

# Section I

## History Can Guide Us

Then came this battle called the Civil War, beginning in Kansas in 1854, and ending with the presidential elections of 1876—twenty awful years. The slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again towards slavery. The whole weight of America was thrown to color caste.<sup>3</sup>

W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America*

But what shall we do with the Negroes after they are free? I can hardly believe that the South and North can live in peace unless we get rid of the Negroes. Certainly they cannot, if we don't get rid of the Negroes who we have armed and disciplined and who have fought with us, to the amount, I believe, of some 150,000 men. I believe that it would be better to export them all to some fertile country with a good climate, which they could have to themselves. You have been a staunch friend of the [Black] race from the time you first advised me to enlist them in New Orleans...What then are our difficulties in sending the Blacks away?<sup>4</sup>

President Abraham Lincoln to General Benjamin F. Butler (April 1865)

We need new friends, we need new allies. We need to expand the civil rights struggle to a higher level—to the level of human rights. Whenever you are in a civil rights struggle, whether you know it or not, you are confining yourself to the jurisdiction of Uncle Sam. No one from the outside world can speak out in your behalf as long as your struggle is a civil rights struggle. Civil rights comes within the domestic affairs of this country. All of our African brothers and our Asian brothers and our Latin-American brothers cannot open their mouths and interfere in the domestic affairs of the United States.

But the United Nations has a Universal Declaration of Human Rights; it has a committee that deals in human rights. When you expand the civil rights struggle to the level of human rights, you can then take the case of the Black man in this country before the nations in the United Nations. You can take it before the General Assembly. You can take Uncle Sam before a world court. But the only level you can do it on is the level of human rights...

Uncle Sam's hands are dripping with blood, dripping with the blood of the Black man in this country. He's the earth's number-one hypocrite. He has the audacity—yes, he has—imagine him posing as the leader of the free world. The free world! Expand the civil rights struggle to the level of human rights. Take it into the United Nations, where our African brothers can throw their weight on our side, where our Asian brothers can throw their weight on our side, where our Latin-American brothers can throw their weight on our side, and where 800 million Chinamen are sitting there waiting to throw their weight on our side.<sup>5</sup>

Malcolm X, "The Ballot or the Bullet," (April 3, 1963, Baltimore, Maryland)

## **The System Fails, the Movement Regroups**

In Louisiana, just a few weeks after Category Five Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, 49 movement organizations from throughout the region met to develop a common strategy and tactical plan. Gathering in Baton Rouge, they formed the People's Hurricane Relief Fund and Oversight Coalition (PHRF). Their main goal: to create a Black-led, multiracial, progressive reconstruction plan for New Orleans and the region that could challenge the white, corporate take-over already underway. The group also discussed how to use the painful example of the human-made disaster, the racism of the Bush Administration, and the vacillation and spinelessness of the Democrats to help create a new movement with an independent, community-based program. This meeting led to a follow-up meeting in St. Helena Island, South Carolina in November, many nationwide support rallies, marches, demonstrations, press conferences, progressive legislation introduced by the Congressional Black Caucus, neighborhood efforts headed up by groups such as Common Ground and Mama D. This work continued into a December 8-10, 2005 meeting, "Survivors Assembly and March for the Right of Return." There have been actions to stop evictions, to stop police brutality and to punish police who abandoned prisoners during the hurricane, efforts to get the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to pay for housing and hotels for the survivors, fights for freedom of information, and fights for union jobs with prevailing wages. It has continued through the mayoral election of April/May 2006 and accelerated with demands for a major expansion

and strengthening of the levee system as the hurricane season approaches as well as the first anniversary of Katrina.

When the first version of *Katrina's Legacy* was written in September of 2005, one of the great fears of grassroots groups in New Orleans was that the suffering of the people, especially because they were Black people, would be soon forgotten, long before remedies could be proposed and a coherent movement could be constructed. But in fact, the New Orleans story has had surprising staying power on the front pages of the newspapers, and the grassroots groups, often carrying out similar but different tactical plans, have managed to keep the demands for the Right of Return and for a viable, Black-led rebuilding of New Orleans in the face of the power structure. Whether those demands can be translated into actual policies is the challenge facing all of us who organize to build social movements during these dark and dangerous times; but the groups in New Orleans are to be commended for keeping up the public pressure as they fight for a broader united front to turn demands into changes in people's lives.

As the PHRF and other grassroots groups propose an alternative, Black-led development plan for the Gulf Coast, they face an even greater danger: the plan of the Bush Administration and the two-party elite to "bulldoze New Orleans," drive out the majority Black population, give the city "a smaller footprint," and rebuild the city as a depopulated, sanitized, suburban theme park with a majority white, affluent population.

The so-called "natural" disaster of Hurricane Katrina is actually the human-made disaster of U.S. imperialism in

general and the Bush oligarchy in particular—where global warming (driven by the emissions of the U.S. economy), imperialist overextension in Iraq, the cruelest versions of structural and individual racism, the crisis of the cities, and the national oppression of Black people (in particular in the South) all tragically intersect.

There are historical moments when a convergence of events creates a governing crisis for the system and the ruling class loses public support and legitimacy. As a result, we are presented with an opportunity. Movement forces that previously have been weak and divided can find a rallying cry and a moment of focus to launch a programmatic and ideological struggle that pushes the system back on its heels. New Orleans—the city, but also as a symbol for the greater Gulf Coast, the Black movement in the South, the Black movement in the U.S., and the Third World within and without the territorial boundaries of the U.S.—offers such a historical challenge and opportunity.

## **Strategic Framework**

Given the enormous number of righteous demands generated by grassroots groups—including demands to bring back intact the dispersed Black population of New Orleans, and for housing and renters' rights, income support, restrictions on police brutality, a survivors fund, massive environmental clean up and reconstruction, and community oversight of all redevelopment efforts—a key question is, what are some broader strategic demands that can frame a comprehensive program of Black liberation and community revitalization?

Imperialism as a system operates by oppressing and super-exploiting whole nations and peoples, and it uses the ideology of racism to subjugate peoples of color throughout the world. Therefore, an international, anti-imperialist united front is not simply a slogan but a strategy in which to situate the many creative demands generated at the grassroots. The goal: to unite all who can be united to isolate the Bush Administration and the Right Wing of the Democratic Party. Four strategic demands can give focus and clarity to the many other specific demands generated by the grassroots.

- 1) *The right of self-determination and the highest level of material aid, under community control, to the oppressed Black people in the Gulf Coast.* The Right of Return is the key to any form of self-determination, for without a returning Black majority there can be no Black power, and Black dispersal will only perpetuate white supremacy.
  
- 2) *An environmental justice/public health framework* to rebuild the city in a way to dramatically reduce greenhouse gases and air toxins, and to reverse ecological disintegration and global warming. Before Katrina, New Orleans and the Gulf Coast were known for “Cancer Alley” and a toxic soup of industrial emissions, while the ravages of global warming were trivialized as natural disasters common to the region’s history and folklore. As Halliburton and the corporate raiders seize upon New Orleans as a corporate welfare project, there must be an alternative vision of a green city to offer an aggressive challenge to the ecological catastrophe

inherent in present capitalist methods of industrial production, transportation, urban construction, and an obsessive consumer culture that seduces the oppressed to participate in the planet's destruction.

