OTHER STORM: WORKER INJURY AND EXPLOITATION IN THE GULF COAST POST KATRINA
KATRINA, THEN AND NOW—Part II

By Jaribu Hill
American Public Health Association Annual Meeting
Monday, November 9, 2009
Philadelphia, PA

In October, 2005, just two months after Hurricane Katrina ravaged the Gulf Coast region, I was invited to participate on a "post-Katrina" panel organized by the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights. The testimony I presented was entitled: Katrina, Then and Now. My comments primarily focused on the racial inequities found at various points of recovery in the storm-torn region. To place the comments I offer today in a more proper context, I invite you to read Part I.

> ***"Where Justice is denied, where poverty is enforced, where ignorance prevails and where any one class is made to feel that society is an organized conspiracy to oppress, rob and degrade them, neither persons or property will be safe."***
>
> Frederick Douglass

When Frederick Douglass uttered those words more than 100 years ago, who would have imagined Douglass's words would ring so true in the 21st Century. While there is no doubt that Hurricane Katrina brought to light long-standing problems of race and class disparities in the U.S., those who were victims of race and class oppression before the storm, wonder what took everyone else so long to see these harsh social realities. Workers who had worked in segregated workplaces throughout the course of their years of employment, were not shocked to find themselves assigned to the most dangerous and dirtiest of all post-storm jobs in their plants. Thrown once again into the bottom of the bottom, these workers were used to the "same old, same old." Naturally,

when personal clothing and equipment were distributed in their workplaces, rife with fallen electrical wiring, chemical and oil spills and mounds of debris, they were the last to be afforded such protective gear. In many cases, they were not afforded such protections at all. Here is one graphic example of what I call the "caution danger, employees only" syndrome:

> Within days after Katrina (on or about September 6, 2005), employees at a certain Gulf Coast factory, were ordered back to work. The local cable TV crawler called for all employees, regardless of previous shift assignments, to immediately return to work. Because of greed and the quest for profit at all cost and without any regard for the safety of its workforce, the company brought its employees back to work in a dimly-lit plant, powered only by generator light. Employees suffered injuries from trips, slips and falls. Some were victims of electrical shocks, while others were unable to complete assigned tasks because they simply couldn't see what they were doing. Add to the stress of working under such impossible conditions the trauma and anxiety brought on by the displacement and/or death of their family members and the loss of their homes and possessions, you clearly had what could only be described as the "walking wounded." We have documented cases where workers' subsequently died because of complications related to pre-existing health conditions.

The "storm" cannot be blamed for certain failures on the part of government agencies to provide safety and health protections for its most vulnerable workers. Housekeepers, known to some as "domestic" workers were not covered by OSHA before the storm and in 2009, they still are not covered. They belong to the elite class of workers that includes farm workers, who also are not covered by OSHA. Hotel and

restaurant workers were among the lowest paid workers before and after Katrina and in 2009, they still are. Immigrant workers are among the forgotten and most abused. This next story graphically illustrates this point:

> When the storm began to pound away on the Gulf Coast region, a group of women employed as housekeepers at one of the area casinos were among those counted as "missing and presumed dead." These 65 women, believed to be of Caribbean or African dissent, were driven to and from work by their employer. On "storm" day, nobody came for them. Labor union officials and other concerned citizens, searched for the women. They were never found.
>
> Slavery was that diabolical system that demanded work without compensation. It forced its captives to suffer in silence or be whipped or lynched. The auction block insured families would be divided-- children were separated from their parents and husbands were separated from their wives. The concept of kinship was systematically destroyed. Not since that time have we seen a more disturbing example of inhumane treatment and familial destruction; however, some might argue, that the season of storms has had a similarly devastating impact upon its victims. They too have lost family members, have been separated from their children and driven from the only homes they knew. The difference between this "season of storms" and the peculiar institution of slavery, is two-fold: 1) Slavery was abolished and declared illegal and 2) We now live in the richest country in the world and despite this fact, developing countries like the Honduras, can boast of having a more humane system in place to insure swift and effective recovery when a natural disaster strikes.

