



The Battle Over New Orleans:

Katrina Survivors Still Under Attack

Four and a half months after Hurricane Katrina slammed into the Gulf Coast and devastated New Orleans and large areas of Louisiana and Mississippi, the survivors – who were cold-bloodedly abandoned by Federal, state and local officials during the week-long horror of the storm and the flooding that followed – are still under attack. New Orleans is in shambles: immense stretches of it are still without water or electricity, hospitals and schools remain shut, whole neighborhoods are uninhabitable. Promises to rebuild have become empty lies. Only 20 percent of the city's residents have returned, and those are mostly white and wealthy. The word "Katrina" has come to mean the deliberate racial and class cleansing of a major Black city.

Katrina was a national and international scandal because the death and destruction were man-made, caused by a series of criminal, racist and anti-working-class acts of commission and neglect by the Federal and local authorities. Over 1300 people died, and a quarter of a million homes were destroyed. As we wrote in *Proletarian Revolution* No. 75: "The result in New Orleans was a 'perfect storm' of all the ugly features of American capitalism, and it led to perhaps the greatest single act of racist mass murder ever to take place in this country."

That storm is not over. Once the continuous media coverage ended, the crimes committed before and during Katrina got swept under the rug. George W. Bush's main concern, after all, was the public relations blow he suffered, not the horrors the victims underwent. New outrages are being committed daily. For example, displaced evacuees across the country are threatened with eviction from the trailers and run-down motel rooms the government parked them in. Although billions of dollars were promised, aid for Katrina victims has been meager, and many of the poorest never saw any at all. And every effort is being made to prevent much of the poor, Black and working-class population of New Orleans from returning.

Katrina washed away much of the veneer covering the true nature of this racist capitalist society. It starkly revealed how Black workers and poor people are still the main targets, not of nature but of

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LRP contingent at anti-war rally in Washington DC on September 24, 2005

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Letter from the Editors

This issue of *Proletarian Revolution* is dedicated to the struggle of the Katrina survivors in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. As it was being prepared, the struggle of the transit workers in New York broke out. These two events are key to sparking a fight-back against American capitalism on home soil.

As our article "Bush on the Run" points out, a major reason for the decline of George W. Bush's presidency has been the resistance of the Iraqi people to the murderous imperialist intervention. Added to that has been the relentless upsurge of workers and peasants in a growing number of countries, particularly in Latin America, where rejection of U.S. designs by the masses is overwhelming. Previous issues of *PR* have examined these struggles in detail. We have noted that workers living in oppressed nations tend to be more advanced in their understanding of the true nature of the U.S. ruling class behind the pretense of "democracy" and "freedom."

But then came the "made in the USA" disaster of the Gulf Coast catastrophe, whose horror was broadcast for the world to see. This cataclysm not only further exposed and de-legitimized American capitalism in the eyes of anti-imperialist fighters internationally. It marked the beginning of a sea change in working-class consciousness, especially Black consciousness, here at home.

The human catastrophe perpetrated in New Orleans revealed that the unnatural misery and poverty imposed by U.S. imperialism was not limited to the so-called "Third World." To point to the common enemy at home and abroad, the League for the Revolutionary Party (LRP) raised the banner "From Baghdad to New Orleans: U.S. Capitalism Means Racist Mass Murder! Socialist Revolution is the Only Solution!" Our current article outlines the latest developments, as Katrina survivors look for ways to press forward their struggle.

FROM NEW ORLEANS TO NEW YORK

On December 20 came the transit strike in New York, defiant of the legal ban on public service strikes and waged by a union dominated by Black workers and other workers of color. This strike, initiated to defend just demands for a basic wage and benefits package, nevertheless showed an anger and militancy that has even deeper roots. It too brought class and race tensions to the surface.

In New Orleans the media lost no time in painting the survival efforts of Black hurricane victims as dangerous criminal activity threatening law and order. In New York the capitalist
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An Appeal to Our Readers

The League for the Revolutionary Party has been exerting every effort to get out material and actively intervene in the living struggles of the working class here in the U.S. Our work in the transit strike in New York City and in visiting New Orleans are just two examples.

We often distribute free and low-cost literature at many events to strikers and low-waged or unemployed workers. We are getting a more encouraging response than ever to our literature and interventions designed for mass events. And even those readers who do not completely agree with our general perspective appreciate that we often provide the only working-class view and analysis, with trustworthy and detailed information as well.

At the same time that struggles are budding in the U.S., revolutionary upheavals of the workers and oppressed are

breaking out, especially in Latin America. These struggles hold the key to future prospects for revolution.

That is why, despite our limited resources, we have followed resistance movements abroad and have made trips to key countries whenever possible, most recently Bolivia and Argentina. In our view, the definitive success of struggles and rebellions at home and abroad depends on the fight to build the revolutionary party internationally.

In order to get our message out more, we need your help. We urge you to subscribe to our magazine, and we call upon you to make a donation today, no matter how small.

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Proletarian Revolution

Published by the Socialist Voice Publishing Co. for the League for the Revolutionary Party (Communist Organization for the Fourth International). ISSN: 0894-0754.

Editorial Board: Walter Daum, Sy Landy, editors; Dave Franklin, Evelyn Kaye, Matthew Richardson. Production: Jim Morgan

Subscriptions: \$7.00 for 8 issues; \$15.00 overseas airmail, supporting subscriptions and institutions. Striking, unemployed and workfare workers may subscribe for \$1.00. Complete set of back issues: \$50.00.

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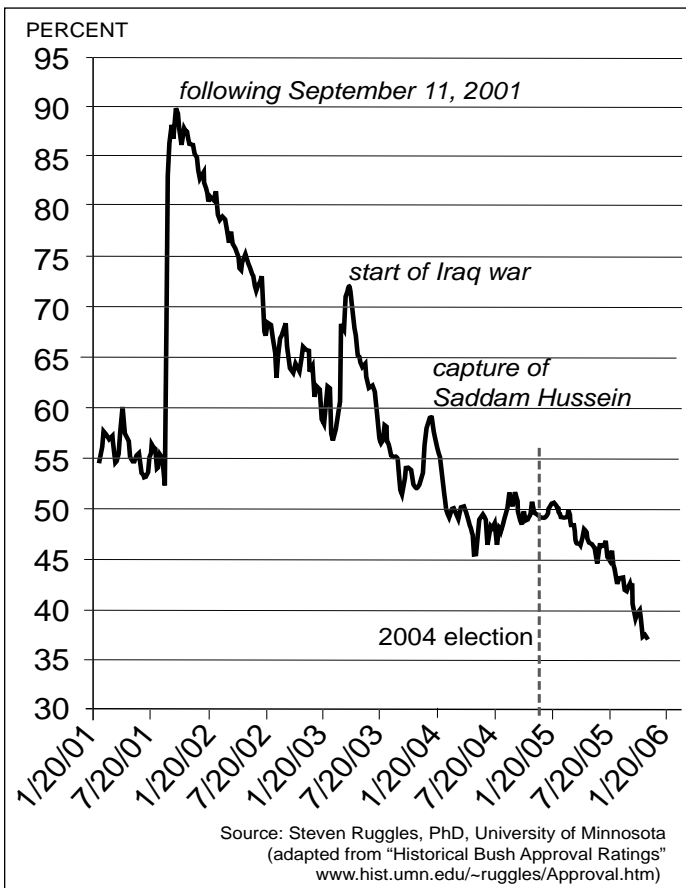
Bush on the Run

Version II of Bush II is in tatters. A year after starting his second term celebrating his electoral “capital,” his administration has undergone a series of crises, failures and scandals that has reduced his electoral popularity to record-low levels and left his standing highly suspect within his own capitalist class. No wonder: his problems mean trouble for the ruling class itself. At least temporarily, they have forced some detours in the unrelenting capitalist attack on the working class.