- 3) *A frontal challenge to the national security state and the racist prison system.* FEMA is not just incompetent, but it operates under the authority of the Office of Homeland Security. The New Orleans police were not just derelict in their duties; they used armed force to suppress Black people seeking food and shelter even during the hurricane. New Orleans' Black poor are imprisoned at rates only comprehensible as human rights abuses, and yet even in the midst of Katrina and its aftermath, the shooting and locking up of poor Black people took precedence over rescuing them. The focus on jobs, housing, and income cannot be separated from the harsh reality that Black people in the U.S. are an incarcerated people. Freeing the Black prisoners must be pushed to the center of the debate about a third Black-led Reconstruction.
  
- 4) *The immediate withdrawal of all U.S. troops from Iraq.* As we speak, more than 2,500 U.S. soldiers, and more than 30,000 (with some estimates as high as 100,000) Iraqis, most of them civilians, have died in the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq, and tens of thousands more have been severely injured for life. As this is written, a group of U.S. marines is facing trial for the execution-style assassinations of 24 unarmed Iraqi civilians in Haditha—an ethical and political catastrophe for the

war of occupation to rival the atrocities of Abu Ghraib prison. Still, the bloodbath continues unabated as the U.S. occupation has now generated a bitter civil war. The U.S. government initially allocated billions for construction companies in New Orleans and now, to fund its immoral war of aggression in Iraq, is dramatically cutting social programs to pay for its capitalist objectives at home and abroad. The U.S. policies of invasion of Iraq and support for Israel's occupation and persecution of the Palestinian people has now led to the humanitarian disaster of Israel's carpet bombing and invasion of Lebanon. The tradition of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)'s "Hell No, We Won't Go" refusal to fight in the war in Vietnam, and the strong internationalist politics of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. can guide today's movement and provide a coherent internationalist and human rights frame for demand development.

These four strategic demands can provide a framework for programmatic coherence in the current political context. A discussion of counterhegemonic programmatic demands is elaborated in Section II of *Katrina's Legacy*.

## **The Historical Achievements of the Black Liberation Movement—Lessons for a New Reconstruction**

We are living in an historical period in which the greatest blow against the progressive movement and the Left is the theft of the history of our intellectual, moral, and



political victories against the system—in particular, the efforts to obliterate the profound contributions of the Black Liberation Movement. The possibility for any multiracial, international movement of resistance to the profound racism in the Gulf Coast situation lies in rebuilding this historical record.

The foundation for resistance has already been built by the abolitionist work of Nat Turner, Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and John Brown; the heroic Black Reconstruction Movement of 1865-1877; the century of struggle against Jim Crow; the 1950s-1970s Civil Rights and Black Liberation Movement, encompassing the work of SNCC, CORE, SCLC, Deacons for Defense, the Black Panthers, and the Gary Indiana Black Political Convention of 1972. Throughout the 20th century, this resistance has been framed by the intellectual and strategic work of Marcus Garvey, W.E.B. Du Bois, Paul Robeson, Harry Haywood, Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and Amiri Baraka. It has been supported by the Black community's many dedicated allies, including Yuri Kochiyama, Reies López Tijerina, Cesar Chavez, Mickey Schwerner, and Andy Goodman. Always an issue on the international stage, it has received powerful Third World support from the Pan African congresses, the Bandung Conference of non-aligned nations, the Chinese and Cuban revolutions, and the victory of the Vietnamese National Liberation Front.

But today, the Black community is under attack, isolated, and lacking a coherent ideology of resistance

or Black United Front forms of organization. In this context, re-establishing the historical record is a central tactic in reversing the despair and beginning to go on the offensive.

## **The First Reconstruction: Program for Emancipation (1865-1877)**

In 1865, less than 150 years ago, when Black people in the South won legal freedom from slavery, millions of Black women and men were thrust onto the historical stage. A Black political class emerged, able to create an alliance of Black freed men and women, some southern poor whites and workers, northern abolitionists, and Radical Republicans. This united front coalition drafted a program to consolidate the victory over the rebellious and racist South, and passed some of the most progressive legislation and social policies in U.S. history.

This plan was based on the material power of more than 150,000 armed Blacks who had rebelled against slavery and fought with the North in the Civil War, backed by four million more potentially-armed Blacks.

Imagine a period in which more than four million Black women and men, after three centuries of slavery, are instantly “freed.” They enter the post Civil War world with little history of training in politics, no history of even the relative freedom-within-oppression of a colonized people in Africa, no permitted relationships with whites except an always terrorized set of adaptations and charades as tactics of self-defense. A progressive, revolutionary Black political

class and multi-class mass movement emerged, based on the small but influential strata of free Blacks who had owned property and learned the skills of bourgeois society combined with the massive power of the former slaves. Imagine what a revolution it was to have former slaves, women and men, leading a political movement after centuries of being denied their families, their right to read or speak their mind, the right to travel outside of the plantation. Their limited history of common activity was restricted by the yoke of bondage to field slave slow-downs and sabotage, the miracle of the underground railroad, and the galvanizing, brave, brief, slave rebellions that were passed on as folklore by word of mouth as the ultimate model of hope. This consciousness, leadership, and organization was geometrically expanded in a period of a few short years, 1860-1865, in which Black slaves rose up against their overextended masters, fled the plantations, enlisted in the Union army, and were given freedom, training, and most importantly, guns.

What made Reconstruction so revolutionary was that it called for a true bourgeois democratic revolution—to grant the slaves full equality, to grant workers of all races the right to organize and make demands on government and their employers, and to militarily restrict and suppress the former planter class in the South, which was intent upon a counterrevolution. Among these forces who could form a united front for Reconstruction were the masses of the Black multi-class nation in the South just freed from bondage, free Blacks in the North, southern white workers, northern white workers, and the northern white middle and upper class progressives represented by the Radical Republicans.

But from the beginning, the Reconstruction movement faced powerful enemies. First, its temporary ally, the growing monopoly capitalist/imperialist class in the North entering its robber baron phase, had little interest in freeing the slaves or granting a multi-racial working class democracy. Rather, it saw its main enemy as the feudal/capitalist class in the South, and was willing to make temporary alliances to consolidate its victory in the war. From the outset, there were conservative forces in the North who anticipated re-uniting with the plantocracy, who shared a white supremacist hatred of the Blacks, and who simply wanted to make sure that the new alliance was under Northern control. Thus, in order to succeed, the Reconstruction movement had to somehow maintain the support of Northern monopoly capitalism for democratic rights for Blacks, as it also struggled for full democracy against the interests of the corporate class north and south—a very difficult tactical plan.

