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New Orleans Intifada

# More Than Mardi Gras is Happening Here

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In neighborhoods around New Orleans, there's a buzz of excitement gathering among this city's Arab population. A new wave of organizing has brought energy and inspiration to a community that is usually content to stay in the background. The movement is youth-led, with student groups rising up on college campuses across the city, but also broad-based, with mass protests that have included more than a thousand people marching through downtown's French Quarter. Activists say that their goal is to fight against what they see as a combination of silence and bias from local media, and – more broadly – for a change in US policy towards the Middle East. They take inspiration from other movements in the city – joining in the struggle against the continued displacement of much of the city as well as the slow pace of recovery – while also following activism across the US and around the world.

New Orleans' immigrant communities are often ignored or under-represented. But through grassroots organizing, legal action, and political lobbying, Asian and Latino organizations in the city have won some important victories. Activists from New Orleans' Arab population – which is largely Palestinian - have expressed hope that they can follow these examples.

The city's Vietnamese community gained influence through post-Katrina struggles to bring their New Orleans East neighborhood back in the first months after the storm. This effort, which also involved a fight against a city landfill located near their homes, turned grassroots protests into political power, including the recent election of the nation's first Vietnamese-American congressman.

The city's Latino community has grown and changed as thousands of recent immigrants came looking for work in rebuilding after the storm. Despite continuing problems, including police harassment of undocumented immigrants, grassroots efforts have helped translate those numbers into political influence and leverage over employers who had sought to exploit them. While employers and politicians have sought to pit the city's Latino and Black workers against each other, organizers have built alliances between these communities.

These examples, together with a sense that there is a need for their community to be heard, have provoked Arab New Orleanians into action. According to Angelina Abbir Mansour, a student activist at UNO, outrage caused by the devastation in Gaza was a catalyst. "When the Gaza massacre happened, the first thought that came to everyone's head was 'we can't be quiet anymore,'" she explained. Young activists have also been inspired by successes in other cities, such as a recent successful campaign to get Hampshire College to divest from companies that supply the Israeli military as well as sit-ins and building occupations on other campuses in the US and Europe.

## Mass Protests

At Jackson Square, in the center of New Orleans' French Quarter, more than a thousand people gathered on January 4 for one of the largest demonstrations this city has seen in recent years. Tracie Washington, a civil rights leader in the city and the director of Louisiana Justice Institute, attended with her son. Addressing the crowd on a megaphone, she said, "my son asked me today about what is happening in Gaza. He asked, 'is it like if I pinched you and you punched me ?' I said to him, 'no, its like if you pinched me and I shot you with an AK-47.'"

The cheers of the crowd were audible from several blocks away. Palestinian youth led raucous chants of "No Justice, No Peace," and "Gaza Gaza don't you cry, in our hearts you'll never die." Children held up signs saying, "This is what an Israeli target looks like."

The Louisiana Justice Institute was one of several New Orleans social justice and civil rights organizations that Palestinian organizers have built ties with – others included INCITE New Orleans, The Women's Health and Justice Initiative, Pax Christi, Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, and Mayday Nola, an organization that works on public housing issues. "I've seen a huge amount of support from the African American community," says Mansour, who is co-founder of a chapter of the General Union of Palestinian Students on the campus of the University of New Orleans. "Because they know more than anyone what its like to face racism. Alliances between our communities make sense."

The January 4th march was the second of four mass demonstrations for Gaza during the Israeli bombing. The first demonstration, brought together in less than 24 hours, brought out more than 300 people. Palestinian youth from New Orleans organized and led the march, and entire families participated.

The size of the demonstrations surprised even the organizers. "New Orleans is a small town," says activist and business owner Emad Jabbar. "For 1,200 people to come out with just a few days notice – I'm speechless." Every local TV station covered the demonstrations. However the Times Picayune, New Orleans' local paper, refused to send a reporter. In response, activists organized a demonstration the following week, bringing almost 100 people to protest outside the paper's offices.

## Beginnings

Organizing in New Orleans' Arab community is not new – it goes back to at least the late 80s, during the first Intifada, a time of increased activity in the Palestinian Diaspora around the world. Since then, activism has surged and receded in waves, with support and trainings from national organizations such as the Muslim American Society and US Campaign to End The Israeli Occupation playing an important role.

The two years before Katrina saw mass action, as well as coalition building and education, among local Palestinians and their allies, and in some aspects today's movement is built from work that happened then. From 2003 through 2005, activists presented a breathtaking array of events ; from films, demonstrations and speakers ; to art shows, a Palestinian hip-hop concert, presentations in high school and college classrooms, and a regional conference. They met with newspaper editorial boards, appeared on radio shows, set up literature tables at busy public locations, and spoke at churches.

A coalition of activists also organized human rights delegations to the Middle East, sending nine delegates from diverse backgrounds and communities to Palestinian cities on the West Bank in the summer of 2004. They self-published a book and released a newsletter, made and distributed a film (chronicling one member's journey to Palestine), and worked on several art projects, including a hip-hop show, a photography exhibition, and collaborations with the New Orleans International Human Rights Film Festival.