But this has certainly not meant an end to the long-standing capitalist offensive. All the more critical, therefore, is the need for a working-class leadership that can take advantage of the opportunities presented by Bush’s setbacks and cohere an opposition not only to Bush but to all capitalist politicians, including the “Bush lite” and liberal Democrats.

IRAQ DEBACLE

Internationally, the most sustained crisis is the Iraq occupation, which becomes a greater fiasco with each passing month. The year 2005 opened with Bush proclaiming a “turning point” in Iraq, with the pseudo-democratic January elections. But as resistance deepened and more body-bags of U.S. soldiers flew home,



Approval ratings for Bush II since his inauguration. The first peak in popularity came after September 11, 2001. The second peak is the start of the Iraq war; the third, the capture of Saddam Hussein. The fourth and lowest peak, which brought his popularity momentarily above 50 percent, came in time for Election Day, 2004. The president’s plummeting popularity has undermined his usefulness to the ruling class.

the war’s unpopularity grew among the mass of Americans. Bush now proclaims that he is focused on “complete victory,” a boast concocted out of denial, desperation and cynical public relations. He is utilizing the recent December elections, with their high turnout and low violence, to make propaganda about the alleged democracy the U.S. is creating. But once again, the voting patterns and resulting protests reflect and deepen the ethnic and religious fractures that the occupation set loose. The new government will be based on the Shi’ite religious parties, which are anti-Sunni and are close to the regime in Iran, one of the poles in Bush’s “axis of evil.” Some victory.

It is increasingly apparent to representatives of the U.S. ruling class, including important sections of the military staff, that the occupation faces a fundamental quandary: the longer the U.S. stays, the more the resistance grows; and if the U.S. pulls out, the puppet government will lack the capability to contain the resistance or govern the country. That would mean either splitting the country, or ethnic and sectarian religious civil war (or both). Turmoil could spread throughout the Middle East and further into the Islamic world. Three years ago we predicted the failure of the U.S.’s Iraq adventure and its whole Middle Eastern strategy. (See *Proletarian Revolution* No. 67.)

The facts point to a debacle for U.S. imperialism. Bush’s dream of setting up a stable government in order to make Iraq a base for dominating the Middle East and Central Asia is already a nightmare. On top of this, from the torture centers at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo and those run by the U.S.-created Iraqi police force, to the ones the CIA had set up in Eastern Europe, the administration has been directly or indirectly involved in a variety of sordid and secretive crimes.

The leaders of the ruling class normally don’t lose sleep over such matters as murder and torture, but on top of Bush’s mounting embarrassments the public relations effect was damaging. Thus Bush, who was once seen as an opportunistic but audacious champion of imperialism’s global interests, is now largely regarded as a stubbornly inept pretender who is undermining U.S. influence and even its military power. Working-class revolutionaries stand for the defeat of imperialism in all its wars.

DOMESTIC DISASTERS

On the home front, Bush’s presidency has been distinguished by its avid prosecution of the capitalist offensive through its privatization efforts and its transparent display of capitalist class rule in the political system. Corporate lobbyists literally write laws and regulations, with the aim of not simply maintaining profits but of openly engaging in the wholesale looting of national resources, regardless of the long-term effect. The administration and its party’s commitment to rapid profits is exceeded only by their dedication to gorging themselves at the public trough.

Shortly after beginning his second term, Bush tried to push privatization of the Social Security system through Congress. As we analyzed in *PR 75*, the attempt to trash the popular social program was too much for the working class. In the face of massive opposition, Republican as well as Democratic Congressmen balked, and Bush had to shelve this lead item on his domestic agenda. Another early setback was the Republican intervention into the Terry Schiavo case, with the Democrats gutlessly cowering in the background – until polls showed them that public opinion overwhelmingly condemned political intervention into this personal and medical matter.

Last year the Plame case also came to a head: the “outing” of CIA agent Valerie Plame by administration officials. Vice President Cheney’s Chief of Staff Lewis Libby was indicted, and it is clear that presidential aide Karl Rove is also up to his armpits in the mess, if not Cheney and Bush themselves. The idea was to retaliate against Plame’s ambassador husband for challenging trumped-up evidence of Saddam Hussein’s nuclear ambitions. The case is a dramatic example of the Bush team’s willingness to harm imperialism’s own operations to protect its priorities.

The culmination was the Katrina tragedy, which exposed the criminal responsibility of all levels of government. (See the article on page 1 and *PR 75* for background.) Its roots go deeper and further back than the Bush administration. But Bush’s policies exacerbated the lack of preparedness. The government’s corrupt ineptness and blatant contempt for the lives of hundreds of thousands of mostly Black working-class people, created a horror for all the world to see.

The usually politically astute Bush made the disaster worse for himself by his praise for Michael D. Brown, the witless incompetent he had appointed to head the Federal Emergency Management Association (FEMA) who compounded the fiasco of the Katrina relief effort. Even after he was forced to fire “heck-uva-job Brownie,” the cronyism continued: Bush tried to appoint Harriet Miers, another hack crony, to the Supreme Court, and public disgust mounted.

BUSH EXPOSED

The outrages keep popping up. In December Bush’s approval of wiretaps without warrants for domestic spying surfaced, a defiance of the U.S. constitution and the Congress. It has drawn angry opposition even from leading Republican senators. And as we write, the lobbying scandals around the confessed swindler Jack Abramoff threaten to entangle carloads of Republican and Democratic politicians in the Capitol and the White House. Dozens of Washington politicians, among them the president himself, are scurrying to dump his tainted “campaign contributions.” Not coincidentally, their move to donate tens of thousands of dollars to charity turned into a flood the day Abramoff pleaded guilty, out of fear he would tell prosecutors the names of all those he paid off and the favors he asked of them.

There were further international setbacks in the fall. One was a disastrous visit to Latin America, where he was upstaged by Hugo Chávez of Venezuela (who basked in the glow of the anti-imperialist upsurge across the continent). There was also a diplomatic debacle at the Asian summit, where his efforts to isolate China and deal with North Korea failed embarrassingly. And in December, Bolivian voters elected as president the reform candidate Evo Morales, whose margin of victory was made overwhelming by the U.S.’s unconcealed distaste for him.