Low wage workers and workers of color never have been afforded human rights in the United States. From the fight for a living wage to the battle being fought for more workers' compensation benefits for injured workers, Mississippi low wage workers fight to maintain their dignity, while trying to feed their families. They fight for safe workplace conditions and equal employment opportunities. They did so before Katrina, Rita and Gustav and will continue to do so, until justice comes.

After Katrina, those in the business of exploiting workers did not waste any time in seeking to relax and/or set aside regulations and standards enacted to protect them. The first assault was levied against the Davis Bacon Act. This Act insures construction employers will pay the prevailing wage. While this assault was in play, other employers seized every opportunity to exploit the exploited. Immigrant workers, who worked long hours under horrific conditions that often included physical assaults, were robbed of their wages. Vicki Cintra, an organizer from the Mississippi Immigrants Rights Alliance, led the fight to recover thousands of dollars in stolen wages. Violators were forced to "pay up." When employers refused to provide protective clothing and equipment, groups like the Advocates for Environmental Human Rights, stepped in to provide protective gear for workers working in life-threatening situations. My own organization provided hours of safety and health training for low wage workers and partnered with the U.S. Human Rights Network to organize a week-long Media Center in observance of the First Anniversary of Katrina. Over the course of that week, we heard the stories of workers who lost their lives, were seriously injured and those who lost their livelihoods. Interviews, video footage, still photography and oral

testimony, documented the suffering. The lack of governmental accountability and the callous disregard displayed by key officials, including Mississippi's governor, also were documented.

Four years later, workers still labor without making a livable wage and cannot afford their employer's health insurance benefits package. They work in segregated workplaces. They work in racially hostile environments. Their overtime wages are stolen by their employers. Many are not paid for their labor. All of this went on before Katrina, Rita and Gustav and still goes today.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

We must resist the urge to close ranks and remain in narrow silos. We must fight the urge to engage in turf wars.

Demand inclusion in all decision-making regarding recovery and worker protections

Urge legislators to increase workers' compensation benefits for Mississippi workers

Support government paid health screenings for Gulf Coast workers in Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama and Florida

Call upon Congress to set up a health program for Gulf Coast workers in Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama and Florida

Support the movement for a National Living Wage to insure the health and prosperity of all working people

Support OSHA protection for Farm and Domestic workers and all others without protection

Hold teach-ins in low wage worker communities to provide safety and health training and organizing support

Hold legal and health clinics to assess possible liability/claims for relief

Strong coalitions of labor, health, faith, youth, parent, legal and economic development organizations must be formed. A uniform demand must be made to insure immediate attention will be paid to the plight of Mississippi Gulf Coast's low wage workers. The same attention must be paid to all workers whose labor is being exploited in the aftermath of the storm. From New Orleans to Mississippi Gulf Coast to Alabama's Coastal region to Florida, we must speak in one voice to demand an end to "Jim Crow" recovery . Full equity and just recovery must be the watch words as we go forward.

Recommended reading:

Mississippi still struggles a year after Hurricane Katrina
Richard Muhammad, StraightWords E-Zine;
straightwords.typepad.com/straightwords_ezine/2006/08/indes.html

Workers' Rights in New Orleans, submitted by Cat Dodson, 8/02/06
Unitarian Universalist Service Committee,
www.uusc.org/category/blog_subject/hurricane_katrina

Katrina, Then and Now, Testimony by Jaribu Hill, Mississippi Workers' Center For Human Rights, workersrights@bellsouth.net; www.msworkerscenter.org

StraightWords E-Zine

An independent alternative source of original domestic and international news, opinion, observation and analysis.

Mississippi still struggles a year after Hurricane Katrina

By Richard Muhammad

The one-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina brought the focus back to New Orleans, but Gulf Coast communities in Mississippi still struggle to get attention and help for areas swept away by last summer's deadly super storm.