In the midst of this white collusion came the Radical Republicans, men and women, Black and white, of great principle, who saw the plight of women, the working class, and “the Negroes” as causes in themselves, not as tactical decisions to advance their class interests, but as part of a broader philosophy of capitalist reform. They were worried about the unchecked power of the growing monopoly capital, and saw the vaunted ideals of the United States as a cover for white racist aggrandizement. Many of them had been elected to the United States Senate and House of Representatives. Imagine them almost as a true Third Party, a left caucus within the Republicans fighting the conservative wing of the Republicans, and the reactionary party, the Democrats. Due

to their great initiative, for about a decade they were able to drive a broad united front led by the Republican party. Their objective was to convince the powerful northern capitalists that in order to effectively suppress the southern reactionaries and to restore the “Union” based on a victory in the Civil War, they needed to allow Black suffrage and full democratic rights for Black people—the effective right to vote, to free assembly, to run for office, to organize politically, and to pass progressive social and economic legislation. The historic Black Reconstruction Movement had a clear program that included the full enfranchisement of Black people in the South, the election of Black and progressive people to office, a major land reform program to bring land back to those who had tilled it as slaves, and profound infusions of funds for Black public education and training. This overall progressive program reached out to, and for a moment included, significant numbers of poor whites who for centuries had been the volunteer militia of “slave catchers” for the slave owners but now, without land or jobs and faced with the material reality of Black power, sought the possibility of a multiracial working class movement led by former Black slaves.<sup>6</sup>

This miraculous decade, directly following and as a result of the Union victory over the Confederacy in the U.S. Civil War, was defined by new legal status for Black people. The 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments to the U.S. Constitution outlawed slavery, conferred U.S. citizenship upon Black people, and extended the franchise to Black males.

In 1865, Congress established the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, known as the Freedmen’s Bureau, to assist emancipated slaves. According to Du Bois,

the program of the Freedmen's Bureau entailed specific responsibilities: "the relief of physical suffering, the overseeing of the beginnings of free labor, the buying and selling of land, the establishment of schools, the paying of bounties, the administration of justice, and the financiering of all these activities."<sup>7</sup>

In 1866, at the initiation of a Black delegation led by Frederick Douglass, Congress passed a Civil Rights Act, conferring citizenship upon Black Americans and guaranteeing equal rights with whites—overriding a veto by Lincoln's successor President Andrew Johnson. In 1867, again overriding President Johnson, Congress passed the First Reconstruction Act of 1867 that established military districts to oversee the progress of Reconstruction, to militarily protect the former slaves from bloody retaliation, and to suppress the newly formed Ku Klux Klan and other counter-revolutionary white supremacist organizations. The Second Reconstruction Act required the registration of eligible voters. The Third and Fourth Acts clarified that existing civil governments no longer had legal standing in the South and reinforced the authority of the federal military to enforce the civil rights laws that demanded enfranchisement of former slaves. Komozi Woodard describes some of the on-the-ground achievements of Reconstruction.

In some counties in the South, blacks enjoyed considerable social and economic benefits from Black political power. For instance, in Beaufort, South Carolina, black rice workers struck for higher wages and decent living conditions. In light of black political power in the state, Governor Chamberlain refused the rich planters' demand

that he send in troops to crush black labor resistance. Moreover, the black workers were emboldened by the support of such black elected officials as Congressman Robert Smalls, the civil war hero.<sup>8</sup>

The fight against counter-revolution was a critical component of the Reconstruction period from the beginning. The tragedy of the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln in 1865 (who had his own vacillation on the issues of full democratic rights for the freed Black slaves) was his replacement by Andrew Johnson, the Vice President at the time, the reactionary ally of the South, and the mortal enemy of Black people. Johnson was adamantly opposed by the Radical Republicans in the Congress, at a time when the capitalist class had not fully consolidated its power in the “chief executive’s” office. The Radical Republicans led a process of impeachment, bringing Johnson up on charges of subverting the constitution with the goal of removing him from office. They came close to succeeding except for the pro-slavery votes of some members of their own party. Senators Thaddeus Stevens, who came to the impeachment proceedings against Johnson in his last dying days, and Charles Sumner, led the almost-successful effort to remove Johnson from office. Sumner railed against Johnson’s treachery:

This is one of the last great battles with slavery. Driven from the legislative chambers, driven from the field of war, this monstrous power has found a refuge in the executive mansion, where, in utter disregard of the Constitution and laws, it seeks to exercise its ancient far-reaching sway... Andrew Johnson is the impersonation of the tyrannical slave power. In him it lives again. He is the lineal successor

of John C. Calhoun and Jefferson Davis, and he gathers about him the same supporters.<sup>9</sup>

While the Reconstruction movement was able to achieve great gains, the treachery of the Johnson presidency and its alliance with armed southern whites prevented the achievement of a key demand of Reconstruction leaders—Reparations, in the form of redistribution of land from the plantation system to a new system of Black land ownership. The 800,000 acres of abandoned Confederate land that were to be distributed by the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands never reached the masses of former slaves but, instead, ended up in the hands of Confederate soldiers who were granted amnesty by Johnson. The speculative developers who stole and profited from land originally intended for Blacks are the ancestors of the Halliburtons, Bechtels and Flours that are exploiting the Gulf Coast today.

Land redistribution was fundamental to the initial Reconstruction program. The progressive Black leadership of the early Reconstruction period was exemplified by the twenty Black ministers who met in January 1865 in Savannah, Georgia with General Sherman and the Secretary of War to negotiate terms of resettlement for freed slaves. Asked how the freedmen might best maintain their freedom, spokesperson Garrison Frazier answered: “The way we can best take care of ourselves is to have land, and turn it and till it by our labor.”<sup>10</sup>

Within two weeks Sherman instituted Special Field Order No. 15. It stated “the islands of Charleston south, the abandoned rice fields along the rivers for thirty miles back from the sea...are set apart for the settlement of Negroes...”<sup>11</sup> By the summer, the Freedmen’s Bureau had distributed



400,000 acres of abandoned Confederate land to 40,000 freedmen (as Sherman's Order stated "each family shall have a plot of not more than forty acres"). But President Johnson was determined to undermine the new Reconstruction alliance and prevent any form of Reparations at any cost. By the beginning of the following year, Johnson had rescinded all distributed land titles and ordered the return of lands to pardoned Confederate soldiers.

The achievements of the Radical Republicans and the self-activity of free Blacks and freed slaves are reflected in a tumultuous 12 years during which democratic rights were granted and public education was established as an objective for all freed slaves through out the South. The southern white hatred of both "the North" and "the federal government" that exists to this day stems from this revolutionary period in which the white supremacists and plantocracy were, for once, under restriction and even temporary subjugation. The Black-led Reconstruction movement offers a model of hope and shapes the terms of Black resistance and multiracial left organizing to this day. It is the subject of one of the greatest books in the history of the written word, *Black Reconstruction in America* by W.E.B. Du Bois. Du Bois' work serves as the fundamental theoretical and analytical frame of *Katrina's Legacy*.