The avalanche of humiliations has taken a severe electoral toll. Despite a recent uptick in polls owing to illusory and temporary economic “good news,” Bush faces unusually low approval ratings. More and more people see him for the liar and agent of the rich that he always was. From the outset of his presidency, Bush was a severely polarizing figure, rightfully hated by Blacks, immigrants and other victims of his anti-working-class policies. Now he is even held in contempt by many who voted for him.

In the wake of these setbacks, Bush has been forced to retreat and cede defeat on legislative initiatives besides Social Security, including his latest installment of enrich-the-rich “tax reform,” and his blessing of torture in interrogation. In short, Bush is on the run. His arrogant sneer has been repainted with a veneer of phony modesty. New events and the White House’s political shrewdness

may yet provide some bursts of political fortune, but it is clear he is never going to regain the momentum and power that he once had, courtesy of Osama bin Laden. His major asset has been the blithering vacillation of the Democrats.

CAPITALIST OFFENSIVE

Bush’s defeats over Social Security and other legislation are both causes and effects of his political troubles. They show that some of the worst elements of capitalists’ “one-sided class war” have been sidetracked. But the war itself has not ended and in fact has started to take on renewed fury.

This is clear in the case of the automobile industry. Ford and General Motors workers have been dealt cuts in health care benefits (Chrysler workers are up next) in the wake of massive financial losses at those companies. Huge layoffs are impending. And still more cuts are promised in the next contract round. The Delphi Corporation, a huge auto parts spinoff from GM, is pursuing bankruptcy, has shut plants and demands truly massive cuts in wages and benefits.

These are attacks on better-paid workers, whose health insurance plans in auto have been the crown jewels of gains for production workers. Much of the attack on the working class at large – plant closings, speed-up, reduced health plans, pension eradication, etc. – has been less publicized but is no less devastating.

The attacks have been particularly focused on Blacks and Latinos. This is not just the objective working of the “market” alone; it involves conscious decisions to superexploit Latino and fearful immigrant laborers while excluding many Blacks because of their militant history. The increased level of anti-Black racist attacks was manifested in the hurricane disaster. Now Bush is attempting to regain some popularity with his conservative base and others through a racist campaign against illegal (mainly Latino) immigrants, while at the same time maintaining a balancing act of utilizing their labor for superexploitation.

Nevertheless, the ruling class still generally prefers to avoid head-on battles with workers at their strongest positions. It still can achieve many of its desired goals through flanking maneuvers. For example, reducing benefits at GM and Ford is largely an attack on retirees, not active workers. Likewise Delphi, following the example of the airline and steel companies, is seeking to use the bankruptcy laws to back it up in wiping out union gains.

The economic attacks are partly offset for the moment by the flooding of consumer markets with cheap goods and easy credit. These features, however, in their own way contribute to the attacks themselves. The outsourcing of production to factories that superexploit labor in China and elsewhere is largely responsible for the cheaper goods. And the expansion of usurious credit is a “blessing” that is reaching crushing proportions in raising the personal debt of working people.

THE RULING-CLASS DILEMMA

These attacks will continue, as they must. It cannot be overstated that they took place also under Democratic administrations and Democratic-controlled Congresses. For this is the only way the capitalists can try to resolve the decline of their profit system and stave off the explosive possibilities of a new great depression.

The crisis looms largest in regard to health care and pensions. Since the U.S. has no universal health care, American companies themselves bear costs that foreign competitors, at least in other advanced industrial countries, do not. As for pensions, one way the capitalists have boosted their profits in recent decades has been to underfund their pension-plan obligations to their workers. (That is, they have robbed workers of deferred wages.) Nationally, the shortfall totals to at least half a trillion dollars.

This frames the fundamental problem that Bush's presidency presents to the ruling class. It is not that he is acting too roughly. (Indeed, some think he is not hard enough). Rather, he has become too compromised: his administration is too nakedly incompetent, corrupt and elitist to do the effective job on the working class they put him in office for. Important sections of the ruling class are also reacting to the administration's quick-buck operations, its favoritism toward particular industries (energy, military, reconstruction, medical corporations) and its open cronyism – all at the expense of adequately maintaining the system. In the Katrina calamity, a major American city and the country's largest port were left to drown, even though the disaster was both predicted and preventable.

The bourgeoisie is in disarray. It never has a full consensus on what to do; that is one reason for having two major capitalist parties. Bush himself flounders, retreating on earlier initiatives while appealing to his conservative petty-bourgeois base through religiosity, "pro-family" stances, a racist campaign against immigrants, etc. Since this president is a lame duck, various capitalist politicians would in any case be scrambling to position themselves for a presidential run. But Bush's breakdown makes the ruling class's need for new leadership much more urgent.

Various Republicans are either running or putting themselves in a position to become capitalism's new commander. Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, beset by his own scandal, nevertheless seems to be assuming the mantle of a "true" compassionate conservative. Senator John McCain has attempted to spread his appeal, combining hard-core patriotism with attacks on corruption. Thus he sponsored the congressional legislation against torture. Rudy Giuliani, the notoriously racist ex-mayor of New York City and pseudo-superhero of September 11, is another contender.

DEMOCRATS' COLLABORATION

At first blush, it would appear that Bush's unraveling is a heaven-sent opportunity for the Democrats to reverse their long decline and provide a capitalist alternative to the mess the Bushites have created. To be sure, they have stepped up their sniping and are not performing their standard rollover in the face of the right-wing agenda. Hence Bush's legislative defeats. But their response is still timid and divided, showing their inability to provide a cohered liberal bourgeois pole.

This can be seen clearly over Iraq. Democrats increasingly are trying to separate themselves from Bush. But their most prominent spokespeople, Hillary Clinton and John Kerry, do not want to undermine the occupation itself, which they supported from the beginning. Some partial exceptions prove the rule: John Murtha, a Pennsylvania Democratic Congressman and a long-term supporter of the war, recently came out for immediate steps toward withdrawal. Murtha did not become a dove, much less an anti-imperialist. He wants to cut imperialist losses in an unwinnable war while still maintaining an American military presence in the region. He reflects assessments within the military leadership itself, with whom he has always been close. His military credentials and changed position provided a huge patriotic shield for an opening by "anti-war" Democrats.

However, his position was isolated in his own party when the Republicans called for a House vote on withdrawal from Iraq: the overwhelming majority of Democrats, including Murtha himself voted against it. Even supposedly anti-war stalwarts like Dennis Kucinich blather about "benchmarks" and "timetables" rather than call for withdrawal at once.

The Democrats are trying to mark out a safe position: figuring that the growing anti-war sentiment has no other place to go if they nod to it. They prefer not going out on a limb by taking a

hard stand. They act this way because they share with Republicans a well-founded feeling that only a substantial American military presence, however unpopular at home and abroad, can protect imperialist interests in the Middle East.

Their position on Iraq echoes their overall relation to the Bush agenda. They have basically gone along with Bush's stepped-up offensive on the working class. They just want to distance themselves from Bush's excesses. They criticize him on Katrina but offer no reconstruction program supporting working-class and Black New Orleanians' real right of return. They went along with the suspension of prevailing wage statutes. They defended Social Security for now, under mass pressure, but whispered about needed "reforms" (i.e., cutbacks) in the future. And it remains to be seen how vigorously they will fight over the latest lobbying corruption scandals, since leading Democrats are implicated as well.

