

How Globalization Got New Orleans's Momma And What We Can Do About It

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Why was Wal-Mart merchandise more important than saving people's lives?

Why was every foul rumor about Black people killing, raping, and destroying reported as fact? Why has the fact that New Orleans police were killing, raping, and destroying not been widely reported?

Why was the first institution immediately rebuilt in the aftermath of Katrina not a hospital, school, or information center but a jail?

I don't think these questions can be adequately answered by saying George Bush doesn't like Black people, although he sure doesn't. Or by saying FEMA, Michael Brown, Ray Nagin, Kathleen Blanco, and a host of others are incompetent, although they sure are. The answer to these questions is bigger than one person or institution. The answer is corporate globalization, more specifically neoliberalism.

For the last thirty years there has been a struggle to determine what the future of the world economy will look like. The last time such an event occurred was in the waning years of World War II. In 1944 the political leaders of the US and Europe met to lay down the expansion plan for the world economy. This meeting was officially known as the International Monetary and Financial Conference of the United & Associated Nations, but anti-globalization activists call it simply Bretton Woods since it was held in Bretton Woods, New Hampshire. The general feeling at the time was capitalism could get ugly and a social safety net was needed. In this climate the forces of social democracy basically won. Harry Dexter White's plan, written for the US treasury in 1934, formed the basis of the agreement at Bretton Woods. The countries agreed to form the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and create the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT).

Now don't think it was all over. While White was writing the plan for Roosevelt and the social democrats, another was working out the philosophy we live under today. Friedrich von Hayek at the University of Chicago was and is a hero of neoliberalism. Mentor to Milton Friedman, von Hayek laid the foundation for the philosophy that is kicking the ass of workers and poor people around the world. In the 1970s when the economy was in deep recession, neoliberalism really took off. In the wake of mass movements making significant gains, including the racial integration of the social safety net, the elite hit upon a "brilliant" idea: destroy the safety net. The recession of the 70s allowed the elite to restructure the economy and promote a neoliberal agenda. We've been living with the consequences ever since.

Neoliberalism is a philosophy, a vision of what the world should look like. Its main points are rule of the "free" market, limited (if any) social spending, deregulation, privatization, and increased political and military dominance. For the last thirty years or so all plans put out by the US political and economic elite have followed those principles. What passes for policy debate in most elections is little more than editing of a pre-approved plan.

That's what hit New Orleans, and it hit long before August 29. Hurricane Katrina didn't cause the devastation, it revealed it. The devastation happened when funds that could have been used to support the levees were diverted to military spending, when a 6,000+ bed prison was operating in the middle of the city, when public transportation for tourists instead of poor people was a priority, when FEMA was slashed with the assumption that the Red Cross and other charities would pick up the slack, and countless other times.

To win the battle over the rebuilding of New Orleans, we can't just focus on the rebuilding of New Orleans. We have to develop and push for our own vision of what the world should look like. This development can't just happen in New Orleans, and it sure can't happen by joining

Food Not Bombs for a week. We have to fight the battle over what our own communities should look like. Yes another world is possible, but what does it look like? We can't just imagine a world where the beer is free and the boss has to get a job. We also have to have a plan for how the buses are going to run.

There are no short cuts and no easy answers. Our task ahead is to build community-controlled organizations that, regardless of the issues being worked on, express an open opposition to neoliberalism. This opposition isn't just no to neoliberalism; it's about articulating and building on common collective values. Based on these values we build strategies that insure the marginalized have power in our own lives. Notice I said strategies. A march is not a strategy. It's a tactic. Explaining how a march builds power and uses that power is a strategy. It's long past time the US left learned the difference.

In fact, most of the US left is struggling with what the hell we're supposed to do come Monday morning. No matter what the strategy or strategies for struggle, I think there are two principles that are central.

Organize Where the Relationships Are

Bring the Ruckus has been working closely with FFLIC (Families & Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children) since almost immediately after Katrina. Although a small organization, our impact on this work has been great because we've focused on relationships we built long before Katrina. Through personal relationships built through common work we were able to quickly provide organizing help. Almost all of our members were able to provide support by working where they live because a strategy was built based on existing relationships. This proved to be extremely effective. More than 75 volunteers in more than 20 cities distributed thousands of flyers and conducted scores of interviews in only a couple of weeks. The volunteers used the relationships they already had created; all we did was link this network of relationships. I firmly believe this is the most effective way to truly build a mass base capable of defeating neoliberalism.

Create a Space Where Democracy Can Happen

From now on most of the Katrina organizing should probably focus on helping displaced people create their own structures. The experience of an institution run and controlled by "the common folk" is not widespread in this country. People who've had direct experience in making decisions about their own future are better organizers, regardless of the outcome. I think we should be focusing on helping build these structures and learning the lessons from them.

Remember Hurricane Ivan in 2004? There are still people living in shelters. While it's possible that privatization efforts will close the shelters permanently this time around, the struggle of displaced people is just beginning. This fight is going to go on for a while and we have to be strong in every round.

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