## **The First Racist Counterrevolution: Jim Crow Apartheid (1877-1955)**

This is the story of how a reactionary Democrat/conservative Republican alliance of the northern imperialists and the

southern plantocracy worked to overthrow Reconstruction and send the Black masses back to virtual slavery at the hands of southern white barbarism.

As an oppressed people, a “nation within a nation” as Du Bois described Black people in the South, a large but militarily outnumbered minority, the Black movement desperately needed the protracted, permanent protection of federal troops to allow them to consolidate political and economic opportunity and power and to achieve full democratic rights. Tragically, the unique and fragile experiment of Black Reconstruction begun in 1865 was overturned through a process of gradual erosion, culminating twelve years later in a counter-revolutionary victory of southern planters and conservative Northern capitalists, the so-called “Hayes-Tilden compromise of 1877.” In the national presidential election of 1876, the vote was so close between the conservative Republican, Rutherford B. Hayes, and the reactionary Democrat, Samuel Tilden, that the virtual tie was thrown into the House of Representatives for resolution. In return for the Democrats agreeing that Hayes would assume the presidency, they won a far greater victory, the agreement that the new Republican administration would withdraw federal troops from the South and allow the counter-revolution of northern and southern capital to proceed with full force. That ugly backroom deal allowed southern white landowners and other members of its ruling class to re-impose a plantation economy based on the superexploitation of Black wage labor, and to unleash a bloodbath against the Black masses to forcibly impose white power and a literal police-state fascism.

Benjamin Wade, a Radical Republican congressman, explained his outrage at the betrayal of Black people by the Republican majority and Rutherford B. Hayes and predicted the unmitigated horrors to be inflicted on the former slaves.

You know with what untiring zeal I labored for the emancipation of the slaves of the South and to procure justice for them before and during the time I was in Congress, and I supposed Governor Hayes was in full accord with me on this subject. But I have been deceived, betrayed, and even humiliated in the course he has taken to a degree I do not have language to express. I feel that to have emancipated these people and then leave them unprotected would be a crime as infamous as to have reduced them to slavery when they were free.<sup>12</sup>

The economic system of neo-slavery was reinforced by a series of laws that began with the Black Codes, which criminalized every aspect of Black everyday life, and evolved into the Jim Crow system of formal apartheid, creating a reign of terror against Black people for a full century. This brutal system was fully supported by northern “progressives” from Republican Teddy Roosevelt to Democrat Franklin Delano Roosevelt. The segregation laws extended the ability of the United White Settler States to construct U.S. capitalism and imperialism through the superexploitation of Blacks as an oppressed people, an oppressed nationality within the U.S.

Why did the North become so reactionary? Why did the post-war “Union” evolve as an imperialist, white settler state instead of a multiracial capitalist democracy? Why did the white North reward its enemies, the white secessionists whom it restored to power, and punish its friends, the Black slaves

without whom the North could never have defeated the South in the first place?

Amiri Baraka in his essay on Du Bois, explicates the thesis that it was the representatives of northern imperialist capital who were the prime movers in the re-enslavement of the Blacks, while the white southerners were its main mechanism of implementation.

The slaves were not peasants; they were slave workers, except for the small groups of free Blacks and the overwhelming number of white farmers in the South. When chattel slavery was destroyed the Black struggle became a land struggle...so that the slaves could become a class of small entrepreneurs. But with the betrayal of Reconstruction by the newly imperialist forces of northern corporate industrial power, the land (the vaunted 40 acres and a mule) was seized by Wall Street (by 1873, 80% of southern lands were owned by northern capital) whose southern outpost was Atlanta.

The Mexican War of 1848, the ongoing pacification of the Native peoples, was followed by big capital allying itself temporarily with northern abolitionist democracy, as Du Bois called it, and the multi-national working class both Black and White. Once the 200,000 Black troops had completely destroyed the Plantation Owners as a class, the superficial move towards full democracy and land settlement, education, equal citizenship rights was tolerated until big capital secured full control of southern land and remaining institutions and the White middle class, the small businessmen, politicians, overseers, small farmers, were transformed into a comprador for rising Wall Street based U.S. imperialism.<sup>13</sup>

The term “comprador” used by Baraka is a Marxist formulation explained most effectively by Mao-Tse-tung in

his *Analysis of the Classes in Chinese Society*.<sup>14</sup> A comprador bourgeoisie is not an independent capitalist class, but rather, the functionaries for the imperialist class within a subjugated nation. They get their class power from their masters. The compradors have been classically reflected in the native colonial puppet governments or colonized bureaucracies that served their British, French, Japanese, and U.S. rulers in the Third World. In the case of the United States after the Civil War, the entire white caste (in a dual caste system of Black and white) was deputized to re-enslave Black people and do the bidding of Northern capitalists who they hated, but far less than they hated the Blacks. (The history of how large sections of the white working class in the South and North became allies of white capital and enemies of Black workers is a story unto itself.)

In one of history's biting ironies, it was the white South that eventually transformed and took over imperialism itself, turning the former Northern victors of the Civil War into their new subordinated co-conspirators—reflected in the long-standing power of the Dixiecrats, the Democratic Leadership Council's good old boys Bill Clinton and Al Gore, and the new Sun Belt Republican cowboys of the Barry Goldwater, Ronald Reagan, George Bush, Sr. and George W. Bush, Jr. variety. Rather than the capitalist North eventually bringing racial equality and democracy to the South (which it's majority never really wanted or supported in the first place), it was the South that imposed a xenophobic chauvinist racist reality on the entire United States. As Du Bois observed, the entire U.S. was "turned into a prototype of the south."

## **The Second Reconstruction: The Civil Rights Revolution (1955-1975)**

One hundred years after the end of the Civil War and almost a century after the white South staged its first counterrevolution, Congress passed the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. These critical reforms were conscious choices by U.S. ruling circles at the national level to repair the profound damage to “the system” of the Hayes-Tilden compromise and the ravages of Jim Crow. They were the product of decades of post-World War II militant civil rights resistance and a growing world communist and anti-imperialist Left, winning converts in the Third World over the overt racism of the U.S. As with the First Reconstruction, a minority of Liberal Democrats during the Second Reconstruction were truly committed to the broader cause of full democratic rights for Blacks, and an antiracist, antiwar capitalist democracy. As the Radical Republicans before them, they were eventually suppressed by their party and voted out of office by an increasingly racist and conservative electorate.