Although all the Democratic leaders are committed to imperialism and defense of capitalism, there are a few who see profound changes coming as the ship of state is tossed and turned in increasingly dangerous waters. Jesse Jackson and Albert Gore are making noises in this regard. In the future, when mass sentiment threatens to get out of hand, these politicians will make more populist promises about defending the "have nots" against excessive greed and preventing giant corporations from sending jobs abroad. John Edwards, who is now aiming for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2008, has apologized for his initial support to Bush's war position and is already pumping up his populist line.

But for the moment, both Republicans and the Democrats are tossing about rudderlessly. Both bourgeois parties are boxed in by capitalism's economic stagnation, which demands increasing cutbacks in social programs, and the fear of mass resentment and potential action against the rulers' greed and criminality. The course they are all committed to is keeping the masses at home and abroad in line and making them pay for the growing crisis.

THE CRISIS OF WORKING-CLASS LEADERSHIP

If the crisis in ruling-class leadership is striking, the crisis of working-class leadership is even more appalling and of longer standing. The fact that mainstream Democrats hardly bother appearing even liberal indicates how much the class struggle in this country has been contained, despite worsening conditions for so many workers.

Many are becoming increasingly disenchanted, as the eco-

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conomic and social miseries and dislocations accumulate. But they are also defensive, in the wake of the sustained offensive. In the recent round of concessions in auto, for example, workers feared not only what the auto companies might do to restore profitability, but also the real possibility that these symbols of American capitalist power could go down the tubes.

That discontent is being registered electorally and in opinion polls: opposition to Social Security changes; increasing hostility to both Bush and Congress and to both the Republicans and the Democrats, etc. While the ruling class does not feel comfortable with even such safe channels of dissatisfaction, they are nonetheless acceptable. But there is also opposition growing in more direct forms of class struggle. Strikes were up slightly from the year before, even before the pre-Christmas walkout of New York transit workers and the resistance at Delphi. The union decisions to accept concessions at Ford and GM only passed over widespread opposition. Protests over Katrina and other forms of racial attacks are isolated at present but indicate the volcano building up underneath.

Critical in keeping the response of the working class in check has been the treacherous role of its leadership, the union bureaucracy and the Black, Latino and immigrant politicians. Throughout the 30-year capitalist offensive, the labor misleaders especially have accepted the basic capitalist dictum that the workers must pay for the crisis of the bosses' system. Even though unions represent a declining percentage of workers, their potential for leading struggles in the interest of the entire class makes the bureaucrats' capitulation all the more treacherous.

The union officials disagree with the capitalists only over exactly how and how much. Even then, they try to limit any struggle by the ranks to the absolute minimum. As brokers for labor power, they do not want any mass action by workers to get out of hand and threaten the arrangements through which they derive their status, power and income. On the occasions that workers have defied the bureaucrats' efforts, they have been ruthlessly repressed.

The alternative the bureaucrats present is: don't struggle, vote! They pose the election of "pro-labor" capitalist politicians, principally Democrats, as the elixir for the ranks' mounting mis-

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eries. By steering workers away from genuine fightbacks, they have allowed the attacks to succeed. The more accelerated the attacks and desperate the conditions of much of the working class, the more the bureaucrats will push populist electoralism as a solution.

As with the Democrats, the lack of mass struggle has caused the bureaucracy to flounder and quarrel internally. Now the unions, and therefore the bureaucracy itself, have become endangered species. While the bureaucrats fight over how to maintain the unions even while continuing to retreat, the attacks rise. Neither the AFL-CIO nor its recent split, the Change to Win Coalition, has even thought about breaking their alliance with capitalist politicians or advocating genuine mass struggles.

A STRATEGY FOR FIGHTING BACK

Several things are necessary if the working class and oppressed people in the U.S. are to successfully defend themselves from the ruling-class attacks: 1) a program of demands which spells out the actual needs of the workers and oppressed; 2) a fight for classwide mass action; and 3) the coming together of a revolutionary leadership right now to fight for the needed demands and actions within the existing mass organizations and movements and to expose the current reformist and centrist misleaderships.

In every struggle, revolutionaries patiently explain the need for the revolutionary party and the socialist revolution. Even now, revolutionaries must educate the most militant and politically advanced workers and youth in the method of the transitional program, which is designed for intervention in major class battles – exactly to prove the need for socialist revolution. Today's struggles are already showing the need for jobs for all at union wages and a massive public works program to solve the crises of low wages, unemployment and the decaying cities and infrastructure as a whole. The need for a universal health care system and a guaranteed decent pension system for all is evident to most working people. An end to racism and the realization of freedom and full equality for Black, Latino and immigrant people are also essential.

Revolutionaries must also consistently raise the need for mass working-class action as key to the defense of our class. The working class has great power because of its ability to withhold labor, which is what makes society run and creates profits. Our class doesn't recognize its own power, however, because the union bureaucracy keeps even major strikes isolated.

The League for the Revolutionary Party (LRP) has long been associated with the call for a general strike because it is the most effective way that the working class can learn its own power as a class through its own experience. At times, we have posed the need for a general strike in an agitational manner, advocating it in situations where a struggle is under way and there is potential for a mass understanding of the need for a general strike strategy. Far more often, we advance the general strike in a propagandistic way, as a means to reach a more limited audience of already radicalizing workers and youth with the vision of how a united working class could exercise its power. The layer of revolutionary-minded workers and youth today is the key to building a vanguard party which can lead our class.

Whenever there are major class battles, we participate in them and point out the road forward. Authentic Marxists know that the mass of the working class can only grasp its own power, reach class consciousness and achieve its own interests through mass action, not classroom lectures. We believe that the struggle itself will show that capitalism, and pro-capitalist leaders, are obstacles to working-class needs. The interests of the workers and oppressed can only be gained and secured through a revolutionary workers' state. ●

Katrina Survivors

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capitalism. The naked grasp for profits by capitalists and their kept politicians, white and Black, shows once again that only a socialist revolution that ends the rule of capitalism for good can create a society that meets the human needs of all.

To that end, supporters of the League for the Revolutionary Party (LRP) have actively intervened in conferences and actions in Jackson, Mississippi and New Orleans. We fought for demands concerning full employment at decent wages, massive public works and racial equality, among others. (See below for a fuller description of our work and proposals.)

THE “CLEANSING” OF NEW ORLEANS

In New Orleans, Federal, state and local officials openly state their plans to gentrify the city while partially rebuilding it – without half of its Black population. Most outrageously, Bush’s Housing and Urban Development secretary, Alphonse Jackson, stated after the hurricane:

“Whether we like it or not, New Orleans is not going to be 500,000 people for a long time. New Orleans is not going to be as Black as it was for a long time, if ever again.”

The entire New Orleans public school system was dismantled and converted into privatized charter schools in mid-October. The first school didn’t re-open until the end of November. Most New Orleans schools will not re-open at all this school year, and those that do will be in the wealthier areas. While 60,000 children attended New Orleans public schools before Katrina, it is estimated that the school system will serve 10,000 students or fewer this year. With no schools to go to, most families of Katrina sur-

vivors with children cannot even think about returning to New Orleans any time soon.

