



U.S. LABOR AGAINST THE WAR

Katrina: *The War at Home and the War Abroad*

December 3, 2005

A central point in the USLAW founding Mission Statement calls for the *“redirecting of the nation’s resources from military spending to meeting the needs of working families for health care, education, a clean environment, housing and a decent standard of living based on principles of equality and democracy.”* We believe that providing for the well being of our people is the first principle of national security.

Hurricane Katrina was a disastrous natural event, but the massive tragic impact of the storm was largely the result (and failure) of political processes, not merely the inevitable consequence of a natural disaster. Protecting our citizens from natural disasters is simply not a national priority for the Bush Administration.

Three months after Hurricane Katrina struck in September of 2005, the relationship between the war in Iraq and the devastating implications of what we call the war at home, against our own people, is crystal clear.

Funding for War, Not for Social Programs

Since Katrina struck more than \$15 Billion has been spent fighting the war in Iraq, while the US and Iraqi death toll continues to grow dramatically. Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands of Gulf Coast residents are without decent housing, jobs and any hope for the future.

While federal funding during the past several years was cut for levee protection, as well as for all the social programs needed by people in New Orleans and Mississippi, at least 1.7 billion of Louisiana federal tax dollars, including \$151.6 million from New Orleans taxpayers alone, was spent on the war in Iraq, pre-Katrina. As billions in tax money continues to flow into Iraq, Congress is seeking to pay for reconstruction while avoiding even deeper deficits by cutting social programs for the poor across the US.

The LA and MS National Guard had more than a third of their troops in Iraq and much of the badly needed vehicles and equipment was unavailable in New Orleans because it was in Iraq. Meanwhile, as the flood waters were rising, citizens spent days sitting on rooftops, dying in abandoned nursing homes and hospitals, and warehoused in athletic field houses that were operated more like prison camps than emergency rescue shelters.

In June 2004, Emergency Management Chief for Jefferson Parish, LA said: “It appears that the money has been moved in the President’s budget to handle homeland security and the war in Iraq and I suppose that is the price we pay”. Requests for additional \$250M for Army Corp of Engineers levee work in the Delta went unmet prior to the hurricane.

Profits Flowing from War and Disasters

Just as we have privatized much of the war in Iraq, enriching the Halliburtons and Bechtels profiteers of the world, so too after Katrina we see the Halliburtons and Bechtels receiving huge no-bid contracts to build camps for rescue workers, to rebuild military installations and the oil industry, and to begin the reconstruction of the entire region. Small local businesses have been left standing in line. Even the notorious Blackwater Security firm that has made a fortune in Iraq and Afghanistan was on the ground patrolling the streets of New Orleans within a week of the hurricane.

Sadly, corporate America now has a deep investment in war and disaster – it’s good for business. The stock market rose slightly following Katrina even though energy costs were catapulted to new highs. What’s good for business in this case is not what’s good for the country and our people.

The under-funded and flagrantly mismanaged Federal Emergency Management Agency has itself been declared a disaster area. FEMA has been militarized as a neglected subsidiary in the Homeland Security Department. Millions are spent promoting the War on Terror with flashing neon signs asking the public to beware of suspicious looking people, while FEMA is weakened in its ability to respond to both foreseeable as well as unpredictable national emergencies.

If ever there was a role for the public sector, it is in preparing for and responding to natural disaster. But, just as 9/11 was used as a pretext by Bush, often with some Democratic support, to undercut our civil liberties and militarize our Federal budget, Hurricane Katrina is being used as an opportunity to promote the right-wing agenda of privatization, school vouchers, no-bid contracts, and removing minority set asides and affirmative action in Federal contracts. It took a national campaign, with strong union backing, to force the Bush administration to restore the wage protections provided by the Davis-Bacon (prevailing wage) Act for Federal spending in the Gulf reconstruction, after initially removing them. The Republicans see it as another opportunity to push the country deeper into the private profit-seeking abyss...or as rightwing ideologue Grover Norquist has put it, to “shrink government down to the point where I can drag it into the bathroom and drown it in the bathtub.”

Attacks on the Public Sector and Workers’ Rights

At the same time the US government has set the stage for a massive privatization of Iraq, undermining their large public sector and setting the stage for foreign corporate control. While debate rages about whether Bush and Congress had correct intelligence about WMD in Iraq and political leaders claim the US should stay in Iraq to help the Iraqis create a democracy, the real motives of the war remain unchanged: control of Iraq’s oil resources, the removal of Hussein as political opponent of US policy in the Middle East, and the

establishment of a permanent military force in an Iraq governed by a compliant regime.

