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John Clark

Postscript to “A Letter from New Orleans”

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June 1 – Day One of the Hurricane Season

It's now exactly nine months since Hurricane Katrina. The past months have only reinforced the lessons that were learned in the first weeks after Katrina. The abject failure and utter irrationality of the dominant system of state and corporate power have only become more obvious with the passage of time. On the other hand, we have seen growing evidence of the extraordinary and inspiring achievements possible through mutual aid and solidarity.

As we enter the new hurricane season the situation in New Orleans remains very dismal. The social crisis continues. Most of the members of our community remain scattered around the country in exile, dreaming of return to their communities while their homes and neighborhood lie abandoned and rotting. As we watch the spectacle of hundreds of billions of dollars being squandered on war of aggression, it is quite clear that the means to assure our exiled citizens the ability to return are abundantly available. Yet there has been no large-scale, official effort to enable them to come home. Instead, we find a policy of de facto ethnic cleansing in which the generally poor and black majority of New Orleanians remain stranded in distant cities with few resources at their disposal. At the same time, vast areas of our city remain ruined, depopulated, and deteriorating. The means have also been available for a major rebuilding program to save these neighborhoods, but no such program has been undertaken. Even the piecemeal approach that would help a certain segment of needy homeowners has been plagued by delay and under-funding.

What is even more troubling from a long-term perspective is that the city remains vulnerable to further massive devastation by the hurricanes and tropical storms that are expected to increase in frequency because of global warming. Even if the repairs and reinforcement of the levees that are underway are completed, they are unlikely to prevent flooding if another storm at the level of Katrina should hit us in the coming months. Most disquieting of all is the possibility that the long-predicted “Big One” will finally hit the city before a comprehensive protection plan is completed. In the worst case scenario twenty feet of water might cover even the higher ground and the city could remain underwater for months. No effective plan to protect us from such a killer storm has been adopted, much less put into effect. Neither has any plan been undertaken for comprehensive restoration of wetlands, which are our first line of defense against the kind of storm surge that was so devastating during Katrina.

We have just seen a farcical political campaign for mayor and city council in which the enormity of the tragedy and the dangers of imminent catastrophe were not faced. The major candidates were all representatives of business interests and had no intention of raising any difficult questions about social injustice, racism, exclusion of the citizens from decision-making concerning their own communities, and, needless to say, the bankruptcy of the political and economic systems that caused the Katrina disaster. None really confronted the issue of the criminal negligence of the Corps of Engineers, the criminal eco-vandalism of coastal wetlands by the oil industry, or the disgrace of condemning a large segment of our citizenry to exile. Instead, they engaged in mindless and trivial quibbling over which of them has superior “leadership ability.” Each covets the distinction of leading this great and historic city, though the direction in which they plan to lead us only takes us further into the abyss of social and ecological disaster.

Over the painful past months we have learned much about the nature of this disaster. A few words on its social and ecological dimensions might be helpful.

The Social Crisis in New Orleans

It is difficult even to begin to summarize the diverse forms of injustice that we have seen over the months since Katrina. They have included de facto ethnic cleansing, mistreatment of foreign workers, widespread police brutality, denial of prisoners' rights, collapse of the courts and legal system, unfair evictions, price gouging on rent, discriminatory housing policies, discriminatory reorganization of the school system, and gutting of the health care

system, to mention some major topics. A brief discussion of just a few aspects of just one area – housing – illustrates the depth of the problems we are experiencing.

Lack of available and affordable housing has been one of the major obstacles to the return of evacuees. While thousands of units of public housing suffered little damage, officials exaggerated that damage and have kept the vast majority of public housing residents (who have no other immediate options) from returning. In addition, landlords have often forced residents out of scarce rental units, at times through fraud and subterfuge, to enable them to raise rents drastically. This has effectively driven some residents out of the community and prevented others from returning.

Some neighborhoods have been threatened with destruction. HUD secretary Alphonse Jackson notoriously questioned whether the entire Lower Ninth Ward neighborhood should even be rebuilt, though he later backtracked on this position. For the time being, residents who are home-owners are free to begin repair and rebuilding with the hope that sufficient density will be achieved to make their immediate neighborhoods viable. However, the difficulties that residents have experienced in moving back into many areas (lack of jobs, schools, and health care; inadequate funds for rebuilding, repairs or rent; etc.) makes the future of these neighborhoods questionable.

In addition, we have seen the promotion of a “New Urbanist” agenda for rebuilding that puts priority on creating “diverse,” mixed-income neighborhoods in place of predominantly African-American ones. The New Urbanism was already applied before Katrina in the demolition of the St. Thomas Housing Project, which was replaced by an ersatz “urban village” development called “River Garden.” While St. Thomas residents were promised a large share of the new housing, in the end they received only 20% or less of the new units and the vast majority of the community was displaced.

