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Katrina: Direct Action vs. Government Guns

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Imagine an alternative Hurricane Katrina scenario where progressives, firefighters and nurses are in power. They can effectively respond to disaster in ways that the US government cannot. While the natural disaster might not have been avoided, the humanitarian disaster could have been largely prevented.

Firefighters are paid to be trained, supplied, coordinated and ready to jump at moments' notice in anticipation of possible disaster. We even pay them to go to false alarms, which are expensive

Health care workers such as nurses also spend most of their time taking care of simple and non-emergency cases. Yet they are prepared to handle critical emergencies, care for their patients as human beings, and are health advocates - counselling illness prevention.

It is progressives with their principles of equality that work to eliminate poverty and racism as a structural necessity that can prioritize people instead of inequality.

In the dry Algiers section of New Orleans, community activist Malik Rahim demanded opening empty schools, churches and centers to evacuees. His mosque became a first aid clinic. Progressive organization Move On! called for Americans to open up their houses to evacuees - a humane and sensible option. Meanwhile the government housed military personnel in luxury New Orleans hotels and spacious 'tent cities' with full facilities. They and the Red Cross evacuated poor, homeless survivors across the country and into crowded, dangerous, militarized shelters. Crowded shelters spread more diseases than the natural disaster.

Despite the need for a civil humanitarian response, the government's rescue operation has been a massive show of security forces with New Orleans resembling Baghdad. FEMA (The Federal Emergency Management Association), folded into the post 9-11 super Department of Homeland Security, disregarded concrete threats of natural disasters which was its original mandate, concentrating on imagined terrorist threats.

To understand the federal response to Katrina, you need to understand its activity as a continuation of post 9-11 and the Iraq occupation: to militarize and privatize; promote the menace of crime and terrorism; intimidate the population while eviscerating social services, minority and worker rights.

Nevertheless, effective progressive community-based responses have emerged. In the mostly poor black community of Algiers New Orleans, a call-out from progressive community organizers with *Common Ground was met by volunteers providing relief and home repairs to survivors, and by action-medics who established a free health clinic. Public health officials acknowledge that the clinic now staffed by volunteer health professionals, has out-performed

other state and private clinics in the storm-battered region. Supported by a variety of national progressive organizations, Common Ground is building a nucleus of community-controlled social infrastructure that is both efficient and essential. Meanwhile, as clinics and hospitals run short-staffed or close for lack of staff, the Feds echoing the Louisiana government are now telling volunteer health workers they are no longer needed.

Government agencies and military units organized for terrorism and combat have been ineffective, and scary for the hurricane survivors. Security forces occupied New Orleans sweeping the streets with patrols - but the streets were not being swept of fetid garbage. Humvees were brought in while garbage trucks were kept out. They, the Red Cross, the media and the many charities treated the majority black and survivors as charity problems or even domestic criminal "insurgents" to be controlled, not people to be in solidarity with. We have witnessed countless frightening examples of these agencies dominated by middle class white managers treating poor survivors with disrespect and disappearing them across the U.S. without support or identification. Meanwhile, the Red Cross never missed an opportunity to advertise for donations to itself for hurricane relief.

Most of the flooded and destroyed houses of New Orleans are in poor black neighborhoods. Presently, a thinly disguised campaign of ethnic cleansing is being implemented: Damaged houses in New Orleans are being painted with X's by FEMA. A Green X means the house is habitable and its residents can stay. If your house gets a Red X, you must be out of it by curfew, and must LEAVE the Orleans Parish if you can't find another place to stay. Intentionally, the government is NOT providing local temporary shelter for these New Orleans residents forced out of their city.

Various levels of government have committed their share of racist and criminal acts- i.e. The Sheriff's Department of the largely white middle class Jefferson Parish blocked ill survivors from accessing a major nearby hospital geared up to treat them. They shot over the heads of escaping survivors from New Orleans on a bridge preventing their evacuation into their parish. Yet the same sheriff previously provided busses for people fleeing -but clamped down when a few evacuees committed crimes. Two days after the flooding, the Feds called for a massive boat rescue - then prevented the three hundred volunteer Cajun boaters who were the most efficient water rescuers from launching their boats.

These were not conspiracies - it was business as usual of how America treats black and poor people.

As super agencies forced emergency crews to wait a week in Atlanta and other far off places before they could arrive, community organizations and activists welcomed help that got through. Independent rescue boaters disregarded authorities and took to the water. Churches used their resources and networks to provide support. Members of military units and large bureaucracies sought ways to cut red-tape and do the right thing. A pattern emerges of thousands of competent people and groups only able to help by sidestepping official agencies and rules that obstruct and frustrate rescue and relief efforts.

Within this dynamic, tactical alliances formed across political divisions.

Members of the Army 82nd Airborne in Algiers brought patients and medical supplies to our health clinic they called the "Black Panther Clinic". The California National Guard asked us to staff another clinic they opened up, and offered to protect us from the New Orleans police and corrupt city councillors. The Sewage and Water Treatment Authority come to us for care, and house our staff at a FEMA-run tent city.

We proved there are principled ways of caring for each other that effectively counter manmade disasters. Progressive, community initiatives strive to maintain a "People-First" principle. We develop 'collective' organizational models that build multi-directional communication networks and flexible decision-making. Moreover, the lesson from Katrina is that despite the reputation of agencies, one always works with individuals. A little respect goes a long way, and initiative, persistence and direct-action can trump bureaucracy and corruption.

Models and principles that work:

Social politics of equality and dignity for all so that disaster victims do not become doubly class or race victims.

Supporting the communities to survive and rebuild as they see fit.

A simple and effective prevention and rescue model that builds on and mobilizes the voluntarism and good will of intrepid people.

A flexible organizational structure that facilitates networking with autonomous activity.

Selection of coordinators that are competent, not friends of those in power.

Aid to groups and organizations --community, cultural, religious, etc.-- that have a working history and a giving spirit to do the right thing.

Goals:

No one left behind. All treated with dignity. The right of survivors to return and live in a community under their control.

Until we become a society that cares for everyone, then any disaster affecting large numbers of poor people and minorities will always be a humanitarian disaster. We must stop waiting for government to change and take direct action to create the society they need.

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