"We have been so overshadowed. In Mississippi, we have total neighborhoods that have been just completely wiped off the map. Not even streets were left," said Cynthia Seawright Wright, who lives in Ocean Springs, Miss. Before the hurricane, she lived in Escawtapa, Miss. Driving around nearby Gulfport and Biloxi, Miss., after the storm, she couldn't find her way around areas she'd known all her life. Most apartment buildings were destroyed, Seawright Wright said.

"We are still living in trailers that are meant for you to live in for a few days," said Darneice Williams, who is raising her granddaughter Brianna with her son deployed in Iraq. (Shown in photo at left) Her son has not been allowed to come to Mississippi to tend to his family because the Army does not want him "injured" trying to help rebuild, she said.
Meanwhile, Williams said she was diagnosed with severe liver damage from drinking dirty water in the FEMA trailers. "I need to talk to someone, I need psychological help, I cannot get it,
I don't know what to do," she said.

"There is still such a long way to go and still a lot of work to be done," commented Rev. George Rouse, pastor of Missionary Baptist Church in Gulfport, Miss. He and other faith-based leaders and churches are renovating and putting survivors back in their homes. He hasn't seen a lot of federal government help. About 1 in 10 people knocked out of their homes are back inside, he said. FEMA trailers dot many places as Mississippians await help and try to rebuild on their own.

"The government isn't the one who are really putting the people in houses, it's actually the church or faith-based organizations," Rev. Rouse said. "FEMA has put people in their FEMA trailers, however, the church stepped up and put people in their homes," he added, quoting one of his church deacons.

Rebuilding for profit, not for peoples' lives?

Jaribu Hill, executive director of the Mississippi Workers' Center for Human Rights, in Greenville, sees grassroots organizations and community leaders at work. But, she pointed out; there is no excuse for the lack of federal government support and action. No one in the government has been held accountable, she said. The racial

disparities and injustices existed before Hurricane Katrina, but the disaster has made them more pronounced, she added. The Mississippi Workers' Center has been working on the Gulf Coast for more than eight years combating workplace hate violence and other issues.

The priority is rebuilding casinos with promises of economic development, without a commitment to building low-income housing, according to Hill. Casinos offer low-wage jobs that help keep people in poverty, she said. Questions remain about public education and getting students on track, environmental hazards abound, workers are getting hurt at unsafe sites and some immigrant workers aren't paid at all, she added.

"They are rebuilding for the sake of profit, not for the rebuilding of peoples' lives," she said. Hill's group and the U.S. Human Rights Network opened the Mississippi Hurricane Media Center in Biloxi, Miss., to try to draw attention and document survivors' experiences. She wants survivors to be given a real role and voice in the rebuilding effort, government commitments to make survivors whole, and a push for a better way of life. The FEMA trailers need to be replaced with decent, affordable housing, Hill said.

"People don't have a desire to go back to the same conditions they were in before Katrina. Katrina exposed the gaps and the underclass and the face of the poor. It only comes up when people are put on the national media. Dead bodies floating in the water, people trying to swim to save themselves, it's a media event. That's the only reason we're seeing the poor in the United States," she said.

Worst of all, Hill continued, the basic things that people want, food, clothing, shelter, safety, income and education, are human rights. The U.S. has been exposed as a major human rights violator, and sham democracy as it exports "freedom" around the world, she said.

"We are seeing people use this event as a media opportunity, but it is an opportunity to change things," Hill continued. She believes Black and Brown unity, visible solidarity from Black communities outside the Gulf Coast, a constant demand for updates and answers about why residents can't return, or rebuild, are needed.

"We need people from every community letting the government know that this is not an isolated incident, but you've got to be concerned about all of us," she said.

According to Gulf Coast activists, 231 people died from Katrina, 750,000 people were displaced by Hurricanes Rita and Katrina, damages in Mississippi hit $125 billion, the state's fishing and shrimp industry is still reeling, unemployment remains high, billions are needed to repair public schools, and just 12 percent of $2 billion in federal contracts went to the state.