In 1965-1968, during a revolution of rising expectations, Black people participated in urban rebellions in Watts, Detroit, Harlem, Newark, Cleveland, and Washington D.C. For many young people today, it may be hard to imagine that Black-led rebellions took place in more than 458 cities between 1967 and 1969 alone.<sup>15</sup> During that period, there was considerable international support for the demands of Black people; the Soviet Union, People's Republic of China, and Third World nations throughout Asia, Africa,

and Latin America, as well as many progressive students in European universities, voiced their solidarity. There even was significant, though minority, white sympathy for why Black people would rebel.<sup>16</sup> This perspective argued that centuries of racist abuse had provoked Black outrage. It viewed police brutality, poverty, and structural racism, including the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, as the causes of Black rebellion.<sup>17</sup>

In retrospect, the profound mass militancy and structural victories of the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Liberation Movement can be understood as a Second Black Reconstruction. During this Second Reconstruction, a broad united front of Black organizations, representing different social classes and perspectives, and despite personal and political conflicts, was able to unite around a clear and popularly understood and supported program. From 1955 to 1975, “the two decades of the sixties,” there was a strong and exploding Black movement; a growing Latino/Chicano upsurge, reflected in La Raza Unida Party, the Brown Berets, the Young Lords, Reies López Tijerina’s fight for land in the Southwest, and the Chicano Moratorium Against the War in Vietnam; Asian/Pacific Islander movements, from the Red Guards to broad Chinatown coalitions supporting U.S. normalization with the People’s Republic of China; the resurgence of the Indigenous movements with the great contribution of the American Indian Movement; and large antiracist organizations of white students such as Students for a Democratic Society. Virtually all of the leaders of those movements acknowledged their debt of gratitude and formative thinking to the leadership of

the Black movement. This multiracial, Black-led Left was a major force in U.S. society. It was both in unity and in struggle with a significant liberal wing of the Democratic Party, many of whose members were elected during the 1960s and 1970s in opposition to the Dixiecrats, to the “moderates” who conciliated with them, and to the war in Vietnam that had been escalated by Democratic presidents John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson.

The Black Liberation/Reconstruction program included: an end to police brutality and proposals for civilian and (Black) community control of the police; comprehensive jobs and social services, including the concept raised by the Communist Party USA during the 1930s of “jobs or income now,” federal “anti-poverty” programs that included dramatic expansion of benefits and eligibility for Aid to Families With Dependent Children, Head Start programs for pre-school children and massive funding for Black and inner city schools; a breakthrough in large-scale hiring of Black people for private and public sector jobs; and powerful government protections for voting rights and against discrimination.

These demands were framed by the two strategic demands the system hated the most:

- “Black Power,” reflected in the demand for Black control of community institutions, a Black homeland and Black self-determination.
- “U.S. Out of Vietnam,” the growing sentiment in Black communities to bring Black (and Latino, Asian/Pacific Islander, Indigenous, and working class white) soldiers



home and allow the Vietnamese people to exercise the right of self-determination.

Many “non-violent” militant civil rights activists, especially before the 1963 March on Washington, initially felt that the implementation of the equal protection clause of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment (full equality, civil rights under the system, and full democratic rights) would eventually be accepted by the system and solve the structural problems of white racism and Black subordination. But with the Kennedy Administration’s weak protections for civil rights workers and its conciliation with southern Dixiecrats and the treacherous role played by J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI to sabotage rather than enforce civil rights laws, these young activists came to understand just how revolutionary the simple demand for “equality” and an end to racial segregation proved to be.

Many militant reformers were transformed into revolutionaries by the lynchings of the Klan, the blows of police billy clubs (in the North and in the South), the assaults of high-powered water hoses, and the racist killings that just would not stop—from Emmett Till to Medgar Evers to the four young girls who were the victims of the Birmingham Church bombing to Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney to the murders of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and Fred Hampton, and yes, the assassinations of John and Bobby Kennedy.

In 1972, poet and revolutionary organizer Amiri Baraka and Gary, Indiana Mayor Richard Hatcher helped convene one of the broadest Black united fronts in U.S. history: the National Black Political Convention in Gary, Indiana. This

convention, organized under the concept of a Black Agenda, generated a series of comprehensive political demands, including holding Black elected officials accountable to the Black community.

Some eight thousand African Americans (three thousand of whom were official delegates) arrived...[at] the “Gary Convention.” A sea of Black faces chanted, “It’s Nation Time! It’s Nation Time!” No one in the room had ever seen anything like this before. The radical Black nationalists clearly won the day; moderates who supported integration and backed the Democratic Party were in the minority.<sup>18</sup>

Also during the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Black Panther Party’s Ten Point Program generated a comprehensive and radical view, punctuated by a quote from the Declaration of Independence in which the U.S. “seceded” from England. This was followed by the tenth “key” demand:

We want land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice, and peace. As our major political objective, a United Nations supervised plebiscite to be held throughout the Black colony in which only Black colonial subjects will be allowed to participate, for the purpose of determining the will of Black people as to their destiny.<sup>19</sup>

The Black movement during the mid-1960s and 1970s developed a strong internationalist and Third World orientation. It called for solidarity with the people of Africa, support for the anti-Apartheid movement, and the most militant opposition to the Vietnam War. Muhammad Ali’s agitational masterpiece, “No Viet Cong Ever Called Me a N——,” mobilized Black and

Latino youth, many of whom were already enlisted, to turn on their own officers and refuse to kill Vietnamese youth fighting for self-determination. The connection between racism and oppression at home and abroad was highlighted by SNCC's cry, "Hell No, We Won't Go" to the war in Vietnam, Martin Luther King's "the United States is the worst purveyor of violence in the world," and the 1970 Chicano Moratorium in Los Angeles, the largest Latino antiwar demonstration with more than 30,000 participants who chanted, "Raza Sí, Guerra No!"

This movement had a worldview and an international strategy. It had significant and powerful grassroots power on the ground, functional unity between Black groups themselves (with, of course, tremendous tension and conflict), and a multiracial multinational alliance that included significant antiracist white support and involvement.

## **The Second Racist Counterrevolution: The New Right (1980-Present)**

The story of the Second Racist Counterrevolution that followed the Second Black Reconstruction begins with three simple points: (1) it happened; (2) we are still living through it; and (3) New Orleans in the era of Katrina is a powerful and painful reflection of its impact.

Today the Black community in the U.S. has been under attack from a ferocious counterrevolution that began almost before the civil rights revolution got off the ground. The "white backlash," which included white voters abandoning the Democratic Party in droves, began from the first day the federal government sent any troops to protect civil

rights workers, the first day one Black person received a job through an affirmative action program, and the first day one Black person was registered to vote through civil rights organizing.

By 1964, the country was split between a passionate movement for civil rights and an hysterical and frenzied white backlash. The Democratic Party, through the election of Lyndon Johnson, tried desperately to hold together a white and Black coalition. But, despite an unusual outpouring of decency among a significant minority of whites (including some in the South), the vast majority of white people and white voters were and still remain rabidly anti-Black.

Historically, southern whites in particular had voted for the Democrats for a century to punish the Republicans (the party of Lincoln) for defeating the Confederacy in the Civil War and for sending federal troops to the South after the war to enforce the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, and 15<sup>th</sup> amendments. Many southern whites saw Lyndon Johnson, a southerner from Texas, as a traitor for his leadership in passing civil rights legislation; still they voted Democrat in 1964 in a last ditch attempt to support the racist Dixiecrats who controlled every southern state and virtually all the key positions in Congress. But, after the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act (and after just three years of the federal government's attempts to enforce those laws) the white South bolted en masse to the now thoroughly racist Republican Party, where it has wallowed ever since.

