



Hurricane Katrina:

**The Black
Nation's 9/11!**

**Saladin Muhammad,
Black Workers For Justice**

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Black Workers For Justice
PO Box 1863
Rocky Mount, NC 27802

Hurricane Katrina: The Black Nation's 9/11!

The magnitude of the destruction and human suffering caused by Hurricane Katrina to the people and communities of the Gulf Coast Region, while not the results of an act of "terror", is directly a result of a profit driven system of capitalist exploitation reinforced by the national oppression of African American people in the US South, a region where the majority of Black people live and where the conditions of oppression, poverty and underdevelopment are most concentrated.

As anti-imperialists and progressives engage in work to build support for the Gulf Coast survivors, we must have an analysis and political context for properly understanding the reasons for this crisis and the contradictions surrounding its aftermath. The response to this human tragedy must be more than a humanitarian response in order to deal with the magnitude and complexity of issues, international political ramifications, the legal aspects, and the various levels of local, regional, national and international coalition and network building and mobilizing that must take place to build a powerful movement for social justice.

There is much talk about how to define the main social impact of Katrina: Whether it is mainly a major disaster for Black people or for working class and poor people in general. This attempt by the media to separate race from class when dealing with issues where those workers affected are majority African American is no accident. It seeks to divide the political character and content of the working class response.

Thus, it is important to define the race and class character of the crisis and to call on the larger working class to unite with its most oppressed section—the African American working class who is also the predominant basis of an oppressed nation and nationality historically denied real democratic rights and subjugated by US imperialism.

The government's failure to correct this impending danger known far in advance, that led to the continuously unfolding massive human tragedy, helps all to see the racist nature of the US capitalist system and how the

system of African American national oppression is in violation of human rights and guilty of crimes against humanity.

The demand for self-determination is both a national democratic demand for African American people's power as well as a demand for working class and women's power. Thus, national, working class and gender democracy are essential pillars of the politics of a Black working class led African American liberation struggle.

African American National Oppression

African American national oppression was/is definitely a major factor contributing to the magnitude of the disaster caused by Katrina. National oppression takes on more factors than race. It includes among other factors where people live and work—social and political territories and institutions, and has a working class character represented by the most exploited strata of the US working class. Thus African American national oppression is at the deepest point of the intersection of race, class and gender oppression and exploitation of the US working class.

As more than 90 percent of Black people throughout the US are workers, African American national oppression places its primary emphasis on the exploitation and oppression of Black workers and their communities. More than two-thirds of New Orleans' inhabitants were African American. In the Lower Ninth Ward, a neighborhood that was one of the hardest hit, more than 98% were Black.

The slow US federal and state government responses to natural disasters like Hurricanes Katrina and Floyd in North Carolina in September 1999, that greatly impacted predominately African American working class communities, make clear that the value of Black and working class life is subordinate to capitalist property and profits.

The racist economic, social and political policies and practices of the US government and capitalist system shape society's attitudes about the reasons for the historical oppression of African Americans. It seeks to isolate, criminalize and scapegoat African Americans as social pariahs holding back the progress of society.

The characterization of the Black working class in this way is a part of the continuous ideological shaping of white supremacy that gives white workers a sense of being part of another working class, different from that of the Black working class. This often leads many white workers to act against their class interests, discouraging them from uniting with

the Black working class in struggling to seek common, equal and socially transformative resolutions to their class issues. However, on the ground in New Orleans, the working class regardless of race forged a level of unity as Survivors led by the African American working class that the system wants to hide.

The media's different descriptions of acts of desperation and survival by Blacks and whites in obtaining food and supplies following Katrina—"looting" and "finders" is an example. The police and National Guard were ordered to stop looking for survivors and to stop "lawlessness." Bush's statements about getting tough on "looters" along with Louisiana Gov. Kathleen Blanco, when she said, "These troops are battle-tested – have M-16s that are locked and loaded – know how to shoot and kill and I expect they will", made clear that New Orleans and the Gulf Coast were becoming areas of military occupation.

White supremacists like David Duke and others have utilized this disaster and repressive racist climate to promote hate for African Americans and Latinos that have encouraged the formation of racist vigilante bands roaming areas of New Orleans attacking Black and Brown people.