A multiracial and multi-generational coalition of Palestine activists met on the campus of Xavier University, a historically Black college, and its core group included Muslims, Christians, Jews, and secular activists. The group collaborated closely with many different aspects of the Arab and Muslim community in the city – meetings were attended by representatives of New Orleans' Muslim Shura Council, the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee of New Orleans, New Orleans' Palestine American Congress, and Stop The Wall - a local group made up

of more than 200 New Orleanians with family in the Palestinian village of Beit Anan.

Another core member of the group was a white Episcopal minister who had traveled to Bethlehem and Jerusalem, and several members were Palestinian Christians. Nation Of Islam members were a part of the group, as well as several Jewish activists, including a woman who had gone on a pro-Israel delegation organized by New Orleans' Jewish Federation – and came home disturbed by the Palestinian suffering she'd seen, causing her to break with the Federation and become an activist for Palestinian rights.

### A Small Community

According to the US census, New Orleans' pre-Katrina population was 67 percent African American and 27 percent white, with all other categories adding up to about 6%. Maher Salem, a young community leader and business owner, adds that, "The Palestinian community is a small minority in New Orleans. The city is mostly African American and white, then you have Latinos, then Vietnamese, and Palestinians are the smallest group. We're at the bottom of the list."

As with many immigrant communities, New Orleans' Palestinian community is both spread out and insular. Families are located in various suburbs on New Orleans' Westbank (on the other side of the Mississippi river), but there isn't a particular neighborhood where most live. The community is rarely discussed in national coverage of New Orleans, or even in the local media. "Growing up, I didn't know there was a Palestinian community here," Mansour says. "I guess because we're a small population and were not making headlines."

Many of New Orleans' Palestinians are from a handful of small towns and villages near Ramallah and Jerusalem, such as Silwad, Al-Bireh, Al-Mizra'a, and Beit Anan. They are often small business owners, owning restaurants, convenience stores, and clothing stores. In the aftermath of Katrina, much of the city's Arab community was displaced, losing both their stores and homes. "A lot of us lost businesses," says Salem, "and many from our community moved to other cities." Although they no longer live here, many of those that are displaced still feel connected to the city. "I know guys that are in Dallas now," Salem says. "But every time we have a protest or something else happening they call and ask what happened. They miss living here."

For those that have returned, rebuilding has been a struggle – as it has been for other New Orleanians in this city where a third of all properties are still empty. Sandra Bahhur is a Palestinian-American woman originally from Al-Bireh. A nurse and restaurant owner, she has been a strong voice for social justice in New Orleans. Sandra's home in the Lakeview neighborhood of New Orleans was so destroyed by flooding that she couldn't get the doors to open. Her business on Carrollton Avenue was destroyed, just days before it would have been ready to debut. They had been working all day on the restaurant the day before the hurricane, as they did many days. "We had just bought a new oven, new refrigerators, new kitchen equipment," she told me days after the storm. "Everything's destroyed. Our home is destroyed, the business is destroyed. We lost everything. Everything."

Like many New Orleanians, Sandra and her husband Luis love New Orleans, and refused to give up. After two more years of work, their restaurant reopened in late 2007 to positive reviews and full houses. However, Sandra and Luis were never able to fully recover from the debt they went into to rebuild after the storm. With the recent economic downturn, the restaurant hit hard times, and closed permanently last month. Although they love the city, Sandra and Luis' future in New Orleans is uncertain.

### Changing The Media

Although disappointed with local media coverage, activists have created powerful video and images documenting

their own movement, and spread the word through social networking sites, email, texting, and word of mouth. 2-Cent Entertainment - a group of young African-American video activists who are responsible for some of the most exciting media organizing happening in New Orleans today - made a pair of powerful videos documenting the activist uprising, which have been widely distributed online.

The young activists that organized the actions are determined to make their mark in the city, through changing the media landscape and shifting public opinion. "We're a part of this city," says Emad Jabbar. "We identify with it. If you ask most New Orleans Palestinians where they're from they'll say New Orleans - especially the young ones." It was this spirit that led dozens of Palestinians to join with African American community leaders in last month's annual Martin Luther King march. Community leader Maher Salem explains, "My cause, my goal is about the Palestinian people, Gaza, and freedom for everyone. However you describe me – businessman, father, community leader - what I am is someone who stands for justice."

As they move forward, Palestinian activists in New Orleans are excited at the possibilities. "People call me, come to me in the street and in the Mosque, and ask me what are you up to, what's next," says Jabbar. "Our organizing in New Orleans is moving forward. People in the community are passionate, and have a lot of energy. We just need to keep stepping up."

Jordan Flaherty is a journalist based in New Orleans, and an editor of *Left Turn Magazine*. He was the first writer to bring the story of the Jena Six to a national audience and his reporting on post-Katrina New Orleans has been published and broadcast in outlets including *Die Zeit* (in Germany), *Clarín* (in Argentina), Al-Jazeera, TeleSur, and Democracy Now. [He can be reached here](#)

*Post-scriptum :*

## Resources :

- [Left Turn Magazine](#)
- [New Orleans Palestine Solidarity](#)
- [New Orleans Palestine Solidarity, updates](#)
- [2-Cent Entertainment](#)
- [New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice](#)
- [Muslim American Society](#)