consensus and little concern for the right of renters—who constituted 53 percent of the population before Katrina—and of public-housing tenants to return to their city.)

Yet by early November it was clear that saving New Orleans was no longer high on the Bush agenda, if it had ever been. As Congress headed toward its Christmas adjournment, the Louisiana delegation was in panic mode: A Category 5 plan had disappeared from serious discussion, and there were doubts about whether the damaged levees would be repaired before hurricane season returned. (In early March engineers monitoring the progress of the Army Corps’s work complained that the use of weak, sandy soils and the lack of concrete “arming” insured that the levees would again fail in a major storm.)

Congress ultimately voted to provide $29 billion for Gulf Coast relief. Yet as the Washington Post reported, “All but $6 billion of the measure merely reshuffled some of the $62 billion in previously approved Hurricane Katrina aid. The rest was funded by a 1 percent across-the-board cut of non-emergency, discretionary programs.” The Pentagon won approval for a whopping $4.4 billion in base repairs and other professions Katrina-related needs, but Congress cut out the $250 million allocated to combat coastal erosion. Meanwhile, Mississippi’s powerful Republican

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troika—Governor Haley Barbour and Senators Trent Lott and Thad Cochran—persuaded fellow Republicans to support $6.2 billion in discretionary housing aid for Louisiana and $5.3 billion for Mississippi, with red-state Mississippi getting five times as much aid per distressed household as pink-state Louisiana.

Louisiana received another blow on January 23, when Bush rejected GOP Representative Richard Baker's plan calling for a federally guaranteed Louisiana Reconstruction Corporation, which would bail out homeowners by buying distressed properties and packaging them in larger parcels for resale to developers. Local Republicans as well as Democrats howled in rage, and the future of southern Louisiana was again thrown into chaos. Although the Administration eventually promised an additional $4.2 billion in housing aid, the appropriation continues to be fought over by Texas and other jealous states.

The Republican hostility to New Orleans, of course, runs deeper and is nastier than mere concern with civic probity (America's most corrupt city, after all, is located on the Potomac, not the Mississippi). Underlying all the circumlocutions are the same antediluvian prejudices and stereotypes that were used to justify the violent overthrow of Reconstruction 130 years ago. Usually it is the poor who are invisible in the aftermath of urban disasters, but in the case of New Orleans it has been the African-American professional middle class and skilled working class. In the confusion and suffering of Katrina—a Rorschach test of the American racial unconscious—most white politicians and media pundits have chosen to see only the demons of their prejudices. The city's complex history and social geography have been reduced to a cartoon of a vast slum inhabited by an alternately criminal or helpless underclass, whose salvation is the kindness of strangers in other, whiter cities. Inconvenient realities like Gentilly's red-brick normalcy—or, for that matter, the pride of homeownership and the exuberance of civic activism in the blue-collar Lower Ninth Ward—have not been allowed to interfere with the belief, embraced by New Democrats as well as old Republicans, that black urban culture is inherently pathological.

Such calumnies reproduce ancient caricatures—blacks running amok, incapable of honest self-government—that were evoked by the murderous White League when it plotted against Reconstruction in New Orleans in the 1870s. Indeed, some civil rights veterans fear that the 1874 Battle of Canal Street, a bloody League-organized insurrection against a Republican administration elected by black suffrage, is being refought—perhaps without pikes and guns, but with the same fundamental aim of dispossession of New Orleans of economic and political power. Certainly, a sweeping transformation of the racial balance-of-power within the city has been on some people's agenda for a long time.

The Krewe of Canizaro

Power and status in New Orleans have always been defined by membership in secretive Mardi Gras "krewes" and social clubs. In the early 1990s civil rights activists, led by feisty Councilmember Dorothy Mae Taylor, forced the token desegregation of Mardi Gras, and some of the clubs reluctantly admitted a few African-American millionaires. Despite some old-guard holdouts, Uptown seemed to be adjusting, however grudgingly, to the reality of black political clout.

