

“Finding” America

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Before you read any further, let us suggest that you do a Kanye West. That doesn't just mean speaking the truth about President Bush. Words alone would be cheap here. It means calling your agent and telling them to send a big donation to grassroots organizations re-building.

Don't have an agent? We'll do their work and list several organizations for you. You can figure out how to send the check, money order or electronic funds transfer:

- Friends and Families of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children (FFLIC).
- Common Ground.
- People's Hurricane Relief Fund.

If you know of similar organizations in Southeast Asia doing work after the tsunami and the recent earthquake, we would commend you for sending help in those directions. This website is not written for liberals, meaning those who think that sufficient money given to the “proper” groups will make a difference. It is written for radicals and revolutionaries in the United States who understand that fundamental shifting of power and restructuring of societies are necessary and that 501(c)3 organizations will not be the social forces effecting those changes.

But, in these circumstances, when groups that have been working for years to bring about those power shifts have been devastated, sending funds is an act of solidarity, not charity. To cite the experience of only one, FFLIC, after their offices in New Orleans were destroyed by Hurricane Katrina, their new facilities in Lake Charles, Louisiana, were destroyed by Hurricane Rita. Some of their leadership have been forced to move twice in the last fifty days and are still living in motel rooms. They have not yet located all of their membership, much less the members' families in prison. Grassroots groups all over southern Mississippi and Louisiana suffered similar fates.

Now read on with a clear conscience.

Bring the Ruckus members have visited evacuee camps and re-settlement centers in several states. We have talked with several hundred evacuees while attempting to gather information for FFLIC and get information on contacting incarcerated family members to the evacuees scattered around the South.

If the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) estimates (posted in USA Today, 9/28/05) are to be believed—and those statistics are most likely to be reliable, since they are based on

applications for aid—then over 1.3 million households are displaced. Given that we saw families ranging up to ten people crammed into RVs in the camp, it is reasonable to say that over two million people are now scattered across the U.S., mainly within 250 miles of New Orleans, in cities such as Houston, Mobile, Atlanta and other southern towns.

It should be emphasized that no one, whether in FEMA or the Red Cross or any news agency, has an accurate number for the evacuees. Due to the criminal levels of incompetence within FEMA, widely acknowledged at every level of society, many families have not checked back in with the agency, especially after their initial interview. Undocumented workers in many cases never checked in, knowing what likely awaited them. Someday in the not-too-distant future, you will be moved to tears, when a hip hop artist or playwright somehow taps into one of those FEMA interviews with an over-worked bureaucrat listening to an evacuee describe how their life and family has been destroyed, then handing them a fistful of forms and then proceeding to tell them that no, the debit cards will not be issued further and no, their rent will not be covered and no, no and more no's.

Despite their official posturing, the Red Cross does not know how to contact hundreds of thousands of people or even where they are. In Alabama the head official had no idea how many people were sited in the state's parks or had sought shelter with church groups. The widely touted website for finding family members is not accessible for a large portion of evacuees who did not use the Internet before Katrina, have not been trained in accessing it in the months since and, in any case, there are few laptops and no free wireless in the parks of rural Alabama and Arkansas.

When one Bay Area Ruckus member sought assistance in locating families with children in the correctional system of Louisiana, they were advised by a Red Cross official in San Francisco to "leave this to the professionals. When grass-roots groups get involved they're likely to mess it up." As almost every non-Red Cross volunteer we talked to made clear: if they had waited for FEMA or the Red Cross to take steps, there would still be evacuees stuck in the Superdome waiting for food, water and shelter. And, of course, nowhere has the Red Cross provided information on the tens of thousands of prisoners located somewhere in Louisiana. POWs (except those in Gitmo Bay) are guaranteed better treatment than a sixteen-year-old who was awaiting trial on August 28, 2005 in New Orleans.

(Lest this be read as criticisms of individual Red Cross personnel, we have none. The volunteers we meet in camps and centers were some of the nicest people one could imagine. The institutional racism and homophobia of the Red Cross is being held up to the light of day in a number of articles that are just now appearing in mainstream media).

There is now a diaspora in the United States, and it is not yet clear whether, like those who fled the Dust Bowl in the 1930s, most of the evacuees will attempt to settle where they are or where they can go soon or return to the communities they were driven from.

This has consequences for the political battle that is now taking place in New Orleans and for coming political battles in the U.S. In a dreary repeat of the Great Flood of 1927, a small group of thirteen men representing the ruling class is meeting almost daily to decide the fate of New Orleans. Within a month or two we can expect the cover of Business Week to be touting, "How New Orleans Will Be Rebuilt." But right now it is not clear that any other social force is ready or able to put forth a contending vision and fight for it. Certainly without the backing of the dispersed population, no one can claim to represent an organized alternative. Despite some divisions within the ruling class (for example, those representing petrochemical corporations are

not as concerned with the clean-up of the toxic sludge that covers every inch of New Orleans as those representing entertainment and casinos), some of their decisions are apparent even now from news reports. The mayor of New Orleans, who sits on the group deciding the city's future, announced that half of the city's workers have been laid off. This announcement came just a day or two ahead of the news story that over 200,000 cars will need to be hauled from within New Orleans and compacted, a task that is supposed to take a year, given the ten crews currently assigned.