The government’s hypocrisy is even greater when it comes to housing. The lack of homes is the main barrier to most people’s return, and Mayor Nagin pretends that it is a problem local authorities are helpless to deal with. At a “town hall meeting” in Houston November 27 attended by hundreds of displaced Katrina victims, the only answer he had was to suggest that the survivors apply for mobile homes being offered by FEMA and then set them up in villages inside the city. The Housing Authority of New Orleans even gave a no-bid contract to Vacant Property Security, Inc. to put steel doors on public housing apartments so residents cannot return or even retrieve their belongings.

Since the 1980’s, under a succession of Democratic mayors and with the cooperation of the Clinton and both Bush Administrations, the public housing stock has been cut in half. Now, if the authorities have their way, they will carry out the outrageous boast by Baton Rouge Congressman Richard Baker, who celebrated Katrina: “We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn’t do it, but God did.”

Nagin, the most prominent of a number of Black politicians involved, provides cover for the racist attacks. At the Houston meeting, Nagin claimed that his main purpose was to urge people to return to New Orleans. When skeptical evacuees asked whether the Lower Ninth Ward (an overwhelmingly Black poverty-stricken area) would be rebuilt, Nagin said yes. The very next day, a public hearing was held in New Orleans on the reconstruction plan by the Urban Land Institute, which proposes that a vast area covering entire Black neighborhoods be “re-evaluated as potential sites for mass buyouts and future green space.” Nagin’s own “Bring New Orleans Back Commission,” dominated by business elites and real estate tycoons, commissioned the plan.

Post-Katrina “Justice”

New Orleans had a notoriously corrupt and brutal police force before Katrina. It more than lived up to this reputation during the aftermath of the storm: arresting “looters” rather than providing aid to stranded victims, and threatening people trying to escape the city. (See *PR 75* for details.) But since then New Orleans cops themselves have come under investigation for looting and stealing cars during the post-storm evacuation.

Nevertheless, the police have kept up their historic task of targeting, intimidating and brutalizing the poor and particularly people of color. One particular assignment has been to harass immigrant workers doing the dirtiest clean-up jobs, making sure that no protest can be organized.

In October, four New Orleans cops were filmed by a television crew beating up Robert Davis, a Black retired school teacher. The cops also attacked members of the crew and other witnesses, and arrested Davis on false charges of drunkenness and battery. After the tape was released, three of the cops were suspended without pay and charged with

assault. The police “union” lawyer representing them argued that they were following standard police procedures. Many New Orleanians would agree.

In late December, a dozen or more New Orleans officers shot and killed a disturbed man who was waving a small knife. It was no act of self-defense, as the police allege: they fired a volley of at least 10 shots.

Along with police brutality, the entire “justice” system is stepping up its level of harassment. One barely-reported scandal is that New Orleans prison officials are refusing to release inmates who have completed their sentences. Local legal activist Bill Quigley exposed this outrage. His description of the New Orleans prison system deserves to be quoted at length:

The jails and prisons are full and staying full. Despite orders to release prisoners, state and local corrections officials are not releasing them unless someone can transport them out of town. Lawyers have to file lawsuits to force authorities to release people from prison who have already served all of their sentences! Judges are setting

\$100,000 bonds for people who steal beer out of a vacant house, while landlords break the law with impunity. People arrested before and after the hurricane have not even been formally charged by the prosecutor. Because the evidence room is under water, part of the police force is discredited, and witnesses are scattered around the country, everyone knows few will ever see a trial, yet timid judges are reluctant to follow the constitution and laws and release them on reasonable bond. (*Counterpunch*, October 11.)

The outrage over the Katrina disaster has shifted the entire police/court/prison apparatus into a higher gear. We warned in our previous article that evacuees, including those holding legal gun permits, were forced to disarm, while in towns where evacuees were sent, racist whites were acquiring weapons out of fear of incoming Blacks. “Black people displaced by the hurricane face the particular threat of racist attack. Survivors’ committees should affirm their right to armed self-defense and organize for it.”

Nagin waffled at the hearing, this time saying his intention was to “ultimately” rebuild all of New Orleans.

More recently, Representative Baker, who admired “God’s work” in cleaning out New Orleans, decided to give his deity a further hand. To the applause of liberals as well as conservatives, Democrats as well as Republicans, this ardent “free market” reactionary proposed a massive government expenditure – up to \$80 billion – to “restore” housing there. Under the guise of public aid, this would finance *private* housing through a massive government giveaway to private corporate developers. No doubt their checks will be sent more quickly than FEMA’s payments to Katrina victims.

The Urban Land Institute cynically tries to justify its own racist plan by saying “it would not be practical in the short term” to redevelop neighborhoods “that lack adequate levee protection.” But the reason for this is that the authorities will not commit to rebuilding the levees to withstand all hurricanes and floods, including maximum-strength Category 5 hurricanes. The Bush Administration has already rejected proposals to rebuild the Louisiana barrier islands and wetlands, which reduce a hurricane’s power as it approaches. Along with proper levees, this is the only way to really protect the region.

Even the dead have not escaped disgraceful treatment at the hands of authorities. First the government manipulated the body count, delaying a full search of the city and pre-emptively releas-

ing an official death figure in the 900’s before further victims were found. The “official” count still stood at just 1,053 by the end of November, an absurdly low figure. More than 6,600 people are still reported missing. Further, up to 200 bodies had not been identified by the end of November because DNA testing had not even begun. The government continues to victimize the poor of New Orleans in death as it did in life.

On every issue vital to their lives – housing, financial aid, schools, hospitals, jobs and rebuilding the levees – the Federal, state and local governments have handed the Katrina survivors nothing but a stream of confusing and contradictory decisions. This is not an accident, nor just a case of massive bureaucratic incompetence, though there is certainly plenty of that. There is a pattern to the official confusion and hypocrisy: they make no commitments that might give Katrina victims any confidence about rebuilding their lives, certainly not in New Orleans. That the ruling class is eager to commit far vaster funds to wage its imperialist wars rather than to rebuild and safeguard a major city – with hundreds of thousands of people living in and near it – shows the true priorities of the capitalist system.

THE SURVIVORS’ DEMANDS

In response to the authorities’ harassment and neglect, Katrina survivors have begun to organize themselves. In addition to local conferences, on December 9 a State of Emergency Conference and Survivors General Assembly drew several hundred people to Jackson, Mississippi. Survivors presented their stories, which ranged from tragic to horrific. Many expressed their outrage, and some broke down while telling their stories. A march in New Orleans the next day, of about 1000 people, centered around the survivors’ right to return to the battered city.

LRP supporters actively participated in both the conference and the march. At a youth speakout before the conference, one LRPer took the floor and pointed out the power of the survivors, noting that when they get organized and can spread their experiences and views widely they have the potential to blow the class

“Concentration Camp”

On December 6, a special congressional committee in Washington held a hearing on the government’s negligent response to Katrina. Survivors and activists testified about the race and class oppression so many of them experienced. One of the most telling moments came in an interchange between Leah Hodges, a New Orleans evacuee, and Republican Representative Jeff Miller of Florida.