In Iraq, the massive reconstruction funds have gone not to the poor and unemployed, but rather to foreign contractors and imported workers. Sadly, to this day, Saddam Hussein's anti-union law remains on the books and unfettered labor rights, the cornerstone of any democratic society, remain an unfulfilled aspiration of Iraqi workers. Under Bush's massive privatization plans, the right to organize independent unions is far from assured in a future Iraq. Working people in both Gulfs need good jobs at good wages with their rights as workers protected.

One of the fundamental questions to address right now is in whose interest will New Orleans and the devastated Gulf Coast area, as well as Iraq be rebuilt? How will the hundreds of billions of taxpayer dollars be spent and who will make the decisions? In the US we have all witnessed decades of "Urban Removal" in which poor neighborhoods are leveled and rebuilt for more prosperous and generally much whiter interests. In Iraq we see a devastated nation deeply in debt and dependent on US and international financial support, including the IMF and World Bank, in order to recover. The average Iraqi is vehemently opposed to privatizing the economy.

In both Iraq and New Orleans we need massive public works programs such as seen throughout the US during the New Deal, not overpriced corporate contractors. Local people, both black and white, need good jobs at good wages, under safe working conditions with their rights as workers protected. They need to be fully involved in all the planning decisions about the future of their communities.

Racism

Lastly, and very profoundly, the issue of racism permeates our government's policies in both areas. Iraqi civilian deaths are not even counted—in New Orleans black corpses were left to rot and citizens were sheltered under conditions Reverend Jesse Jackson compared to the holds of slave ships. The death and destruction of the Gulf had a distinctly racial character based on years of racial oppression and the resulting inequality, leaving the largely African American population of New Orleans with a 28% poverty rate. Iraqis still suffer from 50% plus unemployment almost 3 years after the invasion. Although the administration announced it was waiving affirmative action requirements for federal contracts for the rebuilding, military recruiters have been seen increasing their activities in all the areas where displaced Gulf Coast families are living. The message: Black people are good

Conclusion

We have deep and fundamental problems here in the US that need to be addressed. The war in Iraq has been a costly and deadly diversion. We need to leave Iraq and the Persian Gulf, support the Iraqis' efforts to reconstruct their nation on their own terms, and use the billions of dollars from the war effort to create massive rebuilding programs to benefit the poor and homeless on the Gulf Coast and other underserved areas of the US. If there is one silver lining to these disasters at home and abroad, it may be that the winds that swept through the Gulf in the U.S. and winds of war in the Middle East will sweep through the White House and Congress and lead to a radical change in the political landscape of America. USLAW is committed to being fully involved in promoting and making that change.

enough to fight in foreign wars but don't deserve a fair shot at rebuilding their own communities. The message to Iraqis: your life does not have the same value as an American life.

In a further parallel, while many thousands of unemployed Gulf Coast workers are desperate for work, private contractors are bringing in large numbers of undocumented Mexican and Central American workers, and subjecting them to abuse, dangerous working conditions and crass exploitation. Meanwhile, despite massive unemployment in Iraq, Halliburton and others are bringing in thousands of African and Asian workers who are being paid 45 cents an hour and our subject to continual mistreatment and oppression.

Katrina Solidarity

USLAW will speak out publicly about the links between the disaster in the Gulf Coast and the war in Iraq, will participate in public forums on these issues and will seek in other ways, consistent with our basic mission, to support people on the ground in the Gulf Coast to rebuild their lives and their communities.

USLAW supports the efforts of the People's Hurricane Relief Fund/Community Labor United and other community-based groups and organizations led by people of color in the Gulf that seek to rebuild their communities on pro-people principles.

We Support Gulf Coast Community Demands* for:

- ▶ The right of the people of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, with government support, to return to their homes and their communities and participate fully in reconstruction.
- ▶ Those most affected by Hurricane Katrina must be part of the planning process for the rebuilding of their communities, which includes representation on all boards that are making decisions on spending public dollars for relief and reconstruction.
- ▶ Good jobs, at good wages and under safe working conditions, for the displaced workers and residents of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast as they rebuild their communities.
- ▶ Transparency in the entire reconstruction process.
- ▶ A massive influx of public funds to reconstruct the Gulf Coast using the 1930s New Deal model.

(*People's Hurricane Relief Fund:
<http://cluonline.live.radicaldesigns.org>)