Housing remains a major concern, activists add. Just over 100,000 people still live in temporary housing and 274,000 individuals and families still receive housing assistance from FEMA, which provided over 37,000 trailer and mobile homes in Mississippi.

'Stranded, lost, left out, homeless'

"Stranded, lost, left out and homeless," said Karen Madison, of the L.C. Jones public housing development in Gulf Port, Miss., describing the plight of residents. Some buildings were patched up to keep residents in apartments, but now the property is going up for sale, she said.

Federal officials promise housing vouchers and transfers to other developments, Madison said. But, she added, three public housing complexes with more than 3,000 residents each are closing. "I don't know of no other public housing around here that they could move us to," Madison said.

The 32-year-old mother of three is worried about moving further from work, and where her children will go to school. "To me, they're just telling us, you ain't got nothing, get out. If there was anywhere to go we wouldn't be having all these FEMA trailers out here," she said. "We have no help, other than working. And, those that can't

work, they're ground zero."

Cynthia Seawright Wright watched the storm hit the Gulf Coast on TV in Atlanta, having evacuated her home. When she came back to the mostly Black community of Moss Point, Miss., neighbors had stacked possessions on the side of roads, trying to salvage things. Seawright Wright found four feet of water inside her home. She moved.

"I walked in the house, turned around and walked out," she said. "I did not want to touch anything that had been in that sewage water." Seawright Wright was worried about what a nearby industrial plant and a water treatment facility might have dumped in the water and environmental hazards. Her possessions, packed in boxes and suitcases on the floor of a friend's home in anticipation of moving, were drenched.

When Seawright Wright saw her friend's bath tub and commode filled with three to four inches of a blue-green sludge, it confirmed her decision to abandon everything.

Later, she found out Moss Point had high levels of arsenic left after floodwaters receded and many suffered from rashes and respiratory problems. Violence, suicides, and depression have increased, Seawright Wright said.

The Red Cross came out the third week after the storm, the Salvation Army showed up late and dumped things "funky old clothes" in church parking lots and at shopping centers, Seawright Wright recalled. By that time, she had started her own emergency distribution effort. She recruited a former beauty queen to help. Her sister, Toni Seawright, was the first Black woman chosen as Miss Mississippi, make appeals for assistance. With some news coverage and some breaks, helped started to pour in, she said.

Then there were problems, with people treated badly and questions about how a pastor was using donated money, according to Seawright Wright. She turned to another pastor in Moss Point and went to work. Out of her efforts was born An Outreach of Love, a faith-based group. "We called it that because we weren't getting paid. We still don't get paid," said Seawright Wright, who receives disability payments.

*Distributed by the **Katrina Information Network** and the Hurricane Katrina Media Center.*

August 27, 2006 | Permalink | Comments (1) | TrackBack (0)

Simply blown away

By Emma Dixon

COMMENTARY

When I was a child, I remember my mother waking all of us children in our modest house north of New Orleans to alert us about a severe storm. The crashing thunder and the lighting flashing at the windows had already made sleep virtually impossible.

My mother insisted that we get dressed so that if we were blown away, we would be fully clothed.

Five decades later, my mother was blown away by Hurricane Katrina. She survived the 160 mph winds, but the storm shook her foundations, as it did with the houses near her home in Bogalusa. Her health, already precarious, deteriorated steadily over this past year. She was hospitalized earlier this summer, and is still unable to come home.

I'm not alone in struggling with seniors' reactions to Hurricane Katrina. One friend's elderly mother dwindled from a size 14 to a size 8 over the last year. Seventy-six-year-old Rita Collins, according to an August 16 Knight Ridder article, died of a stroke in May after being moved twice in the aftermath of the storm. Her daughter Michelle said, "We were trying to get her back to Buras, but we never made it. It was the stress, not knowing where she was at. It killed her."

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder has not only affected seniors, of course.

Overall, suicide rates in New Orleans have almost tripled, and some professionals say that half a million people in the Katrina-affected area need mental health care. An estimated 80 percent of local psychiatrists have left the area, and there's a shortage of psychiatric hospital beds.