MILLER: May I ask you a question? ... And this is something that I have heard people talk about. Is it true that some parishes (counties in Louisiana) are refusing to allow temporary housing of certain peoples within their parishes?

HODGES: Very true. Very true. Particularly true of ... Jefferson Parish. Jefferson Parish is where the Causeway concentration camp was housed, where we experienced the Gestapo-type oppression, as opposed to being rescued. We were three minutes away from the airport. They could have taken us to the airport. Those military vehicles could have taken us to any dry, safe city in America. Instead, they dumped us at a dumping ground, sealed us in there, and they backed up all their authority with military M-16s.

And there were thousands and thousands of people. On the last day we were in there – and let me tell you something – they hand-picked the white people to ride out first. Yes, racism was very much involved. They hand-picked the white people to ride out first. Every day, the crowd got darker and darker and darker until finally there were only – there were 95% people of color in that place.

MILLER: Miss Hodges, would you be offended if I respectfully asked you not to call the Causeway area a concentration camp?

HODGES: I am going to call it what it is. If I put a dress on a pig, a pig is still a pig.

MILLER: Not a single person was marched into a gas chamber and killed.

HODGES: They died from abject neglect. We left body bags behind. Pregnant women lost their babies.

No Need for Conspiracy

The escalating attacks on the survivors, especially poor and working-class Black people, have fueled theories that the flooding of Black neighborhoods was a deliberate plot. A precedent for this view was the 1927 flood, when white business owners had the levees in Black areas broken in order to direct water away from their businesses and affluent communities.

But this time no conspiracy was required. It is far more likely that evacuation and rescue were neglected in order to facilitate ruling-class plans for gentrification and racial cleansing, once the extent of the damage was apparent. Bush & Co. didn’t plan the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001, but they certainly seized the opportunity to launch their “war on terrorism” and try to get a stranglehold on oil distribution in the Middle East and Central Asia. So too, the Federal, state and city ruling classes took advantage of Katrina to reshape New Orleans as a more upscale and more white city.

As we said in *PR 75*, “Successive Federal, state and local governments – Republican *and* Democratic – refused to spend the money on the levees, sea gates and pumping stations needed to save the city and its people. They preferred to line the pockets of capitalists and pray that New Orleans would survive.” The capitalist system itself did just what came naturally. Profits inevitably come before people.

struggle wide open in America. He cited the power of the interracial working class, referring to the Philadelphia transit strike and the potential New York City transit strike. His intervention drew widespread applause and led to the sales and distribution of dozens of copies of *Proletarian Revolution*.

The conference issued a declaration demanding that “local, state and Federal government make conditions possible for our immediate return.” Specific points included temporary housing, an end to price gouging and evictions, hiring of local residents to do the rebuilding work, immediate debt relief, quality public education and childcare, and quality affordable health care and free prescriptions. The assembly also demanded that the government immediately clean up air, water and soil to make it safe and healthy for people to return home, and provide funds for all families to be reunited – concretely, that the databases of FEMA, Red Cross and other organizations with people’s records be made public. It insisted on accountability over the tens of billions of FEMA and other funds raised for the survivors and rebuilding.

In our interventions, the LRPers stressed a concrete set of demands: the right to return with a permanent job and training at union wages, the use of these jobs for massive public works to rebuild the city, a halt to all evictions and foreclosures with a moratorium on payments starting now. We also pushed the call

for mass action, beginning with coordinated protests in each of the major survivors’ cities, culminating with a massive march on either Washington or New Orleans.

In all our conversations and discussions, we spelled out that capitalism was the cause of the Katrina disaster. We linked racism to capitalism, and said that only the power of the working class could win a fight to rebuild New Orleans. We showed the parallel between the deaths in New Orleans and the murderous war in Iraq, and argued that a proletarian revolution is needed to get rid of capitalism so that wars and man-made disasters will not happen again.

ORGANIZE KATRINA SURVIVORS AND VICTIMS!

It is absolutely vital to the struggle against all the racist attacks – against Blacks, Latinos, immigrants and all people of color – that everyone under attack must fight against allowing the racist capitalist system to divide and conquer them. The mostly Black Katrina survivors and Black organizations must stand up for the rights of immigrant Katrina survivors and immigrant workers, documented or “illegal,” just as immigrant workers and Latino organizations must stand up against the racist attacks on Black people. Union workers of all races must demand that their leaders mobilize the power of their unions to defend the rights of all workers and oppressed people. We urge Katrina survivors to

Defend Immigrant Workers!

Immigrant workers have come under especially harsh attack after Hurricane Katrina. It has been barely reported by the mainstream media, but the government has acted to victimize immigrants in both relief and clean-up efforts on the Gulf Coast.

After Katrina, the Department of Homeland Security continued to enforce deportation laws against undocumented immigrants, including those found through relief efforts. Immigrant Katrina survivors from the Gulf Coast who had been evacuated as far away as El Paso, Texas and West Virginia were apprehended by Federal authorities and placed in deportation proceedings. The chilling effect of such actions means hundreds of thousands of Gulf Coast immigrants devastated by Katrina will not come forward to get any relief at all.

At the same time, for the Gulf Coast clean-up work the Department of Homeland Security suspended the enforcement of laws that require employers to verify workers’ documentation. This reveals the gross hypocrisy of immigration policy under capitalism: enforcement of laws against bosses is suspended, while enforcement of laws against immigrant workers themselves is kept in place. Together these policies serve to give employers a green light to superexploit the labor of immigrants as brutally as they like, knowing that the threat of deportation hangs over their heads if they protest. The DHS’s immi-

gration policies went hand in hand with Bush’s order to suspend the Davis-Bacon Act which requires Federal contractors to pay union-scale prevailing wages for all contracted work – in a state where the official minimum wage is below the poverty level.

The beneficiary of these policies was none other than Halliburton/KBR, the corporation formerly headed by Vice President Cheney and notorious for its corrupt connections to the government. Just as it had done for “reconstruction” in Iraq, the government handed out no-bid contracts to Halliburton/KBR to do the clean-up work at the many U.S. Navy installations in the Gulf Coast area. When the Laborers’ International Union inquired about details of these contracts, they were told they could not get copies because of “national security”!

Halliburton/KBR and its shadowy network of subcontractors wasted no time in taking advantage of the government’s wage and immigration policies. Job brokers sought out workers with Spanish-language newspaper and television ads and at job fairs across the country. The subcontractors have kept the immigrant workers in miserable living and working conditions, and have used them to displace higher-paid union workers.

Immigrant workers brought in for the Gulf Coast clean-up have been subjected to much worse treatment than just low wages. Reports are widespread of con-

tractors and subcontractors in the Gulf not paying workers at all for two, three or more weeks of labor. Activists found one group of immigrant workers that had been housed in a trailer for three weeks and hadn’t had food for three days. Workers who have gotten sick or hurt at the Naval bases working for Halliburton/KBR have received no medical assistance, even though the bases are equipped with medical facilities.

