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*The Battle for New Orleans:
Only a Real Movement Can Win This War
by BC Co-Publishers
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New Orleans represents a challenge to African Americans, unprecedented since the epic struggles of the Fifties and Sixties. The perverse reality, to which African Americans must rise, is that the man-made disaster in the Gulf provides what may be the last chance to build a real Movement, encompassing the broadest sectors of Black America. Cruel history presents the catastrophe as an unwanted opportunity, a test of Black people's capacity for the *operational* unity craved by the vast bulk of African Americans. The pain and anger in Black America is all but universal, and demands *collective* action, the outcome of which will largely define the true State of Black America as it has evolved over the last two generations.

Let us put it bluntly: If Black America fails to configure its human, organizational and material resources to effectively resist the theft and ultimate disfigurement of New Orleans, then we will be forced to confront the existence of fundamental, crippling flaws in the African American polity.

Click here to view [The new New Orleans](#) cartoon.

There is much reason for optimism. Movements often need monsters, and George Bush and his minions are a horror show. The Katrina debacle plunged Bush's Black approval rating to 12 percent, as measured by the prestigious [Pew Research Center](#). That's only slightly above what most pollsters consider the approval category's irreducible minimum – "about as low as you can go," according to Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies senior analyst David Bositis. Few doubt that the administration's callous and ineffectual handling of the Katrina crisis ("negligent homicide," charged Black Georgia Congresswoman [Cynthia McKinney](#)) caused the near-evaporation of Bush's thin Black support.

(An NBC/Wall Street Journal poll taken earlier in September showed only two percent of Blacks approved of Bush's performance. However, the poll included only 89 African Americans, too small a sample to be considered reliable.)

All African American eyes are on New Orleans, that once-flawed, now devastated jewel of the Diaspora

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whose people have been dispersed to the far corners of the United States: Alaska, Utah and, literally, who knows where, in addition to large Black population centers. The dissolution of a major African American city – far eclipsing in scale the destruction of Black Tulsa in 1921 – has seared the collective Black psyche. The pain and anger in Black America is all but universal, and demands *collective* action effectively coordinated by those who purport to be leaders. In the process, new leadership – and hopefully, a "new" New Orleans that is fit for mass Black habitation – will emerge.

Reversing the Slide

Until the watershed year of 1965, which saw both passage of the Voting Rights Act and the Watts, Los Angeles rebellion, most Black Americans, especially in the South, were focused on the elimination of Black voter disenfranchisement and legal segregation. The Civil Rights Movement was not propelled by a laundry list of issues – rather, its overarching project was the defeat of Jim Crow.

By the time of Dr. Martin Luther King's assassination and passage of the last major civil rights legislation in 1968 (the Fair Housing Act), the Jim Crow project seemed essentially completed – although still requiring years of mopping up operations. However, Black Power projected an additional set of demands, much more complex and varied, and calling forth a murderous government response that added yet another layer of Black grievances. While the beneficiaries of the Civil Rights Movement – those African Americans whose circumstances allowed them to walk through newly opened doors – sprinted to higher living standards and elected and corporate offices, mass Black incarceration became the order of the day in every state of the union, ravaging the very fabric of the bottom half of African American society and threatening to destabilize the half that were doing relatively well.

Although the historical Black Political Consensus survived the sea change that followed the death of Jim Crow, the scope of both Black aspirations *and* grievances expanded dramatically, reflecting the diversity of the upwardly mobile Black sectors' often frustrated dreams and the multiplying injuries endured by the left-behind, criminalized Black population.

The Black Movement devolved to various sets laundry lists with often radically different orders of priority, depending on which Black sector was doing the listing. Most African Americans can agree on most items on the list – after all, the Black Political Consensus remains intact – but not on which items are most compelling. Thus, the diversity of the forces set loose in the Black polity by the death of Jim Crow, while not centrifugally spinning African Americans out of a common orbit, has resulted in sometimes dramatic mismatches in political priorities among Black sectors.

We have traveled a great distance from the simple elegance of the chant: "What do we want? Freedom! When do we want it? Now!"

As a consequence, efforts to forge "unity" across the Black spectrum inevitably produce long lists of the What We Believe and What We Demand type, drawn up in order of the priorities of whichever group or tendency dominates the gathering. Usually, such lists are broadly inclusive, demonstrating that those in attendance respect and share the concerns of their brothers and sisters representing other Black sectors or political schools of thought. However, laundry lists can only lead to *operational* unity among those who give high priority to the same items. Other, pro forma line item endorsements add up to not much more than a well-meant "Amen."