What are we to make of this? First, a sense of outrage should grab anyone when they realize that transportation was available for every single person who got caught within New Orleans by Katrina, including the over 1,000 who were killed there. Brand-new cars that were sitting on lots as well as empty city buses are now filled with sludge and inoperable, good only for recycling, when they could have been driven out of the city. Second, while towing vehicles is not an unskilled job, how many of the thousands of city workers who are being laid off could be trained in a week to drive a flat-bed or operate a tow truck?

Like the decision to keep the police on salary—after all, there are still houses to be looted and Black people to be beaten—it is clear that the cleaning and re-building of New Orleans will be conducted in such a slow and deliberate manner as to guarantee that most of its population will not be able to return, since they will have neither a place to live nor a source of income in the next year.

This then, justifies FEMA's announced plan to prepare for five-year encampments. While on the one hand that announcement appears to be a milestone of preparation and wisdom given FEMA's track record, on the other hand it means an abandonment of the city and surrounding areas to re-population by those who were living there in late August 2005. Of the 1.3 million households scattered from Alabama to Alaska, how many can afford to wait five years for the chance to return to a city where there may be no jobs, social services have just been slashed to non-existence, schools are not operating, and the neighborhoods that provided them with community and culture may exist only as a Disney park? How many, except those that have no other option, will choose to live in an RV in an encampment where armed strangers (FEMA, state troopers, park rangers and/or city police) will be able to come in at any time without a warrant since, after all, it is a government-owned residence on government property.

While not all of the evacuees will end up in the encampments, the dispersal of them in church groups and rural areas has led to their dismissal as a political and social force by those who are planning the new New Orleans. After all, social movements in the U.S. know from bitter experience that unless you are willing to show up at a government office or factory gate with hundreds or thousands of people behind you, any skilled official or bureaucrat or boss can dismiss your demand with a simple: "You ain't got no support."

This is the problem facing those who are contending with the ruling class of Louisiana and the South and the U.S. In order for the people to be heard, the people must speak. While the attempts by Community/Labor United to rally forces, both with the Peoples' Hurricane Fund and their organizing efforts, deserve the support of all progressive and radical forces in the U.S., there are some steps that should be obvious to all of us.

The first is simple and crucial. In every area where large groups of evacuees exist, efforts must be made to give them a place where they can speak without FEMA oversight. In the Bay Area, speak-outs were held in Oakland within a few weeks after Katrina. In other areas, tens of thousands of Katrina evacuees exist and could begin to meet and talk outside the boundaries

established by those with guns and forms. If for no other reason, forums on the forthcoming February elections could be held and centers for absentee balloting established.

This step would allow those who have the most compelling criticisms of U.S. capitalism within the U.S. to put them before the world. It would also insure that the questions that are being raised by others in their name are actually voiced by those who suffered. While Minister Louis Farrakhan of the Nation of Islam may be raising fundamental questions about the racism that pervades the “rescue” efforts when he claims that explosives were used to destroy the levees surrounding New Orleans, Malik Rahim from Algiers asserts that “the only explosive they used was greed.” The questions raised by Mike Davis in his “25 Questions about the Murder of New Orleans” are an act of solidarity, but they are far more compelling when they come from those who were inside the Superdome or living in an encampment—and many of those same questions are being raised there.

While there are numerous acts of solidarity that can be undertaken by organizers in New York City and Los Angeles, speaking for the evacuees is not one. Just as in the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee’s self-creation over forty years ago, when one organizer successfully demanded that only those who had gone to jail be allowed to vote on strategy for the organization, so it is the case that only those who lived and worked and suffered in New Orleans and Mississippi should be speaking for the evacuees.

Second, as raised by FFLIC and every other social justice group in Louisiana, the only functioning institution in Louisiana is the corrections system. It is functioning to incarcerate those who were arrested before Katrina and those who were arrested in attempts to survive during Katrina and the aftermath. Yet it is not cooperating in listing the names of the prisoners who are alive and accounted for, whether they are children or adults. Every group that can raise its voice should join in demanding that all the tens of thousands of prisoners be accounted for immediately. The long Southern tradition of losing prisoners when the levee breaks must be stopped.

And finally, we want to endorse, with some small changes, the words of Texas Governor Rick Perry, when he was preparing the people of Texas for Hurricane Rita, as reported in Time. The head of Texas Children’s Medical Hospital informed him that they had to break into a warehouse to “liberate a huge load of meat patties.” The governor told them, “Don’t ask permission, ask forgiveness.”

This should be the call for amnesty for all who “found” necessary supplies in the last weeks and are now facing criminal charges. But we should not be forgiving any of the survivors of Katrina; we should be honoring them.

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This is a discussion document from Bring the Ruckus. It draws on the work from several individuals, but should not be seen as an official statement of the organization. M. Treloar is a member of Bring the Ruckus. He recently returned from Alabama, where he met with hundreds of Hurricane Katrina evacuees.

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