"We really have a mental health crisis, and we've had it for months," said Tulane psychiatrist Dr. Janet Johnson.

But the new mental health services now being funded do not focus on the particular needs of seniors. One icon for the storm is Milvirtha Hendricks, the frail 85-year-old lady wrapped in the star-spangled coverlet, who appears in Spike Lee's new movie and innumerable magazine reports.

Yet more attention has been paid to the youngest survivors of the storm than to the oldest. It's much easier for young and middle-aged adults to pick up and start a new life. The toll on the elderly has been tremendous, with their health weakened by anxiety, insomnia, and depression.

The loss of homes, churches, neighborhoods and family treasures is more than the frail elderly can bear. And many African American seniors, especially those with low incomes, already had more risk factors than their white counterparts. In "A Different Shade of Gray: Midlife and Beyond in the Inner City," Katherine S. Newman spotlights the challenges that working-class minorities face sooner and more severely than anyone else.

The vast majority of African Americans now in their 70s spent their formative years in deep poverty, with little access to education. They worked very hard with little reward. Diabetes, cancer and heart disease hit them at younger ages than whites. Some lost children to dangerous street life, leaving them with too little family to help them and sometimes with grandchildren to support.

Seniors of color are less likely to own homes or have savings to cushion their old age. In "The Color of Wealth," Meizhu Lui and her co- authors describe how asset ownership is influenced by public policies affecting previous generations. White Americans built assets with the help of programs such as the Homestead Act and the GI Bill, which were inaccessible to most minorities. Many of today's white families have been able to pass down some assets, and even modest assets bring security.

In Black families, by contrast, the working generation more commonly needs to support the elders financially. Black homeowners are more likely to lose their homes to debt, foreclosure and bankruptcy, often after long illnesses not covered by health insurance. My mother's generation of African Americans lived through a time of enormous political and economic change.

They grew up under Jim Crow and broke its barriers for us, but couldn't take full advantage of the new opportunities available for younger African Americans. Many of them are people of deep faith. They were our steady rocks during our childhood storms. Now they need us to steady them. One year later, we owe it to the eldest Katrina survivors to surround them with all the love, services and support they need.

Emma Dixon of Mandeville, Louisiana (dzkem@i-55.com) is an economics educator with United for a Fair Economy and co-author of "Stalling the Dream: Cars, Race and Hurricane Evacuation."

August 27, 2006 | Permalink | Comments (4) | TrackBack (0)

- Wk place Fatal. after Katrina

- Mandatory work under precarious condit's
  - No lights - generator lighting
  - falls
  - returning under stress post-trauma
  - homes destroyed
  - lives lost
  - health condit's/injuries pre-exist. exasperated by forced work
  - clean up w/o prop. protective gear

Mississippi Workers' Center For Human Rights

213 Main Street
Greenville, MS 38701
P: 662-334-1122
F: 662-334-1274
rightsms@bellsouth.net
www.msworkerscenter.org

Katrina, Then and Now

Testimony by Jaribu Hill, Executive Director
Mississippi Workers' Center for Human Rights
on the occasion of LCCREF's First Briefing on Hurricane Katrina
Washington, DC
October 28, 2005

Segregation is a social cancer that existed before Hurricane Katrina. So is racism. So is ageism. So is extreme poverty. So is abuse of the elderly and the very young. People were living in war zones and shanty towns, in the state of Mississippi and across this very rich land, long before Hurricane Katrina ripped through already ravaged neighborhoods. Long before August 29th, the poor were abandoned by government and everyone else. Who wants to invest in suffering?

Long before August 29th, Mississippi was the poorest state in the union (especially poor in the Delta region with 43% of the population living in poverty), tying only with Louisiana and the Appalachia region. Folks already had been dropped from the medicaid rolls and left to fend for themselves without safety nets, bank accounts, FEMA cards or food for the next day. Long before August 29th, most people never were gainfully employed or properly educated, clothed or housed. Long before August 29th, thousands of Black children sat in Jim Crow classrooms, gazing out windows, looking at landscapes of desolation and hopelessness–dreaming about lives they saw on TV.