In a city with a 70% primarily poor African-American population, the redevelopment of neighborhoods into overwhelmingly affluent white enclaves has obvious implications. It is a strategy for, first, re-appropriating desirable real estate that the white elite foolishly abandoned during the white flight hysteria, and secondly, for displacing a large segment of the African-American population. As whites began to move out of deteriorated, obsolete older suburbs, room was created for a certain segment of the displaced black population to be relocated from areas ripe for redevelopment. However, the convenient exile of most of the black population to distant cities has been an even more effective solution to the displacement problem that might stand in the way of the New Urbanist ethnically cleansed utopia.

One of the most pressing needs in the effort to preserve our housing stock after Katrina was adequate tarping of roofs to prevent further water damage. Official policy in this area has reflected the general mode of operation, which has been to subordinate community needs to exploitative programs that favor large corporations. In this particular case, large companies were paid \$150 to \$175 per hundred-foot square to install temporary tarps for roofs. After several layers of subcontracting and skimming off of profits, the small companies and crews that finally installed the tarps were sometimes paid as little as \$10 per square for doing the actual physical work. Thus, there has been up to a 1700 percent markup, an absurd increase that even defies credibility. The companies at the top of the pyramid justified their plunder in the name of overhead, but it is in fact a clear case of opportunistic exploitation of disaster. Furthermore, considerable funding that could have subsidized permanent roofing for residents who are in need was squandered on what is essentially corporate welfare.

It is tragic that an image that sticks in the minds of many TV viewers is the “looter” walking out of a store with a case of beer or a boom-box in the few days after the Katrina, while they miss the more complex story of the ongoing plunder of billions of dollars by rapacious capitalists, while real grassroots recovery receives sadly inadequate funding.

The Environmental Crisis in New Orleans

The criminal negligence of the Federal government in its levee design policies has become blatantly evident as careful analysis of the disaster has progressed over the past months. Corps of Engineers commander Lt. General Strock stated before Congress that "levees were never intended to protect against a category four hurricane such as Katrina." This statement is in itself damning, since the charge of the Corps is to protect the city from catastrophic flooding, yet it indicates that the Corps had no plans to protect the city from inevitable category four or five hurricanes which are becoming increasingly more likely in view of global warming and generally increased storm activity. The Corps' "Standard Project Hurricane," which is defined as "the most severe storm that is considered reasonably characteristic of a region" was based on ridiculously obsolete data and indeed assumed a level of storm activity that had already been exceeded several times in very recent Gulf Coast climatic history. However, the effects of Hurricane Katrina itself we now know were only those of a category three hurricane. So the Corps not only failed to prepare for the climatic realities of the region but also failed to achieve even the inadequate protection that it claimed to have as its goal.

On April 5, Gen. Strock told the United States Senate Subcommittee on Energy and Water that: "We have now concluded we had problems with the design of the structure." This ludicrous understatement is not much a concession, given the level of negligence and malfeasance by the Corps and the enormity of the resulting disaster. Studies based on information that has long been available now show numerous design flaws in many levees. To mention only the most outrageous one, the Corps designed levees in which sheet metal extended only a short distance down into layers of sand that were susceptible to seepage and undermining by canal water, rather than using longer sheets that would have reached a layer of impervious clay.

While Strock and the Corps continue to claim that such problems didn't come to light prior to Katrina, in reality studies by the Corps as early as 1986 suggested the possibility of failure based on inadequate wall design. Anyone interested in the details of the greatest engineering disaster in U.S. history should read Ivor van Heerden's new book *The Storm*, which presents all the shocking details. It is clear that the Corp of Engineers caused the Katrina disaster through its malfeasance and the federal government should be fully liable for damages to the lives and property of the victims.

Evidence of the role of wetland loss in the disaster is also now quite clear. If we still had the wetlands that existed fifty years ago and that have been destroyed in the pursuit of maximizing economic exploitation, flooding from Hurricane Katrina would have been moderate rather than catastrophic. It is now known that the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet (MRGO), which was constructed at a huge cost to benefit a few corporations, has eaten up an enormous amount of wetlands and during Katrina acted as a funnel for storm surge and vastly increased devastation and deaths. However, the overwhelmingly greatest single factor in overall wetlands loss has been the canalization of coastal areas by the oil industry to support drilling and movement of equipment.