But as post-Katrina events have brutally clarified, if the oligarchy is dead, then long live the oligarchy. While elected black officials protest impotently from the sidelines, a largely white elite has wrested control over the debate about how to rebuild the city. This de facto ruling krewe includes Jim Amoss, editor of the New Orleans Times-Picayune; Pres Kabacoff, developer-gentrifier and local patron of the New Urbanism; Donald Bollinger, shipyard owner and prominent Bushite; James Reiss, real estate investor and chair of the Regional Transit Authority (i.e., the man responsible for the buses that didn't evacuate people); Alden McDonald Jr., CEO of one of the largest black-owned banks; Janet Howard of the Bureau of Government Research (originally established by Uptown elites to oppose the populism of Huey Long); and Scott Cowen, the aggressively ambitious president of Tulane University.

But the dominating figure and kingpin is Joseph Canizaro, a wealthy property developer who is a leading Bush supporter with close personal ties to the White House inner circle. He is also the power behind the throne of Mayor Nagin, a nominal Democrat (he supported Bush in 2000) who was elected in 2002 with 85 percent of the white vote. Finally, as the former president of the Urban Land Institute, Canizaro mobilizes the support of some of the nation's most powerful developers and prestigious master planners.

In a city where old money is often as recluse as Anne Rice's vampires, Canizaro poses as a brave civic leader unafraid to speak bitter but necessary truths. As he told the Associated Press about the Katrina diaspora last October: "As a practical matter, these poor folks don't have the resources to get back to our city just like they didn't have the resources to get out of our city. So we won't get all those folks back. That's just a fact."

Indeed, it is a "fact" that Canizaro has helped shape into reigning dogma. The number of displaced residents returning to the city is obviously a highly variable function of the resources and opportunities provided for them, yet the rebuilding debate has been premised on suspicious projections—provided by the RAND Corporation and endlessly repeated by Nagin and Canizaro—that in three years the city would recover only half of its August 2005 population. Many Orleanians cynically wonder whether such projections aren't actually goals. For years Reiss, Kabacoff and others have complained that New Orleans has too many poor people. Faced with the dire fiscal consequences of white flight to the suburbs, as well as three decades of deindustrialization (which has given New Orleans an economic profile closer to Newark than to Houston or Atlanta), they argue that the city has become a soul-destroying warehouse for underemployed and poorly educated African-Americans, whose real interests—it is claimed—might be better served by a Greyhound ticket to another town.

Kabacoff's 2003 redevelopment of the St. Thomas public housing project as River Garden, a largely market-rate faux Creole subdivision, has become the prototype for the smaller, wealthier, whiter city that Mayor Nagin's Bring New Orleans Back commission (with Canizaro as head of the crucial urban planning committee) proposes to build. BNOB is perhaps the most important elite initiative in New Orleans since the famous "Cold Water Committee" (which included Kabacoff's father)
Seth Tobocman, a comic-book artist, a political activist and one of the founders of the radical magazine World War Three Illustrated, traveled to New Orleans this winter to volunteer with the Common Ground collective (models for drawings: Kennitta Lindsey and Louisa Krupp).
mobilized in 1946 to overthrow the “Old Regulars” and elect reformer deLesseps Morrison as mayor. BNOB grew out of a notorious meeting between Mayor Nagin and New Orleans business leaders (dubbed by some “the forty thieves”) that Reiss organized in Dallas twelve days after Katrina devastated the city. The summit excluded most of New Orleans’s elected black representatives and, according to Reiss as characterized in the Wall Street Journal, focused on the opportunity to rebuild the city “with better services and fewer poor people.”

Fears that a municipal coup d’état was in progress were scarcely mollified when at the end of September the mayor charged BNOB with preparing a master plan to rebuild the city. Although the seventeen-member commission was racially balanced and included City Council president Oliver Thomas as well as jazz musician Wynton Marsalis (telecommuting from Manhattan), the real clout was exercised by committee chairs, especially Canizaro (urban planning), Cowen (education) and Howard (finance), who lunched privately with the mayor before the group’s weekly meeting. This inner sanctum was reportedly necessary because the full-panel meetings did not allow a frank discussion of “tough issues of race and class.”