A Common Focus

There can be no question that millions of African Americans are eager to find their own specific mission within the context of a broad Black movement, as proven beyond doubt by the 1995 and 2005 "Million"

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rallies – events that drew multiples of the (integrated) 1963 March on Washington crowd. The problem is, these searchers find themselves still without a mission at the end of the rally.

This October's Million More Movement rally produced a 10–point Issues Statement, while Nation of Islam leader Min. Louis Farrakhan offered his "Covenant with God, Leadership and Our People." Essentially, both documents are generalized versions of the usual laundry lists – useful for their inclusiveness, just as the rally was worthwhile as "a mass reaffirmation of the existence of an African American polity, a form of Black nationhood that yearns for unity and autonomy in the struggle against white supremacy, and for its own sake." (see *BC*, "MMM: The Quest for a Movement," October 20, 2005).

But most of all, the huge throng wanted an action plan for New Orleans.

"Katrina" was on virtually every speaker's lips – the crowd–arouser. From Dr. Ron Daniels, of the Institute of the Black World, who reported that 30 heads of national Black organizations had convened to assist the Katrina families; to CME Bishop Henry Williamson, who assured the vast audience that his denomination was deployed in the Gulf region in strength, providing aid and ministry; to the (whacky) songstress Erykah Badu, who made sense to the crowd only when she invoked "Katrina"; to Min. Farrakhan, who proposed a one dollar per week contribution to a Millions More Movement Disaster Relief Fund; to Congressional Black Caucus chairman Mel Watt's announcement that the CBC would soon introduce "a specific piece of legislation, restoring the families of the Gulf area...a goal that is definable" – speaker after speaker, representing the broadest spectrum of African American sectors, disciplines and political tendencies, made common cause with Black New Orleans.

"Katrina" – shorthand for the tortures inflicted on the helpless by nature and man, and the planned ethnic cleansing of a great Black city – has the potential to ignite a movement much wider and deeper than the campaigns to Boycott South Africa and Free Nelson Mandela, solidarity actions that breathed life into broadly–based Black politics in the Eighties. Katrina touches home and history, friends and family; it revealed the Black condition in the raw. The exodus of multitudes speaks to the Old Testament cultural framework that is wired into the consciousness of even the most secular African American. On the scales of historical group memory and symbolism, the five days of video–taped Black debasement in New Orleans will weigh as heavily on the African American psyche as the dogs and water hoses of Birmingham.

Katrina–related activities have proliferated beyond the countable, to become an obligatory action item on every authentic Black organization's agenda. The expanding universe of Katrina projects in some respects already resembles the pre–1960 Civil Rights Movement – a focus of all Black people's deep concern, but inchoate, not yet fully formed.

In a relatively short period of time, the 1950s Civil Rights offensive was transformed into a great engine of social change. In the current era, however, it is the Right that is on the domestic and global offensive. A Katrina–spawned movement will begin, of necessity, as a broad, Black–anchored *resistance*.

The Fight to Return

Every strata of Black America – all of which were physically represented on the Capitol Mall, October 15 – shared a soul–deep identification with Mtangulizi Sanyika, of the African American Leadership Project, as he outlined the New Orleans Citizen Bill of Rights. In abbreviated form, the displaced citizens demand: the right to return; to retain their right of citizenship in the city; the right to shape and envision the future of the city; the right to [fully] participate in the rebuilding of the city; the right to quality goods and services; the right to affordable neighborhoods; the right to be paid a livable wage; the right to increased economic benefits; the right to preferential treatment in...work associated with rebuilding the city; the right to contracting preference; the right to an environmentally clean and hurricane safe city; and the right to preserve and

continue the rich and diverse cultural traditions of the city. (See the full text of the document at the bottom of this page.)

The 12–point Bill of Rights fits wholly within the Black Political Consensus, and could serve as a guide to citizens of virtually every American city. Indeed, the document contains most of the elements of *BC*'s recommendations for urban "democratic development...to preserve and further empower the huge and strategic Black and Brown presence in the central cities" (More on that, below.)