Eighteen hundred square miles of wetlands, an area the size of the state of Delaware, have been lost in the last half-century as the result of this activity. On the other hand, in the same period the oil industry has produced over 5 billion barrels of oil in Louisiana, and at peak production the state was producing over 300 million barrels per oil. Enormous wealth has been generated for the national and global economies; however, Louisiana has reaped few economic benefits while suffering the consequences of massive pollution, destruction of the natural beauty of coastal areas, and the loss of its natural protection from hurricane disasters. There is an enormous issue of restorative justice here. Justice requires minimally that the oil industry be required to undo the enormous harm that it has inflicted on Louisiana in the course of its reckless pursuit of profit by underwriting a significant portion of the cost of restoration programs.

A viable plan to restore Louisiana's coastline has long existed, and its price-tag has been estimated at \$14 billion, a

small fraction of the \$200 or \$300 billion estimated cost of Hurricane Katrina's damage. Ivor van Heerden estimates that a comprehensive program to build effective levees and flood gates and also to restore wetlands would cost a total of \$30 billion. Last September newspapers featured a headline announcing the Bush administration's proposal for \$250 million for wetlands restoration. Perhaps many readers thought that this was a generous step in the right direction, but what most of them probably didn't grasp was that this allocation (even if it were carried out, which it has not been yet) is a mere 3% of the total funds needed to restore our wetlands and protect the region. In view of the responsibility of the federal government in creating the disaster such a level of response is grotesque.

Mike Tidwell, author of *Bayou Farewell: The Rich Life and Tragic Death of Louisiana's Cajun Coast*, has been one of the few commentators to describe our current dilemma with stark clarity: "To encourage people to return to New Orleans, as Bush is doing, without funding the only plan that can save the city from the next Big One is to commit an act of mass homicide."

Mutual Aid and Solidarity in New Orleans

At the same time that the state and corporate capitalism have shown their ineptitude in confronting our fundamental social and ecological problems, the grassroots recovery movement has continued to show its strength, its effectiveness, and its positive vision for the future. Most importantly, within this large and diverse movement some have begun to lay the foundation for a participatory, democratically self-managed community based on mutual aid and solidarity.

The Common Ground Collective has been at the heart of this recovery movement from the beginning and has been the major force within it that has focused on putting a transformative vision into practice. Common Ground was founded in the Algiers neighborhood of New Orleans only one week after Hurricane Katrina, when, according to a now legendary account, three friends sitting around a kitchen table, with only a cell phone, \$50, and their own energy, imagination and compassion to work with, decided to take direct action to save the community. The former Black Panther leader and longtime Green activist Malik Rahim is one of Common Ground's strongest guiding spirits and its main visionary. Malik's vision includes not only the immediate disaster relief and first response for which Common Ground immediately became well-known, but also more far-reaching programs such as sustainable and environmentally sound rebuilding and a solidarity economy based on workers' cooperatives and other forms of mutual aid.

Over eight thousand volunteers have participated in Common Ground's projects over the nine months since Katrina and its aid programs have helped 80,000 people. Common Ground volunteers range from students who have come for a week at Thanksgiving or spring break to long-term relief workers who have stayed for months or even moved to New Orleans for long periods to work as permanent staff members. In March alone, 2600 volunteers from 220 colleges and fifty states, and at least eight countries came to work with Common Ground. During that single month volunteers gutted 232 houses, four schools and one church. The work of the volunteers saved the community and residents the equivalent of \$1.5 million in paid labor.

Common Ground is now an important presence in a number of neighborhoods and has instituted a wide spectrum of programs to serve diverse needs of the community. Its main center has moved three times to accommodate its rapidly expanding activities and is now located at St. Mary of the Angels School in the city's ravaged Ninth Ward. Every classroom in the school building is filled with cots and the center can now house up to five-hundred volunteers at one time. Common Ground operates several distribution centers, two media centers, a women's center, a community kitchen, several clinics, and various sites for housing volunteers. Its current projects include house gutting, mold abatement, roof tarping, tree removal, temporary housing, safety and health training, a community newspaper, community radio, bioremediation, a biodiesel program, computer classes, childcare co-ops, worker co-ops, legal assistance, eviction defense, prisoner support, after-school and summer programs, anti-racism training,

and wetlands restoration work.

The Post-Katrina Portraits

Francisco di Santis is an "embedded artist," "visual folklorist" and Common Ground volunteer who arrived in New Orleans on September 11, less than two weeks after the hurricane. He immediately began talking to survivors, evacuees and volunteers and sketching their portraits. Since then he has created "the Post-Katrina Portrait Project," a collection of over a thousand powerful and expressive portraits, and on each of them the resident or volunteer has written his or her story or dictated it to be written. Francisco says that the portrait series "by serving as a forum for their voices, contributes to the self-empowerment of those struggling to reclaim their lives in North's America's Gulf region, those who have come to bring solidarity to those struggles as well as those who have come in search of honest paid labor." It is now one of the official projects of Common Ground. Francisco recently put 342 pages of images and texts from the project on a website (www.postkatrinaportraits.com).