The refusal by thousands of mainly Black people to leave their homes was initially described by the media as the main problem related to the slow evacuation efforts—blaming the victims. Nothing was initially mentioned about the low wages, level of poverty and high rates of unemployment that prevented people from leaving.

After it took almost a week for the government evacuation effort to begin, leaving people to fend for themselves without electricity, food and water, it became shamefully clear and unavoidable for the media to hide, that the government had made no provisions for a major evacuation.

The acts of heroism by the people themselves in rescuing their neighbors, although not emphasized by the media, could be seen throughout its coverage. These acts by the people have no doubt reduced the numbers expected to die resulting from the slow "emergency" rescue response of the government.

The so-called "looting" and "lawlessness" must be addressed and placed in proper context. When it became clear that there was no emergency evacuation plan in place—people waiting up to a week before any major evacuation effort began, people were forced to take desperate actions for survival, both until they got "rescued" and for their uncertain future

as refugees with no resources and sources of income. TV's, appliances, etc, become a form of capital and a means for trade during a crisis.

Some survivors were forced to "steal" cars and buses to get their families out of the areas. Should this be considered a crime? NO! Also, when people are oppressed, neglected and left to die, they often engage in spontaneous acts of rebellion striking out against those who control wealth and power.

This is why the term "racism" without the context of national oppression and imperialism is grossly inadequate in describing the scope and depth of the impact of the US oppression of African American people. It often fails to point out the impact that African American national oppression has on influencing the standard of living and social conditions of the general working class regardless of race especially in areas where Black workers make of a majority or large minority of the population.

US Imperialism on the Domestic Front

Not only did the US federal and state government place the working class of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast in impending danger, including failing to develop a planned emergency response to the crises, it has also refused the aid of other countries like Cuba and Venezuela who have offered to send hundreds of doctors, tons of medical supplies and fuel to help the people in the Gulf Coast Region.

US imperialism has thus decided that it has the sole right to decide if the majority African American and working class people and communities in the Gulf Coast Region have the human and political right to survive or not. This is clearly an international human rights question where the demand for self-determination must be applied as part of the resolution.

Though food, water and transportation trickled in, the government made sure the oil industry was taken care of fast. Over 10 major refineries were knocked out of commission in the Gulf region, but many of them were back operating within the week. Bush released federal oil reserves, but oil companies jack up gas prices to a criminal level. Environmental safeguards were loosened for gasoline producers to allow more pollution. All this while the four largest oil companies had profits of nearly \$100 billion in the last 18 months. Why isn't this labeled as corporate "lawlessness?"

Many of the African American working class majority of New Orleans

and parts of the Gulf Coast have been “evacuated” to other cities several hundred and in some cases thousands of miles away from their communities. More than 1,800 children have been separated from their families since the flood, almost two weeks. Many feel that their communities will never be restored and that they won't be returned home.

They have good reason to feel this way, as some majority African American communities have already begun to experience gentrification—moving Black and poor people out of the inner cities and replacing them with more affluent and predominantly middle and upper class whites.

Many reports have warned that profit driven development along the coast had done away with millions of acres of wetlands that buffered coastal communities from storms. Thus, this disaster and the racist and capitalist circumstances surrounding its occurrence and aftermath, raises the issue of “ethnic cleansing.”

The media in some of the cities receiving the “evacuees”, are describing them as “the worst of New Orleans’ now-notorious lawlessness: looters, carjackers and rapists.” This sounds like the racist labels placed on working class and poor immigrants and refugees from throughout Latin America and the Caribbean who have been forced to leave their countries and come to the US for economic and political reasons. Many African Americans experienced these labels when they were forced to migrate out of the South in the first half of the 20th century.

Many African Americans in particular will experience problems related to the loss of identification documents in the Flood and fall into a similar status as undocumented and immigrant workers that come from Latin America and the Caribbean. Their residential and citizenship status will be challenged in most cases, when it comes time to get disaster relief subsistence. The racist nature of US capitalism often makes this reality of being a refugee and undocumented worker within one's “own” country a unique reality for African Americans and other oppressed nationalities, especially during times of natural and social crises.