Thus, a true national movement to defend and support the citizens of New Orleans, if sustained, would infuse millions with the lessons and logic of a new urban politics that elevates human and citizenship rights above corporate rights. A movement that is immersed in the language, spirit and values of the New Orleans Citizen Bill of Rights would refine and clarify the African American conversation, and also alter the prisms through which non–Black Americans perceive the world. That's what real movements do; it's what the Civil Rights Movement did. In a real sense, the New Orleans document takes the rights gained by the decades–ago movement to what Black folks used to call "a higher level."

However, the Bush regime recognizes none of these rights – not for New Orleans citizens, nor for people anywhere on the planet. Rushing like a storm surge, the Bush men and the corporations they serve saw the breach of the city's levees as a grand opportunity to flood the region and nation with reactionary rollbacks of citizen and worker protections, to impose by "emergency" measures Hard Right programs that could not pass congressional muster.

Bush Bum–rushes the Gulf

"Whether or not by design, the administration has used the tragedies of hurricanes Katrina and Rita to waive, bend, and break federal laws that protect our civil rights, worker rights, public health and safety, while suspending rules that help small and minority–owned businesses," said Wade Henderson, executive director of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights (LCCR), in a letter to key congressional committees.

Among the administrations offenses against law and decency:

- Cutting wages for construction workers in the Gulf states by indefinitely suspending the Davis–Bacon Act, which guarantees workers are paid the region's prevailing or average wage. Suspending wage protections for Gulf Coast workers allows all contractors, regardless of whether or not the work relates to cleanup and reconstruction, to pay as little as \$5.15 hour.
- Ignoring federal procurement practices, which has resulted in the award of several multi–million dollar no–bid contracts that hurt local small, minority, and women owned businesses.
- Denying equal opportunity employment initiatives for workers in the Gulf states through an exemption from some existing Affirmative Action Program (AAP) requirements for new federal contractors dealing with Hurricane Katrina relief.
- Exploiting the hurricane to create a private and religious school voucher program that could allow federal money to be used to promote employment discrimination.
- Allowing a temporary waiver of environmental protections in the Gulf Coast region and supporting additional environmental suspensions at the expense of the health and safety of Katrina survivors, particularly the poor, disabled, and minority populations.
- Rebuilding segregated and inaccessible housing.

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- Enforcing immigration laws during search and rescue.

The latter outrage demonstrates the Bush men's pure, devilish cynicism and howling racism. While allowing reconstruction contractors to import low-wage, non-citizen workers from Latin America, Homeland Security's immigration agents conduct raids that single out Latino-looking residents of emergency shelters.

Having failed to get congressional approval for a federal school voucher program except in the colony of Washington, DC, Bush seeks to establish a de facto national voucher system by dispensing half a billion dollars to private schools that enroll the far-flung children of displaced families.

Thwarted over the years by the U.S. Supreme Court in their jihad against affirmative action, the Bush crowd decrees that such programs will be cleansed from the Gulf by emergency fiat.

Bush policy is the precise opposite of the New Orleans Citizen Bill of Rights. The lines of struggle have been drawn in the muck left by Katrina.

Wade Henderson, speaking for the LCCR and 60 other civil rights, labor and advocacy organizations, declared: "Instead of directly meeting the rebuilding challenges created by Katrina, the administration has chosen the moral equivalent of a Trojan Horse."

Little George Wallace, standing in the Alabama schoolhouse door in 1963, seems tame by comparison. At least Governor Wallace was faithful to some version of the rule of law, albeit perverted. Bush recognizes no law, at home or abroad. His regime's lawlessness has created a host of allies for a new Black movement to call on, should it choose to – from a far longer list than was ever available to Dr. King.

For Whom Katrina Tolls

"If New Orleans is rebuilt as an enterprise zone, private investors will wait for the government to clean up the mess and then build luxury condos to replace affordable housing. They'll turn New Orleans into a theme park, with its former residents unable to afford to come back." – Rev. Jesse Jackson, Sr. in the Chicago Tribune, October 11, 2005.

It does not have to be that easy. But the ethnic cleansing of New Orleans will surely be accomplished in the absence of a mass Black movement, mobilizing elements of all African American classes and disciplines, the broadest range of large and small organizations, and the forging of strategic alliances with non-Blacks.