BNOB might have quickly imploded but for a shrewd outflanking movement by Canizaro, who persuaded Nagin to invite the Urban Land Institute to work with the commission. Although the ULI is the self-interested national voice of corporate land developers, Nagin and Canizaro welcomed the delegation of developers, architects and ex-mayors as a heroic cavalry of expertise riding to the city’s rescue. In a nutshell, the ULI’s recommendations reframed the historic elite desire to shrink the city’s socioeconomic footprint of black poverty (and black political power) as a crusade to reduce its physical footprint to contours commensurate with public safety and a fiscally viable urban infrastructure.

Upon these suspect premises, the outside “experts” (including representatives of some of the country’s largest property firms and corporate architects) proposed an unprecedented triage of an American city, in which low-lying neighborhoods would be targeted for mass buyouts and future conversion into a greenbelt to protect New Orleans from flooding. As a visiting developer told BNOB: “Your housing is now a public resource. You can’t think of it as private property anymore.”

Keenly aware of inevitable popular resistance, the ULI also proposed a Crescent City Rebuilding Corporation, armed with eminent domain, that would bypass the City Council, as well as an oversight board with power over the city’s finances. With control of New Orleans schools already usurped by the state, the ULI’s proposed dictatorship of experts and elite appointees would effectively overthrow representative democracy and annul the right of local people to make decisions about their lives. For veterans of the 1960s civil rights movement, especially, it reeked of disenfranchisement pure and simple, a return to the paternalism of plantation days.

The City Council, supported by a surprising number of white homeowners and their representatives, angrily rejected the ULI plan. Mayor Nagin—truly a cat on a hot tin roof—danced anxiously back and forth between the two camps, disavowing abandonment of any area while at the same time warning that the city could not afford to service every neighborhood. But state and national officials, including HUD Secretary Alphonso Jackson, applauded the ULI scheme, as did the editorial page of the Times-Picayune and the influential Bureau of Government Research.

The Crescent City’s best-kept secret has been the resurgence of trade-union and community organizing since the mid-1990s.

On the crucial question of how to decide which neighborhoods would be allowed to rebuild and which would be bulldozed, BNOB endorsed the concept of forced buyouts but equivocated over process. Instead of the ruthless map that the Bureau of Government Research wanted, Canizaro and colleagues proposed a Rube Goldberg–like temporary building moratorium in tandem with neighborhood planning meetings that would poll homeowners about their intentions. Only those neighborhoods where at least half of the pre-Katrina residents had made a commitment to return would be considered serious candidates for Community Development Block Grants (CDBGs) and other financial aid.

Canizaro presented the report to Nagin in front of a public audience on January 11. The mayor said, “I like the plan,” and he complimented the commissioners for “a job well done.” But most locals found little charm in the Canizaro report. “I will sit in my front door with my shotgun,” one resident warned at a jammed meeting in the Council chambers on January 14, while another demanded, “Are we going to allow some developers, some hustlers, some land thieves to grab our land, grab our homes, to make this a Disney World version of our homes, our lives?” Predictably, Nagin panicked and eventually disavowed the building moratorium. Soon afterward the White House torpedoed the Baker plan and left BNOB with only the state-controlled CDBG appropriation to finance its ambitious vision of New Orleans regrouped around a dozen new River Gardens linked by a high-speed light-rail line.

But Canizaro doesn’t seem unduly worried. He has reassured supporters that the ULI/BNOB plan can go forward with CDBGs alone if necessary; in addition, he knows that independent of the local political weather, there are powerful external forces—lack of insurance coverage, new FEMA flood maps, refusal of lenders to refinance mortgages and so on—that can make permanent the exodus from redlined neighborhoods. Moreover, as anyone versed in the realpolitik of modern Louisiana knows, nothing is finally decided in New Orleans until some good ol’ boys (and girls) in Baton Rouge have their say.
Power Shift

Even before the last bloated body had been fished out of the fetid waters, conservative political analysts were writing gleeful obituaries for black Democratic power in Louisiana. “The Democrats’ margin of victory,” said Ronald Utt of the Heritage Foundation, is “living in the Astrodome in Houston.” Thanks to the Army Corps’s defective levees, the Republicans stand to gain another Senate seat, two Congressional seats and probably the governorship. The Democrats would also find it impossible to reproduce Bill Clinton’s 1992 feat, when he carried Louisiana by almost exactly his margin of victory in New Orleans. With a ruthless psephologist like Karl Rove in the White House, it is inconceivable that such considerations haven’t influenced the shameless Bush response to the city’s distress.