We should expect the US to use this disaster to increase restrictions on forced economic immigration. It is therefore important that African Americans and Latinos unite in challenging the refusal of survivor's assistance on the basis of the lack of documentation or citizenship status. It is also important to point out that countries in Latin America have offered aid to all without regard of citizenship status and nationality—even though the US seeks to overthrow their governments.

Forging unity between African Americans, Latinos and working class ethnic groups throughout the US and especially within the Gulf Coast Region in responding to this disaster is an important part of a larger, more difficult and absolutely essential process of building US multi national working class unity and international solidarity against US imperialism.

The future of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast in terms of the reconstruction of the historical communities, but at a higher quality of social conditions and standard of living will be decided by the US corporate class, the white power structure, unless there is an organized and combined African American and working class struggle led by the African American working class majority in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. Such a struggle must take the popular form of a combined struggle for African American self-determination and workers power, and must have an international component. Emphasizing the majority African American working class character of the Katrina-US imperialist disaster is important to exposing its unmistakably racist character.

Katrina Disaster Exposes Impact of Unjust US War and Occupation against Iraq

The Katrina disaster exposes how US imperialist war in Iraq and throughout the Middle East, including billions in support for Israel's occupation of Palestine is directly connected to the human tragedy in the Gulf Coast Region.

Vital resources that had been allocated by the Bush administration to fix the substandard levees in New Orleans and the erosion of marshlands along the coast that caused the Region to experience such enormous flooding and massive loss of lives were cut and shifted to the war budget.

Both Republican and Democratic administrations have consciously refused to adequately maintain or strengthen the levees that protect New Orleans. Hurricane and flood control has received the steepest federal funding cuts in New Orleans history—down 44.2% since 2001. The emergency management chief for Jefferson Parish, Louisiana, told *The Times-Picayune* in June 2004: "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 an additional \$250 million for Army Corps of Engineers levee work in the delta went unmet.

There are close to 15,000 National Guard from the Gulf Coast Region in Afghanistan and Iraq fighting unjust wars. Their equipment, including generators, water purification systems and other needed life support and disaster preparedness supplies were overseas as well. Precious hours and days were lost as the bureaucratic machinery slowly moved equipment from other parts of the country that could have helped save lives of thousands who are expected to die.

As was the case during every war engaged in by this country, African Americans and working people were sent to fight, kill and die to bring about so-called "freedom" while they and their communities are denied freedom from hunger, imminent dangers, racial violence, gender oppression and state repression.

As was also the case during the Vietnam and Korean wars, the US tried to conceal the racist treatment of African Americans on the home front. In both of these wars, the racist treatment of African Americans in the US led to rebellions in the military and drew many former veterans into the civil rights and African American liberation movement when they returned home.

Now the US military has the audacity to start recruiting at the Gulf Coast Survivors evacuation shelters in various parts of the country. This is outrageous, as it was the US war in Iraq that was responsible for diverting of funds away from repairing the levees in New Orleans.

It is important that this connection be raised and exposed to help African Americans better understand the more immediate relationship to the wars abroad and the national and working class oppression of African Americans in the US. This will not only serve to strengthen the current US anti-war movement, it will strengthen the US and international anti-imperialist movement.

Lessons from North Carolina's Hurricane Floyd

The coalitions and movement that develop to aid the survivors of this disaster must understand the magnitude and how it differs from other disasters throughout the US history. When one analyzes the conditions and responses to Hurricane Floyd—labeled the "Flood of the Century"—and how it impacted 30 counties in Eastern North Carolina in September 1999, we see at least one major difference that defines how people's aid must be organized.

With Floyd, the evacuation of thousands of survivors to far away dis-

tant cities and states did not occur. People were moved and went on their own to neighboring towns and communities, thus making it easier to build a survivor's organization and movement in the area made up of representatives of the various towns and communities that were impacted.

There was a decision to define people as survivors and not "victims" as one way of helping to empower them and to discourage a "victim's consciousness" which made many feel they had no right to challenge the abuses of FEMA and the state. There was the need to establish a survivor's slogan—Social Justice, Not Charity—to promote that aid is a human right.