Activists should understand that the Battle for New Orleans will take place over years – and that the Bush-corporate assault is well-advanced. In a brilliant article first posted on the website of the Clark-Atlanta University-based Environmental Resource Center, EJRC director *Robert D. Bullard and Beverly Wright, a Katrina survivor who directs the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice at Dillard University, spelled out what the nascent movement is up against:*

"Hurricane Katrina has opened the floodgate of land speculation and redevelopment scenarios that plan 'for' rather than plan 'with' the storm victims. What gets built and redeveloped (and for whom) and who participates in the re-building process are major economic justice issues. A small group of private companies, nongovernmental organizations and members of think tanks have divided up 'pre-completed' no-bid contracts. A predatory form of 'disaster capitalism' exploits the desperation and fear created by catastrophe to engage in radical social and economic engineering."

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The Right's "radical social and economic engineering" cries out for a massive Black response that is equally sophisticated and comprehensive – and backed by masses of fired-up people. The liberation of a once-great Black city from the grip of land pirates acting in concert with the federal government, is no easy task. However, the struggle must be joined, since the outcome may well decide the fate of urban – and therefore Black – America.

Katrina hurled New Orleans into a kind of time machine, instantly fast-forwarding the city to an advanced stage of the gentrification process. The "Negro-removal" stage was skipped entirely, courtesy of the floodwaters. In real-time cities, poor and working people drift away house by house, block by block, with very little drama, to points...unknown. An incremental exile, a piece by piece theft of community, then a final, anti-climactic fait accompli.

In maddening contrast, the Katrina drama has fixed our attention on the sheer precariousness of the Black condition. Like Ebenezer Scrooge, we see the future of our cities – and we ain't in it. A specter from the urban future screams at us in the present, in the form of a quarter million displaced African Americans and a valuable hole where a cultural center of Black America used to be.

Suddenly, Black folks are waking up, shaking – and universally angry.

Where There's a Will, There Must Also Be a Plan

The collective Black human and material infrastructure is exponentially more developed than in 1955, when the African American working poor of Montgomery, Alabama sustained a bus boycott that humbled Jim Crow in the former capital of the Confederacy; or in the years that followed, when a tiny group of progressive Black preachers embarrassed a racist superpower in the eyes of the world, forcing Uncle Sam to leave his white supremacist clothes in the closet; or in 1964, when mere hundreds of young people invaded the fortress of Mississippi with virtually no money in their pockets and little backup during Freedom Summer.

The best and the brightest of the era were at the core of activism, but there were not many of them, and even less cash. The resources that Blacks and their allies can bring to bear in the Battle for New Orleans are on a different order of magnitude than 40 years ago. At long last, and at such high cost to the people of the Crescent City, one senses a general Black *will* to struggle.

A true national movement has as many components as the polity, itself. The Battle for New Orleans will require lawyers, researchers, city planners, architects, social scientists, psychologists, financiers, educators, pension fund managers, liberation theologians, culture workers, athletes, medical practitioners, criminal justice experts, chefs, t-shirt designers, micro- and macro-organizers, as solid a front of Black politicians as can be assembled – and hundreds of thousands of foot soldiers in struggle.

A *vision* of the *new* New Orleans is also required– a full-blown counter-vision to the condo-studded "theme park" corporate blueprint, one that will inspire both those displaced from the city and the African American movement at-large.

In *BC*'s final edition of the five-part series, "Wanted: A Plan for the Cities to Save Themselves" ([July 29, 2004](#)), we sketched some of the steps that must be taken, and questions that must be answered in the quest to build a healthy city, a place that exists for the benefit of those who live there. Much the same process applies to the task of rebuilding and restoring New Orleans under the auspices of its largely displaced citizens.

"We must present the fullest picture of the [new] city's demographic, physical, and economic layout and activity: where different populations live; how dollars move; where people work, and what types of work they do; where they shop; how they move around the city; what

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public or private institutions anchor which neighborhoods, and what activity do they create; what is the state of the housing stock, and where; how many businesses exist; who owns them, and who do they employ, and where do the employees live; what is the state of infrastructure (streets, water, sewage, phone and cable telecommunications, mass transit lines, etc.), and who does the infrastructure serve; what are the physically attractive (and, therefore, valuable) sites and vistas, and who owns/controls them; how are police deployed; where are the schools...?"

If African Americans fail to develop a plan for New Orleans, they will have no effective role in the final product of reconstruction, whatever the exertions of a reinvigorated Black movement.