By the 1968 presidential election, Republican Richard Nixon campaigned on a "Southern Strategy" that assured the white South, through the racially coded discourse of "law

and order,” that he would not enforce civil rights laws, but would use police violence to suppress Black urban protests and rebellions. The white South rewarded him by voting Republican for the first time in its history. But the Nixon vote was not even the worst development. In that same election, George Wallace, Governor of Alabama and a champion of apartheid, bolted from the Democratic Party, ran on a states’ rights and “defense of segregation” platform, and argued to white voters that even the Republicans were not racist enough. Although Nixon carried most of the southern states, Wallace won the electoral votes in the Gulf Coast states—Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas, and Georgia. Nixon barely won the election, receiving only 43 percent of the popular vote. Hubert Humphrey, the Democrat, received 42 percent, and Wallace received 13 percent of the vote, which included many white working class votes from the North, where white anger about Black power and the urban rebellions had reached a fever pitch.

Just as the First Counterrevolution resulted in the establishment of Jim Crow laws, the Second Counterrevolution did not simply aim to slowdown the Civil Rights Movement. Instead, it inflicted a subsequent reign of terror against Black people to reverse, not simply halt, the expansion of civil and economic rights. Richard Nixon and George Wallace’s plans worked. The Republicans, quickly followed by the Democrats, totally abandoned the demands of the Black community. With the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, the Black movement was denied the “Black messiah” that J. Edgar Hoover and the white establishment feared (and played a role in extinguishing).

A few years later, in 1978, the racist movement used the Bakke legal case to launch a brilliantly manipulative attack on affirmative action. Alan Bakke, a white medical school applicant to the U.C. Davis School of Medicine, claimed he was a victim of the now infamous concept of “reverse discrimination.” The Supreme Court upheld his claim by a 5 to 4 vote, paving the way for the anti-affirmative action movement. By 1980 came the rise of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, and an international right-wing counterrevolution based on neoliberalism and counterinsurgency was in full swing.

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Civil Rights Movement was in full retreat. Many of its strongest leaders had been killed or imprisoned through the work of COINTELPRO, a government counterinsurgency program that infiltrated leftist groups, caused internal splits and wars in the movement, and assassinated Black revolutionaries (not unlike the current surveillance programs that use September 11 as their pretext). Both the Republican and Democratic parties—opportunistically seeking angry, conservative, and racist white voters—further abandoned Black voters (with the Democrats coming to realize they could still win Black votes without taking any risks to alienate white voters). In the meantime, the civil rights victories opened the door, both ideologically and materially, for a growing and influential Black capitalist class that began to repudiate the very politics that led to its ascension, many of whom became closely allied with “the white power structure” and the corporate agenda.

In the face of this rightward movement and massive government repression, many Black left organizations increased attacks on other Leftists with whom they did not agree, and a climate of sectarian infighting and vicious competition grew. Reduced to a shell of their former selves, with many former members dropping out and recanting their actual experiences, these groups were unable to generate new forms of mass resistance and unable to contemplate a new revolutionary path under the difficult conditions of the rise of the Right.

And yet, during the Reagan years, there were significant efforts at popular resistance that created new alliances. Black, Latino, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Indigenous organizations built “Third World” strategic alliances and began to advocate the formation of multiracial organizations.

A broad alliance between radical Black, Latino activists, labor groups, and Democratic Party reformers who wanted to fight the Right found a dynamic vehicle in Reverend Jesse Jackson’s 1984 and 1988 presidential challenges. Jackson’s candidacies, under the mantle of the “Rainbow Coalition,” demonstrated the enormous potential for a Black-led, multiracial, progressive politics in the United States—and the possibility of aggressively challenging the Right.

In his 1988 campaign, Jackson and his Rainbow Coalition surprised the media and the political pundits. Initially written off as a marginal candidate, Jackson emerged in the Democratic Party primary season as a serious contender for the nomination. He attracted over 6.9 million votes—from urban Blacks and Latinos, poor rural whites, farmers

and factory workers, feminists and gays, and from white progressives wanting to be part of an historic change. After early respectable losses in Iowa and New Hampshire, he won five southern states on Super Tuesday, March 8, 1988. On March 12, he won the caucus in his birth state of South Carolina and three days later finished second in his home state of Illinois. On March 26, Jackson stunned his closest challenger, Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis and the rest of the nation in the Michigan caucus: winning that northern industrial state with 55 percent of the vote, Jackson became the Democratic front-runner. Dukakis later recaptured the lead and the eventual nomination with strong showings in the second half of the primary season aided by an orchestrated white backlash and by the sabotage of Jackson by Democratic Party operatives.

Jackson went into the 1988 Democratic Convention hoping to be nominated for Vice President based on his very strong showing, coming in second to Dukakis and having defeated a host of white big name candidates from former Colorado Senator Gary Hart to astronaut and Ohio Senator John Glenn. Instead, the Democratic Party silenced him and his progressive demands. Jackson, compelled by calls of “party unity,” and frightened by threats to isolate him from any positions of authority in the Party, chose to prioritize his future career aspirations and refused to challenge his suppression and marginalization. Shortly thereafter, Jackson disbanded the Rainbow Coalition he had built, and what had begun as an “independent” Rainbow Coalition challenging the rightward shift of the Democratic Party was sadly subsumed into the private property of an ambitious politician.



Following Ronald Reagan's 1984 rout of moderate liberal Walter Mondale, and in 1988, the pathetic performance of alleged liberal Michael Dukakis, and the racist and successful "Willie Horton" ploy of George Bush, Sr., the Democratic Party was losing white votes in droves, and was in a mood of outright panic.<sup>20</sup>

In 1985, an alliance of Democratic southern conservatives and Northern "neoliberals" formed the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC), to move the Democratic Party to the "center." Led by then-Governor of Arkansas Bill Clinton, Congressman Richard Gephardt (D-IN), and powerful tactician Al From, the New Democrats, as they advertised themselves, blamed the Democratic Party's internal crisis on "the liberals," advocated down playing discussions of civil rights, shed any "peace" identifications, advocated a "strong military" and suppressed and out-organized the declining liberal wing of the party. The goal was to woo back white voters from the Republicans with the "color blind" economics-oriented appeal: "It's the economy, stupid!"

But the Democrats' move to the right was not simply limited to "economic" and corporate issues. *Every year since 1968 the Democrats have moved further to the right on race.* This has transpired partially because Jesse Jackson and other progressive and Black Democrats have been unwilling to abandon, much less punish the Democrats by putting forth an independent program. They have refused to launch an independent *antiracist* campaign that could push the Party to defend civil rights, or, over time, bring former Democratic Black voters into the leadership of a third

party. And while there exists the important Congressional Black Caucus and, on paper, a Democratic Progressive Caucus, neither of these forms has the ideological cohesiveness or political will to confront the conservatives the way the DLC openly and vociferously attacks the few remaining liberals in its own party.

By 1992, many Black elected officials and functionaries of the civil rights establishment, shaken by 12 years of Reagan and Bush with no end in sight, accepted Bill Clinton's assessment that, in order to win a national election, they needed *two* southern white men (Clinton and Gore) to work like hell to keep the remaining white voters inside the Democratic Party. In return for Black support (assurance of no civil rights pressure to his left), Clinton promised to provide a significant number of Black appointments and contracts if he won, which he did.