The largest camp housing Floyd survivors was set up on a toxic waste dump which had not been inspected ahead of time and was located behind a women's prison. Survivor's felt they had no right to complain and also feared that if they did, they would be put out of the FEMA camp with no place else to go.

The Survivor's organization was not a "support" or emergency "relief" organization per say; even though it participated in "relief" activities—worked in food and clothing distribution centers set up by community forces and supporters.

A survivor's committees were organized in 15 sites throughout Eastern, NC and a survivor's summit was organized to bring survivor communities together to hammer out a survivor's manifesto of demands to serve as their program for recovery and reconstruction.

The state of NC had established a Floyd Relief fund that had several hundred million dollars of federal money and private "donations." The survivor's organization demanded that the fund address key needs and ensure that the cut off period did not leave survivors to fall through the cracks. There was a demand that Floyd Survivors have input in decisions about use of the Floyd Relief Fund.

An advisory committee was appointed by the governor that included one representative of the Survivors organization. The majority were company, banker and state and local government management heads. There was no national and international pressure around the demand that Floyd Survivors control the Relief Fund. This is needed for Katrina Survivors.

The Survivor's organization and support coalitions in the areas organized reconstruction brigades of people who came in from other cities to help repair and rebuild damaged homes. Progressive lawyers and legal clinics were set up to deal with the massive insurance fraud and real estate speculators who were trying to get people to sell their homes for little or nothing to get desperately needed money. Volunteer doctors and medical people set up screening and emergency support clinics that wrote prescriptions for medicine, and college students and educators set up schools and day care in the camp areas. A people's transportation service was set up to take people to work, to look for work and to shop for clothes and other items. There were discussions about setting up survivor worker run businesses to help create employment but they never materialized.

The postal workers union local led by a member of Black Workers For Justice that was part of the Survivor's support organization brought mail transfer forms and workers to assist survivors in getting their mail rerouted. The scope of this work was based on the number of progressive groups and level of participation of the Survivors that were drawn into this social justice work. This is a main reason why it's very important to build a broad network tying together activists groups with allies.

It is very important to draw the trade unions into this movement, the Gulf Coast wide coalition and national support network. They should be encouraged to contribute directly to a Survivor's and people driven support coalition in the region, not to the red cross or government agencies. The identity of the working class efforts will not be projected by the contributions made to these agencies.

It is important that workers see that trade unions have a broader concern and commitment to the needs of the working class and not just their immediate members. The employers will certainly ask the workers where the unions were during the disaster when they try to organize.

Trade unions can play an important role in supporting those evacuated to their cities, especially outside of the South. The unions can help in adopting families and shelters in their areas. They must also play a leading role in helping to combat the racist attempts by the media, white supremacists, religious rights and others to alienate and scapegoat Survivors evacuated to their cities by educating their members and getting them involved in support efforts.

Distribution centers were designated by FEMA and state crises agencies.

The Black Workers For Justice set up a distribution center at its Workers Center in Rocky Mount, NC, but had to struggle to demand it be recognized as an official center so that it could receive food and supplies from distribution warehouses that were set up in the areas by FEMA.

Most of the FEMA designated distribution centers were the big white area churches, some Black churches, YMCA's and OIC's. The white paternalistic and missionary character of a major portion of the establishment designated "formal" relief efforts was overwhelming.

Disaster Relief Efforts Must be Carried Out as a Political Struggle

Yes, it's important that organizing be done around the humanitarian aspects of this crisis and recovery. It must not try and substitute for the obligation that the US government has to fully address the problems. A "full" recovery requires some political and economic changes and pressure by a mass movement.

We learned that during times of disasters, the state and federal government declarations of a "state of emergency", allows local governmental powers to be suspended or place under the direct demand of the state government. During Floyd, survivors particularly from the Town of Princeville, the oldest historically Black town in North Carolina and some say in the US, were organized to demand that their city council convene itself, even though the town had been destroyed.

This was a struggle for self-determination within the context of the struggle for reconstruction. The Princeville city council held weekly open meeting where activists organized transportation to take survivors by cars and church buses to have input into the decisions and town government struggle for reconstruction.

Some towns attempted to weaken the Black voting strength through its recovery plan. The City of Tarboro, NC established an ordinance prohibiting the construction of low income housing in a political district where African Americans constituted a majority. The town was sued along with mass actions forcing it to change the ordinance allowing people to move back into the area with affordable newly built housing.