Black America is challenged to make Katrina/New Orleans the center of gravity around which an inclusive African American movement revolves – a unifying nexus and vision that draws together organizations and previously unaffiliated individuals, especially youth, in common cause. There are plenty of tasks for us all.

African American Leadership Project & The New Orleans Local Organizing Committee & The Greater New Orleans Coalition of Ministers

New Orleans Citizen Bill of Rights'

1. All displaced persons should maintain the "**Right of Return**" to New Orleans as an International "**Human Right.**" A persons' socioeconomic status, class, employment, occupation, educational level, neighborhood residence, or how they were evacuated should have no bearing on this fundamental right. This right shall include the provision of adequate transportation to return to the city by the similar means that a person was dispersed. **THE CITY SHOULD NOT BE DEPOPULATED OF ITS MAJORITY AFRICAN-AMERICAN AND LOWER INCOME CITIZENS**, and must be rebuilt to economically include all those who were displaced.
2. All displaced persons must retain their **right of citizenship in the city**, especially including the right to vote in the next municipal elections. Citizen rights to the franchise must be protected and widely explained to all dispersed persons. The provisions of the Civil Rights Act of 1965 should be examined and enforced in this regard.
3. All displaced persons should have the **right to shape and envision the future of the city**. Shaping the future should not be left to elected officials, appointed commissions, developers and/or business interests alone. We the citizens are the primary stakeholders of a re-imagined New Orleans. Thus, we **MUST** be directly involved in imagining the future. Provisions must be included to insure this right.
4. All displaced persons should have the **right to participate in the rebuilding of the city** as owners, producers, providers, planners, developers, workers, and direct beneficiaries. Participation must especially include African-Americans and the poor, and those previously excluded from the development process.
5. In rebuilding the city, all displaced persons should have the **right to quality goods and services** based on equity and equality. Disparities and inequality must be eliminated in all aspects of social, economic and political life. It should be illegal to discriminate against an individual due to their income, occupation or educational status, in addition to the traditional categories of race, gender, religion, language, disability, culture or other social status.

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6. In rebuilding the city, all displaced persons should have **the right to affordable neighborhoods**, quality affordable housing, adequate health care, good schools, repaired infrastructures, a livable environment and improved transportation and hurricane safety.

7. In rebuilding the city, workers, especially hospitality workers should have **the right to be paid a livable wage** with good benefits.

8. In rebuilding the city, African–American should have the **right to increased economic benefits** and ownership. The percentage of Black owned enterprises MUST dramatically increase from the present 14%, and the access to wealth and ownership must also be dramatically improved.

9. In rebuilding the city, African–Americans and any displaced low income populations should have the **right to preferential treatment in cleanup jobs, construction and operational work associated with rebuilding the city.**

10. In rebuilding the city, the **right to contracting preference** should also be given to Community Development collaboratives, community and faith–based corporations/organizations, and New Orleans businesses that partner with nonprofit service providers and people of color. No contracts should be let to companies that disregard Davis–Bacon, Affirmative action and local participation. Proposed legislation to create a "recovery opportunity zone" should specifically include Community Development organizations and minority firms as alternatives to the no bid multi–national companies. Over the last 30 years, such firms have demonstrated their capacity to successfully build hundreds of thousands of quality affordable housing, and neighborhood commercials and businesses and service enterprises.

11. In rebuilding the city, priority must be given to the **right to an environmentally clean and hurricane safe city**, rather than the destruction of Black neighborhoods or communities such as the lower 9th ward. Priority must also be given to environmental justice, disaster planning and evacuation plans that work for the most transit dependent populations and the most vulnerable residents of the city.

12. In rebuilding the city, priority must be given to the **right to preserve and continue the rich and diverse cultural traditions of the city**, and the social experiences of Black people that produced the culture. The second line, Mardi Gras Indians, brass bands, creative music, dance foods, language and other expressions are the "soul of the city." The rebuilding process must preserve these traditions. **THE CITY MUST NOT BE CULTURALLY, ECONOMICALLY OR SOCIALLY GENTRIFIED. INTO A "SOULLESS" COLLECTION OF CONDOS AND tract home NEIGHBORHOODS FOR THE RICH.** We also respectfully request that the CBC initiate its own Commission to thoroughly investigate all aspects of the physical and human dimensions of the Katrina disaster.

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