But rather than simply the racism of "benign neglect," (a proposal once made to Richard Nixon by then advisor and later Democratic Senator from New York, Daniel Moynihan) the Clinton Administration carried out vicious, right-wing policies that even the Republicans would not have considered by themselves. In 1996, the Clinton Administration undermined due process and *habeas corpus* by signing the "Anti-terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act," which made it far harder for those convicted to overturn their death sentences, and opened the doors for Bush's later elaboration of the police state. Bill Clinton also campaigned on and carried out "ending welfare as we know it," which undermined federal social welfare protections that went back to FDR and the 1930s.

Clinton also personally sabotaged the movement in California to protect affirmative action programs at the University of California and other public institutions. From the outset of the right-wing assault on affirmative action as “reverse discrimination” and “promoting the unqualified” the Clinton Administration put many Democratic Party liberals on the defensive with the reactionary slogan, “Affirmative action, mend it don’t end it” (as if Blacks had already gotten too much). Clinton undermined the work of California Democratic progressives by withholding promised Democratic Party funds from the “No on 209” (the anti-affirmative action initiative) Campaign in California.

Clinton actually worked to sabotage any effective defense of affirmative action, worried that it would hurt his own chances for re-election if the fight to defend affirmative action was given public visibility, as the initiative was on the same California ballot as the presidential one in 1996. In practice, Clinton gave ideological support to the racists. After this history of treachery, in his most disgraceful move, he bragged to Black supporters that he was “the first Black president.”

The Clinton debacle was followed by the racist policies of Gore and then Kerry. Gore’s refusal to challenge the 2000 presidential election results in Florida allowed the conservative Scalia/Thomas Supreme Court to throw the election to Bush. (Michael Moore’s greatest historical contribution may be the inclusion in his documentary film *Fahrenheit 9/11* of footage showing Black Congress people protesting Bush’s stolen presidency in the 2004 presidential election through voter fraud, only to have white, southern

Gore turn against his Black supporters. Gore chose instead to placate, once again, white southern and suburban voters who had voted against him, in the vain hope of securing their vote in some future election.)

In 2004, John Kerry ran a pathetic campaign altogether, and an even worse campaign with regard to the Black community and civil rights. Despite his color blind, racist appeal to white voters, Kerry and the Democratic Party were despised for their opportunism by this voting bloc, especially white males, who voted for George W. Bush in record numbers.\* Tragically, even with Kerry's open contempt for Black voters and his wife Teresa Heinz's bizarre assertion that as a billionaire with family roots among the white colonialists from Zimbabwe she qualified as "an African American," Kerry was rewarded by receiving almost 90 percent of the national Black vote. Thus, the cynical tactic of the Democrats to take the Black vote for granted and chase after the white vote, with increasingly racist and reactionary appeals, does not presently cost them anything, and, in fact, perpetuates the political subjugation of Blacks. Similarly,

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\* The numbers are astounding. George Bush received 58 percent of white voters nationally, with Kerry receiving only 41 percent. Also nationally, Bush got 62 percent of the white male vote, and Kerry got only 37 percent. In the South, the numbers were off the charts (and increased the national average into which they are incorporated). Whites in the South voted 70 percent for Bush and 29 percent for Kerry, and white male voters in the South voted 72 percent for Bush and 27 percent for Kerry. These figures do not represent a two-party system among whites, but rather a white supremacy party, the Republicans, and a permanent minority party among more liberal and decent whites, the Democrats (who do nothing to earn the trust of antiracist whites or Blacks, but get their votes by default).

the lack of political independence by Black Democrats perpetuates their humiliation.

One final “fact” illustrates how brutal the Second Counterrevolution has been on the Black community:

The number of people in prison, in jail, on parole, and on probation in the U.S. increased by 300% from 1980 [since the election of Ronald Reagan] through 2000, to more than 6 million. The number of people in prison increased from 320,000 to almost two million in the same period. This buildup has targeted the poor, and especially Blacks. In 1999, though Blacks were only 13 percent of the U.S. population, they were 50% of all prison inmates (1 million people). In 2000, one out of three young Black men was either locked up, on probation, or on parole.<sup>21</sup>

This pain and suffering is the product of white supremacy as bipartisan national policy. This material and political reality explains and reinforces the political perspective that Black people in the United States are a nationally oppressed people trapped inside the U.S. nation state. As such, Black people have the right to self-determination, have an independent and conditional relationship to the U.S., and have the right to recourse for their grievances as an “internally oppressed people” in international bodies. This historical and ideological perspective sets the political frame for the events of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast.

### **The Gulf Coast: The Third Reconstruction (2005 – As Long as it Takes!)**

As we turn to proposals for action and remedy, there are Black

groups and individuals in New Orleans, the Gulf Coast, and throughout the U.S. who choose to explain their dilemma, their experience, and their demands in a Black-centered, civil rights, antiracist, and self-determination framework. These groups and individuals should be supported by all progressive people, including white people of good will who must stand up to the dominant white supremacy of our times. Let us acknowledge the profound courage required to put forth a perspective based on Black Liberation, which was once the leading view in the Black community. Today, there will be a strong bipartisan “white backlash” against those who think and express themselves in these terms.

These varied forms of Black resistance have already put the Bush Administration and the Democrats on the defensive—if only momentarily. Forced to respond to Black rage—a good example being Kanye West’s observation, “George Bush doesn’t care about Black people”—Bush, in a mid-September 2005 speech, declared “Poverty has roots in a history of racial discrimination, which cut off generations from the opportunities of America. We have a duty to confront this poverty with bold action.”<sup>22</sup> Headlines read, “Bush Talks About Poverty,” as if it was a major news scoop that he would talk about race and poverty and even their intersection (which of course it was, and would never be heard coming out of his mouth again).

Still, as we have seen, Bush’s neoliberal proposals for “enterprise zones,” corporate tax cuts, and his \$70 billion corporate giveaway betray his real intentions. Bush’s powerfully coded statement that “New Orleans Will Rise Again” is little more than a racist nod to the long-

standing Confederate theme “The South Will Rise Again.” This ideological and material assault is the challenge to the Gulf Coast and national resistance and to effective plans for a Black-led reconstruction. Yet today, we are not living at a time of a unified Black movement, Black Left, or multiracial movement with a recognized leadership structure that can challenge the political, ideological, and organizational strength of the two-party Right. Without such a counterhegemonic movement, which activists on the ground in New Orleans are working to construct, Bush can transform and pervert generalized acknowledgements of past racial discrimination into a pro-corporate, anti-Black reality.