Building a Gulf Coast Survivors Justice and Reconstruction Movement

The movement in the Gulf Coast Region has major concerns that require the organization, politics and leadership of the African American liberation as a central component to help unite a broad, multi-national, multi-racial and international campaign for social justice and reconstruction.

The following areas need to be organized to establish a national and international capacity:

1. There must be efforts to unite the many relief and reconstruction efforts if the Gulf Coast Region into a regional coalition such as a Gulf Coast Survivors Justice and Reconstruction Movement. This will take time and education. It can begin by putting out joint statements, coordinating relief activities where possible, agreeing to related to satellite offices—such as proposed by the Community Labor United for Jackson, MS, Lake Charles, LA, Baton Rouge, LA and Houston, Texas.
2. Gulf Coast Survivors Justice and Reconstruction Councils should be formed among groupings of Gulf Coast evacuees in the various cities throughout the country with elected representatives to a Gulf Coast Survivors Reconstruction Assembly that would decide demands and direction for the movement.
3. The Gulf Coast Survivors Justice and Reconstruction Movement would help to organize and reconnect the dispersed masses from the region into a representative body that acts somewhat as their provisional government to deal with questions regarding the future of their communities, the blatant neglect of the US government in dealing with the national and international campaign and particulars related to the reconstruction and redress of the Gulf Coast Survivors and their communities.
4. The Survivor Justice and Reconstruction Movement need to have a Gulf Coast Survivor's Support Network connecting supporters, technical resources, fundraising and allies throughout the country and internationally.

Gulf Coast Survivors and Supports Must Act Now!

It is very important that activity begin immediately to set the political tone of the movement. Otherwise, the tone will be set and dominated by the US government and corporate media who don't want the struggle to go beyond disaster relief and "recovery." The US spin doctors have already begun their work. There is an attempt to place major blame on the local government of New Orleans. The firing of the FEMA Director seeks to give the impression that the "wrong" man was in charge.

A Gulf Coast Survivors Justice and Reconstruction Petition to the UN should be launched to get Survivors throughout the country to sign.

This will begin political intervention among Survivors throughout the country. This could also help in the process of organizing Survivor Councils. Press conferences and rallies could be organized.

A Right of Return Committee should be organized and headed by a prominent African American activist figure to begin promoting a campaign for the right of a speedy return of the Gulf Coast Survivors to their communities. This committee could have regional coordinators and should be formed and publicly announced immediately.

A UN Petition and Right of Return Committee and campaign would give the Gulf Coast Survivors movement an immediate focus and sense of movement beyond emergency relief.

Some of the demands that must be included in this movement include:

- The right to return of the people of the Gulf Coast Region,
- Open up area military bases for no cost temporary housing to begin moving survivors back into the region,
- Extended unemployment and emergency financial relief based on a living wage for all Katrina Survivors until they are returned to their homes and jobs,
- A People's referendum on all decisions affecting the politic and residential issues of the Gulf Coast survivors,
- Gulf Coast Survivors should continue to have full voting rights in their home state, counties and local governments
- Establish a public workers program funded by the federal government and the big corporations to rebuild New Orleans and the affected Gulf Coast Region,
- Employ the survivors at a living wage as required by the David Bacon Act¹ to work on clean up and reconstruction of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, with the right to organize unions,
- That major contracts for clean up and reconstruction of New Orleans Black and working class communities be allocated to Black contractors,

- That the US immediately allow other countries to provide aid to the survivors,
- Full assistance and rights for all undocumented immigrants dislocated by Katrina,
- That the United Nations conduct an investigation into the circumstances surround the Katrina disaster to determine if the US is guilty of human rights violations,
- That everyone suffering property damaged and destruction, dislocated, death and illness, including emotional and psychological, receive reparations from the US government as victims of a racist act of placing Black majority cities and communities in imminent danger,
- Issue a massive bankruptcy executive order for Gulf Coast survivors forgiving all debt of property lost or destroyed by the disaster,
- That the US government take immediate steps to protect people from price-gouging at the gas pumps and profiteering by the big oil companies, including the release of additional oil from the US Strategic Oil Reserve.
- Amnesty for all Survivors charged with "crimes of survival" such as "looting", taking vehicles, etc. and acts of self defense against vigilantes and police brutality,
- End wars and occupations in the Middle East, bring the troops home now,
- Cut the US military budget and reallocate finances to deal with state and local programs to address environmental needs that threaten the lives, safety, health and communities of African American and other working class ethnic populations,
- The immediate impeachment of George Bush for his role in the US government in placing people's lives in imminent danger and thereby committing crimes against humanity.