New Orleans has always vied with Detroit when it comes to the violent antipathy of white-flight suburbs toward its black central city, so it is not surprising that representatives from Jefferson Parish (which elected Klan leader David Duke to the state legislature in 1989) and St. Tammany Parish have particularly relished the post-Katrina shift in metropolitan population and electoral power. Both parishes are in the midst of housing booms that may consolidate the hollowing out and decline of New Orleans.

For her part, Governor Blanco, a Democrat, has expressed little concern about this fundamental reconfiguration of Louisiana’s major metropolitan area. Indeed, her immediate, Bush-like responses to Katrina were to help engineer a state takeover of New Orleans schools and to slash $500 million in state spending while sponsoring tax breaks (in the name of economic recovery) for oil companies awash in profits. The Legislative Black Caucus was outraged at Blanco’s “complete lack of vision and leadership” and went to court to challenge her right to make cuts without consulting lawmakers. But Blanco, supported by rural conservatives and corporate lobbyists, remained intransigent, even openly hostile, to black Democrats whose support she had previously courted.

Poor people have no voice inside the Louisiana Recovery Authority, whose gaggle of university presidents and corporate types appointed by Blanco is even less beholden to black New Orleans voters and their representatives than the Canizaro krewe. The twenty-nine-member LRA board, dominated by representatives of big business, has only one trade unionist and not a single grassroots black representative. Moreover, in contrast to Nagin’s commission, the LRA has the power to decide, not merely advise: It controls the allocation of the FEMA funds and CDBGs that Congress has provided for reconstruction.

According to interviews in the Times-Picayune, leading members of the LRA believe that the sheer force of economic disincentives will shrink the city around the contours proposed by the Urban Land Institute. The authority has thus refused to disburse any of its hazard mitigation funds to areas considered unsafe, and presumably will be equally hardheaded in the allocation of CDBG spending. At a special session of the legislature Governor Blanco emphasized that the state, not local government or neighborhood planning committees, will retain control over where grants and loans go.

But Blanco and the elites may have overlooked the Fats Domino factor.
Like hundreds of other flood-damaged but structurally sound homes, Fats Domino’s house wears a defiant sign: SAVE OUR NEIGHBORHOOD: NO BULLDOZING! The r&b icon, who has always stayed close to his roots in working-class Holy Cross, knows his riverside neighborhood and the rest of the Lower Ninth Ward are prime targets of the city-shrinkers. Indeed, on Christmas Day the Times-Picayune—declaring that “before a community can rebuild, it must dream”—published a vision of what a smaller-but-better New Orleans might look like: “Tourists and schoolchildren tour a living museum that includes the former home of Fats Domino and Holy Cross High School, a multiblock memorial to Katrina that spans the devastated neighborhood.”

“Living museum” (or “holocaust museum,” as a black friend bitterly observed) sounds like a bad joke, but it is the elite view of what African-American New Orleans should become. In the brave New Urbanist world of Canizaro and Kabacoff, blacks (along with that other colorful minority group, Cajuns) will reign only as entertainers and self-caricatures. The high-voltage energy that once roared juke joints, housing projects and second-line parades will now be safely embalmed for tourists in a proposed Louisiana Music Experience in the Central Business District.

But this minstrel-show version of the future must first defeat a remarkable local history of grassroots organization. The Crescent City’s best-kept secret—in the mainstream press, at least—has been the resurgence of trade-union and community organizing since the mid-1990s. Indeed, New Orleans, the only Southern city in which labor was ever powerful enough to call a general strike, has become an important crucible of new social movements. In particular, it has become the home base of ACORN, a national organization of working-class homeowners and tenants that counts more than 9,000 New Orleans member-families, mostly in triage-threatened black neighborhoods. ACORN’s membership has been the engine behind the tumultuous, decade-long struggle to unionize downtown hotels as well as the successful 2002 referendum to legislate the nation’s first municipal minimum wage (later overthrown by a right-wing state Supreme Court). Since Katrina, ACORN has emerged as the major opponent of the ULI/BNOB plan for shrinking the city. Its members find themselves again fighting many of the same elite figures who were opponents of hotel unionization and a living wage.