Despite these brutal conditions and the threat of deportation hanging over their heads, some immigrant workers on the Gulf Coast have heroically fought back anyway with strike action – and have won some limited victories. The Davis-Bacon Act was reinstated by early November. The intervening two months had already given Halliburton/KBR and their cohorts ample time to get their super-exploitative operations up and running rampant without any legal niceties to worry about.

These attacks on immigrants fit right into the ruling class’s racist offensive after Katrina – not only because the anti-immigrant attacks are racist in themselves, but also because they are designed to set Black and Latino immigrant workers against one another, as well as to set white workers against both. Contractors have gone so far as to take over emergency shelters meant for hurricane victims to house immigrant clean-up workers rather than build additional housing. Divide-and-conquer tactics that stoke racial divisions must be stopped!

Further Reading...

- **“The Gulf Coast Catastrophe: Racist Capitalism’s ‘Perfect Storm’,”**
Proletarian Revolution No. 75, Fall 2005* \$1.00
- **“Stop the War on Immigrants!”**
Proletarian Revolution No. 67, Spring 2003* . . . \$1.00
- ***Marxism, Interracialism and the Black Struggle,***
an LRP pamphlet. \$3.00

*Article available online at www.lrp-cofi.org

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Murray Hill Station, New York, NY 10156

form their own organizations to take forward the struggle for their demands. They must also resist the ruling class’s attempts to pit survivors against oppressed and exploited immigrant clean-up workers. Instead they should defend the immigrants’ rights and support their struggles.

Our central point is that the survivors – together with other superexploited workers, many of them immigrants, who have been brought to the devastated regions to work at sub-minimum wage levels – have an opportunity to spark the class struggle nationwide. If they join together in effective organizations and create a public fight, they have the moral authority, based on the visible atrocities they went through, to be widely heard. They can gain the attention of workers, especially oppressed workers, across the country. Their example can inspire others, and we believe that their struggle would prove that the oppression and attacks that working people face are due to the capitalist system.

Indeed, the survivors’ immediate demands speak to needs that working-class people face all over the country. But their specific needs are so enormous that they will have to be fought for by the mass organizations of the working class – trade unions, civil rights groups and immigrant organizations. The real power of the working class lies in its centrality in production and in the production of profits: by striking, by withholding their profit-producing labor, workers can force the capitalist ruling class to act.

Letter

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politicians and media played a similar role, trying to mobilize “public” (read racist and anti-worker) opinion against the union. Yet the strike was immensely popular among working class people, especially people of color.

The LRP and its newsletter *Revolutionary Transit Worker* received messages of solidarity from near and far. For the first time in a long while, working people across the country could turn on the news and see workers, mainly Blacks, Latinos and immigrants, standing up for themselves. The strike sent a powerful message of both racial and class pride.

INTERRACIALISM AND INTERNATIONALISM

The LRP was formed to carry out the struggle for revolutionary leadership of the working class. It is the ABC of Marxism that capitalism, even in its most democratic form, is a class-divided, wage-slavery system based on exploitation of the work-

Katrina survivors’ organizations should call demonstrations and demand that unions, Black and Latino community organizations and politicians mobilize support.

THE DANGER OF MISLEADERSHIP

The survivors’ conference was politically influenced by several Black nationalist currents which promoted Black business success stories. In effect, they are trying to transform a struggle based on the needs of large numbers of poor working-class people into a get-rich, small-business mirage.

Few survivors have any illusions left in President Bush, Kathleen Blanco (the Democratic governor of Louisiana) or Mayor Nagin. But other Democratic politicians and some religious figures are playing a cleverer game. Minister Louis Farrakhan and other Black nationalists have switched from pushing free enterprise ideology and a stress on Black “atonement” (of all things!) to a militant-sounding populist line over Katrina. Using the rhetoric of “poor people versus the rich,” they actually seek to bury the class struggle. Their outlook points to the greater expansion of Black capitalism in America, a dead-end trap for the overwhelming majority of Black people.

Likewise, Rev. Jesse Jackson has often captured the imagination of radicalized militants and undermined their struggles, sending them back into the Democratic Party (and its electoral pitfalls) – which since the 1930’s has served as the graveyard of movements for justice and equality. Jackson and his Operation Push use militancy to get more access to white-dominated big business for Black merchants and would-be franchise-holders – but not for the needs of the besieged Black masses.

As always, truth has to be proven in practice. Inside and alongside the organizations engaged in the struggle, revolutionaries will fight to convince our fellow workers to avoid the traps set by leaders who are committed to preserving the capitalist social system. We will fight their efforts to accept the system’s divide-and-conquer strategy. This, we believe, is the way to expose and ditch the false leaders and to create independent fighting working-class organizations. The common struggle against American capitalism and imperialism will bring together workers of all colors against this common enemy – provided that revolutionaries do our job of fighting to create an interracialist and internationalist proletarian revolutionary party to lead the masses of the dispossessed. ●

ing class by the capitalist class. But we also understand that American capitalism depends fundamentally on fomenting racism to survive, since the tiny ruling class can only rule over the massive and objectively very powerful working class through racist divide-and-conquer tactics. Therefore it is in the material interests of the working class as a whole to champion ironclad opposition to racism and national chauvinism, to make working-class unity possible.

The LRP program includes the defense of self-organization for Black and other oppressed peoples in the imperialist heartland, as well as the right of self-determination for oppressed nations, including the call for military defeat of U.S. imperialism in its interventions abroad. (A copy of our *Political Resolution* is available upon request or at www.lrp-cofi.org.) The interracialist and internationalist world we strive for can only be achieved through workers’ socialist revolution.

The workers and youth of the LRP dedicate ourselves to forging a leadership which will be the product of a renewed and fighting working class at home and abroad. To politically advanced workers and youth we say, join us in this goal. ●

Transit Strike

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up and maintaining picket lines with little help from union officials, who were rarely if ever seen.) Toussaint hoped for a last-minute deal with the MTA, as in the previous contract round in 2002. But the MTA, acting as part of the ruling-class assault team, hoped for a knockout blow or an abject retreat. It was pressure from the ranks that forced Toussaint to reluctantly call a strike, four days after the actual contract expiration date.

Then there were the other city union bureaucrats who had agreed to sellout contracts themselves and feared being shown up by a clear-cut TWU victory. These officials had lavishly promised support before the strike, but predictably they did nothing to support or extend it once it was on. The TWU International head, Michael T. O'Brien, scabbed on the strike by calling on the workers to go back from the start. Toussaint in turn covered up this filthy betrayal by telling the press it was a purely legal maneuver!

The union leaders' Democratic Party friends, who had praised the TWU before the strike, suddenly went into hiding. New York State Attorney General Elliot Spitzer, a liberal Democrat who had been elected with union support, promptly lodged Taylor Law complaints against the Local. Toussaint & Co. have made no criticism of Spitzer, the likely Democratic candidate for governor, even though he is trying to bankrupt the union and its members. Other union leaders and Democratic politicians have also been silent.