The political movement must be organized nationally. The progressive organizations of every political tendency and humanitarian expression should be able to support this movement. However, it is very important and political necessary to give it its proper anti-imperialist character,

that it be led by a national Black united front, in terms of shaping and putting forward its main political demands and representing it at the national and international levels.

We must be careful while insuring the presence, politics and leadership of the African American working class and liberation movement forces not to narrow the scope and content of the struggle to try and fit a particular ideological perspective. The African American liberation movement forces must help to build a mass movement and work inside of it to try and influence it in a more conscious anti-imperialist direction.

There will be multiple responses from progressive forces representing various classes, ideological, political and religious tendencies and social movements. Many will be small groups seeking foundation grants to help in their efforts. They must be careful not to allow competition for funding to create tensions among them. Differences among the progressive forces should be struggled around in a non-antagonistic manner.

Instead of abstract and sectarian polemics and arguments at mass meetings, there must be an effort to out organize opportunist elements who see using the disaster to win favor and reposition themselves with the Democratic and Republican Parties or with sections of the corporate class by promoting their image as big contributors to the Katrina Survivors.

We must also discourage efforts to create sole dependence on cult of the personality "saviors" political or religious or liberal and paternalistic dominated groups however well meaning, to solve the problems for the Survivors or to speak on their behalf. This is why it's so important to have Black worker leadership play a major role in helping to organize and promote this struggle in the broad anti-war and African American liberation coalitions.

We must make this tragedy and the struggle for Gulf Coast Justice a major projection and demand of the anti-war movement and demonstrations, not only in the US but internationally. Survivors should speak at anti-war activities throughout the US and internationally.

Likewise, the major African American mobilizations like the Millions More Movement must project this struggle as a major demand of the African American liberation movement. The US Congressional Black Caucus must help make this struggle a centerpiece of the Congress.

This human tragedy must be used to organize and mobilize millions of people to challenge the US system of racist national, working class and women's oppression and to build international solidarity against the forces of US and world imperialism who profit from this oppression.

Saladin Muhammad
Chairperson, Black Workers For Justice

NOTES

The Davis Bacon and Related Acts (DBRA) requires all contractors and subcontractors performing work on federal or District of Columbia construction contracts or federally assisted contracts in excess of \$2,000 to pay their laborers and mechanics not less than the prevailing wage rates and fringe benefits for corresponding classes of laborers and mechanics employed on similar projects in the area. The prevailing wage rates and fringe benefits are determined by the Secretary of Labor for inclusion in covered contracts.

In addition to the Davis Bacon Act itself, Congress added Davis-Bacon prevailing wage provisions to approximately 60 laws—"related Acts"—under which federal agencies assist construction projects through grants, loans, loan guarantees, and insurance. (Examples of the related Acts are the Federal-Aid Highway Acts, the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974, and the Federal Water Pollution Control Act.) Generally, the application of prevailing wage requirements to projects receiving federal assistance under any particular "related" Act depends on the provisions of that law.

The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) has oversight responsibilities to assure coordination of administration and consistency of enforcement of the labor standards provisions of the Davis Bacon and Related Acts. Under this authority, DOL has issued regulations establishing standards and procedures for the administration and enforcement of the Davis-Bacon labor standards provisions. Federal contracting agencies have day-to-day responsibility for administration and enforcement of the Davis-Bacon labor standards provisions in covered contracts for which they are responsible or to which they provide federal assistance under laws they administer.

Within DOL, the Employment Standards Administration's Wage and Hour Division (WHD) is responsible for administration and enforcement of the DBRA.

<http://www.dol.gov/compliance/laws/comp-dbra.htm>