ACORN founder Wade Rathke scoffs at the RAND Corporation projections that portray most blacks abandoning the city. “Don’t believe those phony figures,” he told me over beignets at Cafe du Monde in January. “We have polled our displaced members in Houston and Atlanta. Folks overwhelmingly want to return. But they realize that this is a tough struggle, since we have to fight simultaneously on two fronts: to restore people’s homes and to bring back their jobs. It is also a race against time. The challenge is, You make it, you take it. So our members are voting with their feet.”

Not waiting for CDBGs, FEMA flood maps or permission from Canizaro, ACORN crews and volunteers from across the country are working night and day to repair the homes of 1,000...
member-families in some of the most threatened areas. The strategy is to confront the city-shrinkers with the incontestable fact of reoccupied, viable neighborhood cores.

ACORN has allied with the AFL-CIO and the NAACP to defend worker rights and press for the hiring of locals in the recovery effort. Rathke points out that Katrina has become the pretext for the most vicious government-supported attack on unions since President Reagan fired striking air-traffic controllers in 1981. “First, suspension of Davis-Bacon [federal prevailing wage law], then the state takeover of the schools and the destruction of the teachers’ union, and now this.” He points to a beat-up green garbage truck rattling by Jackson Square. “Trash collection in the French Quarter used to be a unionized city job, SEIU members. Now FEMA has contracted the work to a scab company from out of state. Is this what Bring New Orleans Back means?”

ACORN also went to court to insure that New Orleans’s displaced, largely black population would have access to out-of-state polling places, especially in Atlanta and Houston, for the scheduled April 22 city elections. When a federal judge rejected the demand, ACORN organizer Stephen Bradberry said it’s “so obvious that there’s a concerted plan to make this a whiter city.” The NAACP agrees, but the Justice Department denied its request to block an election that is likely to transfer power to the artificial white majority created by Katrina.

It would be inspiring to see in this latest battle of New Orleans the birth pangs of a new or renewed civil rights movement, but gritty local activism has yet to be echoed in meaningful solidarity by the labor movement, so-called progressive Democrats or even the Congressional Black Caucus. Pledges, press statements and occasional delegations, yes; but not the unflinching national outrage and sense of urgency that should attend the attempted murder of New Orleans on the fortieth anniversary of the Voting Rights Act. In 1874, as historian Ted Tunnell has pointed out, the failure of Northern Radicals to launch a militant, armed riposte to the white insurrection in New Orleans helped to doom the first Reconstruction. Will our feeble response to Hurricane Katrina now lead to the rollback of the second?

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FRESH POLITICAL VOICES FOR A PUBLIC FED UP WITH NEOLIBERALISM AND WAR.

The Emerging New Euroleft

HILARY WAINWRIGHT

Manchester

From my desk in the north of England, the grass seems considerably greener—or the poppies redder—across the water in Europe. Here in Britain political look-alikes compete frenetically for the center ground, and politicians of the radical left are sidelined by a grossly disproportionate electoral system. In contrast, Norway’s Left Socialist Party is part of the government; Italy’s radical Partito della Rifondazione Comunista (Communist Refoundation Party, or PRC) is a key player in L’Unione, the coalition that could well defeat Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi in this April’s elections; Germany’s Linkspartei (Left Party) potentially provides a new voice on the left; France’s historically fissiparous left united to give the EU constitution a resounding “No!” Ripples from this defeat of an arrogant political elite are evident in the confident way that young people presume they can block Prime Minister Villepin’s attempt to neoliberalize the French labor market.

It’s not all onward and upward. In last year’s Spanish elections the United Left lost all its seats in the Madrid Parliament, partly because it was insufficiently nimble in the face of the move

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