To live in the real world is to see the day to day suffering of the masses who must always do without in order to balance the budget. To live in the real world is to understand how and why Katrina relief was dispensed in the manner that it was. To live in the real world is to understand that charity begins anywhere else, except where the very poor, the black and the brown live. To live in the real world is to not be shocked when learning about how relief trucks passed by East Biloxi, a

predominately Black community, to get to D'Iberville, a predominately white middle class community. They had their orders. To live in the real world is to understand why the Red Cross station in East Biloxi barely served food, had no mobile healthcare unit and was located in a depressing run-down building, while the Red Cross station in D'Iberville was pristine, well-stocked with food and supplies and a full service mobile healthcare unit. To live in the real world is to understand why the whole time houses, boats, trees, and casinos were flying across highways and landing on peoples' thirty year mortgages, you never saw East Biloxi on the news. East Biloxi is where most Black people live on the Gulf Coast. It is where they get up every morning to go to work or look for jobs. It is a place where parents are concerned about their children's safety and whether they will learn enough in the classroom to succeed in life. It is "anywhere" America. The difference is, it is, East Biloxi is where Black people live. We never saw East Biloxi on TV.

D'Iberville is a predominately white suburb of Biloxi. It is where investments in the future are made. It is where in the aftermath of

Katrina, the stormy remains were quickly removed, to give the appearance of a return to "normalcy."

What is normal in D'Iberville is the exception to the rule in East Biloxi, where the stench of neglect and disregard seeps through mounds of debris and waste. The insurance man won't go in because of the smell and because of the denial letter in his back pocket and the list of excuses and loopholes in his briefcase. He won't call you back because the decision was made without any input from you– passed over, sold for the going rate-- forced out of almost nothing to begin with. Flooded out by the fine print.

To live in the real world is to understand how in the wake of natural disasters that destroyed lives and put dreams on hold, land snatching, raiding developers, seized the opportunity to gentrify communities of color out of existence in New Orleans and Biloxi and make born and raised citizens homeless, without voice or vote.

We had to be witnesses. We had to be there to make a record. Our inquiring minds would not allow us to accept the lop-sided account of

desperate measures in desperate times. We had to be there to see Red Cross staff call the police on immigrant workers, housed at a Red Cross shelter. We had to be there to see this 2005 version of ethnic cleansing. Soon this shelter will be for "Americans" only. We had to be there to hear the stories of apartment dwellers who lost everything and had no renter's insurance. We had to be there to hear stories about money-grubbing landlords who hiked up rents, changed leases and started eviction proceedings on those without homes. We had to be there to witness the betrayal by those who canvassed neighborhoods and made promises to get elected and then disappeared. This the America most people of color and the poor are used to. What is shocking is how so many think it's something different. What is shocking is how many people refuse to accept this America. Why is August 29th so different from any other example of institutional racism at work?? Could it be that this time, the whole world was watching? Maybe that's it. For the past nine years, the Mississippi Workers' Center for Human Rights has joined with those who are perpetually locked out, abandoned and

criminalized because they are poor. We support Black workers in their fight for equality on the job. We stand with them and their families as they take on the very systems and structures that control their lives and deny them equal access. The work we do now after Katrina is the same work. How can it be any different, when nothing really has changed??

For the past two months since Hurricane Katrina, the Workers' Center has joined with the Mississippi Legal Advocacy Network to launch the Witness Delegation Project. The project works in three areas: legal advocacy, emergency relief and solidarity and organizing support for communities who want to see change. The Delegation has been on the Gulf Coast interviewing individuals whose rights have been denied and representing them in actions to stop forced evictions and unjust insurance denials. Stay tuned, there will always be more!

Mississippi Workers' Center for Human Rights
213 Main Street Greenville, MS 38701 P: 662-334-1122 F: 662-334-1274
rightsms@bellsouth.net www.msworkerscenter.org