### **Grassroots Movements Will Have to Lead—The Democratic Party has Abandoned the Black People of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast.**

Every radical social movement needs to build a broad united front to include more moderate and even vacillating allies, and the movement for a Black Reconstruction in New Orleans will need every ally it can get. But the Bush corporate bail-out of New Orleans is both facilitated by the Democratic Party establishment, and the absence of even the most tiny, coherent liberal, antiracist caucus or tendency within the Party. Virtually every white Democrat of any national recognition—from Hillary Clinton to Nancy Pelosi, from Howard Dean to Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid, to former presidential candidates Al Gore and John Kerry, and the opportunist Bill Clinton—has refused to fight against the ongoing civil rights

atrocities that hit New Orleans and refused to call for an effective Right of Return of more than 250,000 dispersed and abandoned Black New Orleanians.

Many of us had hoped that the Congressional Black Caucus, the self-identified “conscience of the Congress,” would provide militant leadership and challenge the Democratic Party establishment and from there the Republicans, but so far little concrete help has been forthcoming. In a seemingly encouraging development, in November 2005, the Congressional Black Caucus introduced the “Hurricane Katrina Recovery, Reclamation, Restoration, Reconstruction, and Reunion Act of 2005—HR 4197” a coherent programmatic plan for the reconstruction of New Orleans from a Black perspective.<sup>23</sup>

On paper it was very encouraging. It has provisions for “A Victim Restoration Fund” and environmental provisions that include “training for responders and clean up workers and public health assessment and monitoring.” It also includes a significant increase in stipends for Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, unemployment compensation, health insurance coverage, housing and community rebuilding that includes public housing funds, community development block grants, emergency rental assistance vouchers, prohibition of placement of families in substandard dwelling units, and fair housing enforcement. The list goes on to child care, head start services, relief for elementary and secondary schools, aid for institutions of higher education, voting rights protections, disaster loans and small business relief, and exemptions from bankruptcy restrictions.



On the surface, the Congressional Black Caucus bill is so progressive, so comprehensive, so exciting, that one would have expected it to be a legislative juggernaut to mobilize the Black and progressive communities. *There is only one major problem: the bill does not exist in the real world; it only exists on paper.* So far, the bill has not passed through any Congressional committees in either the House or the Senate, has very few white Democratic co-sponsors, and as we will see, is not even being pushed with any resolve by the Congressional Black Caucus. The bill, like the CBC itself, is trapped inside the white and reactionary-dominated Democratic Party. Tragically, the Congressional Black Caucus often fights only as hard as the white Democratic leadership allows it to.

Glen Ford and Peter Gamble, in their *Black Commentary* article “Katrina: Shock Therapy for Black America,” explain how the Congressional Black Caucus has contributed to the Democrats’ abandonment of grassroots movements in the Gulf Coast.

The national Black infrastructure has failed utterly to respond to the Katrina crisis, the wiping out of a majority Black city. The Congressional Black Caucus, which claims to be “the conscience of the Congress” has shown itself to be an appendage of the white [Democratic] House leadership. They slavishly followed Majority Leader Nancy Pelosi’s command to make the Democratic Party look good—as opposed to the Republicans—rather than address the crisis that was affecting their own people.

Forty-one of the forty-two Black members of Congress obeyed Pelosi’s edict, that the House Committee on

Katrina be boycotted...because it was stacked against the Democratic Party. Of course every committee in Congress is stacked against the minority Democratic Party, that's the way Congress works. But Democrats go to committee meetings every day faced with a Republican majority. Nancy Pelosi, however, was able to convince the Congressional Black Caucus, as a body, to stand down in the face of a horrific crisis, the displacement of hundreds of thousands of residents of New Orleans...

Only Georgia congresswoman Cynthia McKinney broke the Pelosi-invoked boycott [risking retaliation from the Party's House minority leader]. She attended every session, and made good use of the experience, challenging the administration's witnesses every step of the way. The rest of the Black Caucus...failed to make use of the forum in which the New Orleans debacle was being discussed. Why? Because they collectively had nothing to say...They showed their true colors on Iraq, when only Cynthia McKinney out of the whole Black caucus voted for the Murtha bill that called for an immediate exit.

We have a dysfunctional Black Caucus. It cannot cope with the biggest crisis that has befallen our people...ever. A whole Black city wiped off the face of the map. Yet the CBC allows itself to be towing the party line—a white line—based on the logic of a bunch of white consultants who are in search of some mythical white American heartland. That's not where we live. So this is not a commentary about the minutia of legislation that has been introduced under the signatures of various Black congress people. None of it is going anywhere anyway. It is about the failure of Black leadership. We have a dysfunctional Black caucus...drunk on somebody else's power, but it's not ours."<sup>24</sup>

## **Fighting “Katrina Fatigue”—Supporting Black Leadership at the Grassroots**

Given the capitulation of the Democrats, and the crisis of Congressional Black leadership that the *Black Commentator* outlines, the simple but profound realization is that grassroots, Black-led, working class-based labor and community groups must lead the resistance. At this point in history that is easier said than done. The two-party system tries to crush any radical social movements on the ground that would challenge the bankruptcy of the two-party oligopoly. That work is made even more difficult for groups trying to put forth an explicitly pro-Black message. Rev. Lennox Yearwood, chair of the Hip Hop Caucus, in an interview with Damon Azali on the Pacifica radio program *Voices from the Frontlines*, observed that many Black organizations in New Orleans and nationally are being pressured to drop specific references to Black demands, Black liberation, or Black anything. The white backlash in the Congress, for example, threatens to further punish the residents of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast if they put forth any demands that specifically challenge U.S. racism, claiming that such a Black-centered discourse will result in less federal and state funds for the New Orleans relief efforts. Yearwood explained that many Black groups in New Orleans have been pressured to talk more about “all New Orleans residents” or “the poor.” He called this white backlash pressure against Black-centered demands “Katrina Fatigue.”<sup>25</sup>

Ironically, from the first Black Reconstruction to the present, it has been social movements led by the Black

Left and revolutionary politics that have generated the broadest progressive programs for all working people and for “the poor,” including poor and working class whites. Conversely, the liquidation of Black demands has generated reaction and no help for any working people, let alone the poor, and especially the Black poor and working class and the Black community as a whole. The first obligation of a national progressive movement is to support those forces in the Black community who choose to frame their resistance and demand development in terms of Black power, reflected in demands for Reparations, land, and the right of self-determination. The immediate reflection of these politics is the demand for the Right of Return for all 350,000 Black people in New Orleans and the Black community throughout the Gulf Coast at a time when the city is now less than 50 percent of its former population with a massive newly-created Black Diaspora. Only if Black people can get home to New Orleans will there be a social base for a long-term struggle for Black and left power. That single demand, the Right of Return, is the key link to reconstruct a foundation for the people of the Black Belt South.

Today, in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, there is the historic opportunity to build more unity in the movement and to drive the national and international discourse to the left. Progressive forces throughout the U.S. can offer concrete help to the beleaguered Black community that consistently remains the most progressive force in the country, reflected in a Third Reconstruction from the bottom up. As in the 1960s, when civil rights demonstrators marched in front

of establishment targets, the first question of the corporate and governmental flak catchers was “What is it that you people want?” The next section, with its focus on demand development, will offer some answers to that question.