Francisco's approach is, I think, basically an expression of the communitarian anarchist view of grassroots community and voluntary cooperation based on mutual aid. He expresses the values that guide the project as follows in his Foreword to the collection: "respecting the heritage of those displaced or dispossessed by disaster is mandatory for disaster relief work. An awareness of regionality is a crucial dimension of politics. Places deserve to have their own name for a reason. Entire cities are not portable, will not exist elsewhere. . . . multi-generational New Orleanians tend to have a very strong sense of neighborhood or heritage, sadly lacking in lands overtaken by suburban and ex-urban sprawl, utilitarian (but unsustainable) efficiency, corporate monoculture and mass media consolidation. And recognizing this upon arrival . . . won my heart over, dedicated me to contributing to the culture here and helping to defend it."

I would like to quote a few excerpts from this Portrait Project. In one passage, a survivor writes of her experience during and after Katrina as follows:

You are looking at the face of a traumatized Katrina survivor! Katrina came and uprooted my family and community like a thief in the night. Been to so many places. You can never know what it was like for me and my child to see everything disappear right in front of our faces. The media lies! So did the people that told me they were taking me somewhere safe, but instead tossed us under a bridge, held at gunpoint without food or water for days on end. I WAS LIED TO when they told me my child and I would be transported to the same place – they lied and separated us. I fought with guards until finally I was reunited with my child. The cops told us to "take what we need" after they LOOTED stores and shops. . . . This is my home. I want to return to and give back to and help rebuild my community. My name is Miss Donna and I am a survivor of Katrina, the US gov't, FEMA & media.

Miss Donna has gone on to help run the Common Ground Women's Center. In the following excerpt a volunteer writes of how her work with Common Ground affected her deeply:

My group and I traveled 17 hours straight through . . . and we arrived that night ready to take on the world and fight the good fight. But, after two days up on a roof near the 9th, I thought to myself, “What the hell was I thinking? What kind of egocentric jerk am I to think that my two weeks here will change a damn thing?” But after seeing the gratitude on people’s faces as I served them lunch in Washington Square Park, I realized that no, two weeks is not enough, but it’s something. I will never forget the tears welling up in Mrs. Turner’s eyes (a 75-year old homeowner in the upper 9th) when I showed up at her house and asked if I could scrub her walls for her. I sat and listened to her sing her heart song, and we cried together. All the king’s horses and all the king’s men will never be able to put Mrs. Turner’s life together again. But we’ll keep trying. Louisiana sunshine rests cozily on a shoulder. Whole town sweats through universal pores. It beads and glistens as it slowly begins its descent down the crease of a back or the tip of a sunburnt nose. It’s wiped away with a dusty finger as its creator labors away at the exhausting endeavor of making this body whole again, so that we all may breathe and laugh and dance cry, as if New Orleans had never been severed before.

Postscript to “A Letter from New Orleans”

Here, a media person writes of his new awareness of social realities after working in a devastated area in the Ninth Ward:

I drove into New Orleans for the first time a week to the day after Katrina hit. I came to photograph the aftermath of the storm for the mainstream press. I remember the physical impression of the city – how the smell felt, how the heat felt, how the dust and abandonment felt. I realized, working in the 9th Ward, that I was in place that had been invisible to me, the rest of white America, and to the world before Katrina tore the lid off it. I came back in December because I did not want the darkness and neglect, my own and everyone else's, to descend on this place again.

Another volunteer who had previously worked with the Red Cross writes of his experience of personal and political change:

I believe very strongly in the ideas of synchronicity and serendipity, that things ironically work together toward something unexplainable and a higher purpose. . . . In a short time with Common Ground I found a lot of authenticity and a model of people being the power instead of the bureaucracy. This one week experience struck me so much that for three months at home I just wanted to come back. Now I have been back for a month in another ghost town seeing flowers and birds coming back literally and figuratively. Out of deep hurt can come beautiful transformation personally and collectively.

These excerpts only begin to convey the depth, the beauty, the humanity, and the spirit of hope found in the experiences recounted in the Portraits. I can only urge you to view the entire collection of images, read the stories and allow yourself to be moved by them. If you do so, before long you may find yourself here in New Orleans, working with the grassroots recovery movement, or looking for ways to help carry on this revolution of solidarity and compassion wherever you are.