Toussaint, once known as a leftist, had won the local presidency in 2000 as part of the pseudo-militant New Directions slate. He has since ditched many of his former allies, and runs the union in a top-down fashion. He still at times demagogically invokes genuine union militancy of the 1930's and the civil rights struggles of the 1960's. But he has become another traditional union bureaucrat and a loyal supporter of the imperialist, anti-worker Democratic Party. The bureaucrats' role is to broker between the workers and the capitalist bosses, earning ample privileges in return for keeping the workers' struggle within bounds. That is the fundamental reason for the sellout, as we have explained in our bulletins to transit workers.

UNION OPPOSITION

While the Local's Executive Board voted overwhelmingly to endorse Toussaint's deal, there is strong and growing opposition

to the contract inside the union. Over a hundred members showed up to a Vote NO Coalition meeting on January 4, including RTW supporters, Transit Workers for a Just Contract (the remnants of New Directions) and even a couple of union vice-presidents. The meeting voted to adopt a motion by RTW to not wait for the voting to start but instead to get union meetings to reject the deal and call for mass membership meetings.

At packed borough meetings in Brooklyn and the Bronx on January 9 and 10, Toussaint was sharply challenged. His arrogance and evasiveness in presenting the contract turned opposition into rage, and at the Bronx meeting, most of the members present stormed out, chanting "Vote No!"

It is not guaranteed that the contract will be rejected, despite mass anger at Toussaint. If it passes, it will be because workers see that Toussaint and his supporters on the board cannot be trusted to carry out the struggle further. They therefore draw the mistaken conclusion that further action must wait for the next election or beyond.

THE WAY FORWARD

RTW has distributed thousands of copies of ten issues since the contract struggle began, informing transit workers of the contract details and calling for its rejection. The LRP and RTW are also calling for mass meetings of the union to decide the way forward and for an elected Contract Struggle Committee to lead the fight for a new contract – with a big wage raise, no givebacks and amnesty from all Taylor Law penalties.

This committee should also have the authority to lead a new strike if that becomes necessary. In preparation, RTW spells out that Local 100 should organize demonstrations of tens of thousands of workers, the kind of massive confirmation of class solidarity that Toussaint avoided. And in case of a strike, the sold-out and angry city workers, along with railroad workers also employed by the MTA, should be called on to join the transit struggle. This would cripple the bosses, sending out a signal that workers aren't going to take it any more. That is the way to fulfill the potential that workers showed in the December strike.

A militant transit strike, spreading to other sectors of the workforce, can beat back the bosses' attacks and win all its demands. It can also show workers' power and help raise the question of a *general strike* of all workers, union and non-union, to mount a class-wide defense and fight for class-wide demands. Among these would be guaranteed jobs at union wages, with decent health care and retirement plans for all.

These demands cannot be gained simply within a union framework: a political fight is needed. The LRP and RTW consistently explain that we are socialist revolutionaries and believe that workers need a revolutionary party. At this juncture, when workers are in motion and there is momentum toward a fightback that could have a huge impact on the class struggle, we look for ways to prove the need for a revolutionary party in practice. Therefore we have raised the call for a new fighting leadership for the union as a united front proposal, a tactic by which revolutionaries can fight side by side with other workers who are not yet convinced of revolutionary conclusions. We hope to prove in the course of struggle that revolution is not only possible but also the only solution.

With our small forces, the LRP has already played a major role in building a fighting opposition in a key union and struggle. We fight both to win the immediate, limited, gains because we know that with even partial victories workers gain self-confidence and class-consciousness. But at the same time we aim to convince our fellow workers that the overall and permanent solutions to all the economic and social attacks require a revolution to overthrow capitalism. ●

January 11, 2006

Further Reading..

- In-depth analysis of the previous contract fight: "New York: Union Tops Whack Transit Struggle,"* and "Left Strikes Out in TWU Struggle,"* *Proletarian Revolution* No. 66 (Winter 2003). . . . \$1.00
- "Revolutionary vs. Reformist Methods in the Unions,"* *Proletarian Revolution* No. 63 (Fall 2001) \$1.00
- For a blow-by-blow account of the transit struggle, see recent issues of *Revolutionary Transit Worker*. Write for free copies or check our website.

*Article available online at www.lrp-cofi.org.

Order from SV Publishing, P.O. Box 1936, Murray Hill Station, New York, NY 10156

New York Transit Strike Shows Working-Class Power

On December 20, 34,000 New York City bus and subway workers, members of Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100, went on strike against the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA). They struck in the face of New York State's "Taylor Law" banning strikes by public sector workers, and of court injunctions threatening fines and jail. Management was demanding that the retirement age for all future workers be raised from 55 to 62. The strikers' commitment to fight in defense of future workers was an act of inspiring class solidarity. They also wanted to reverse decades of union givebacks and win improvements in their wages, benefits and working conditions.

The power displayed by transit workers was electrifying. A union whose majority is composed of Black and immigrant workers, brought the financial capital of the world to a crawl. They showed it is possible to fight back against the capitalists' racist and anti-worker attacks. But as is so often the case, the fighting workers were burdened by a pro-capitalist union leadership that first tried to avoid the strike and then sold it out at the first opportunity.

After just three days on strike, with active working-class support growing and big businesses suffering pre-Christmas shopping losses, there was an obvious potential for victory. But Local 100 President Roger Toussaint sent the ranks back to work – without a contract. He agreed to a deal that gave workers less than cost-of-living wage raises, while sticking them with a hefty new paycheck deduction for health benefits and big Taylor Law fines that could have been defeated.

The League for the Revolutionary Party, through its supporters inside and outside the Local and grouped around our bulletin *Revolutionary Transit Worker*, played a prominent role in building the strike movement. Since the sellout, we have been the most active campaigners in a fight to reject the deal and return the union to battle. As we go to press, the struggle lies in the balance, with voting on the contract to be completed by January 20.

WORKING-CLASS SOLIDARITY

The capitalist media, the MTA board, Mayor Bloomberg, Governor Pataki – that is, the ruling class and their flunkies – denounced the strikers as "greedy," "selfish" and "thuggish." But they failed to win over the working-class population of New York. Thousands of people shouted or honked encouragement when passing TWU picket lines, expressed solidarity in "person in the street" TV interviews and strongly supported the strikers in the capitalist media's own polls.

One reason for the popularity was that TWU Local 100 reflects the city's working class as a whole: it is made up in its majority of workers of color and includes many immigrants. Throughout the strike, the New York gutter press hurled racist stereotypes at the union, demanding that Toussaint be jailed and even thrown off a subway train. That campaign backfired, however, since working people decoded its barely concealed racism and class venom.



On top of that, the strike was a courageous response to the nation-wide, decades-long capitalist assault on working-class living standards, now focused on health care and pension benefits. A union victory would have been a major step in inspiring workers around the country to recognize their class power. Whatever the inconvenience to their own lives (and even to their own income), plenty of workers saw the transit strike as their struggle.

And that is one reason why the strike was brought to an untimely end. In the few days between Toussaint's return-to-work order and the announcement of the final deal, the bosses also took note of widespread rank-and-file opposition in the Local to Toussaint's retreat. (See "Contract Gains Come From Rank-and-File Opposition," *RTW* No. 30.) Thus the MTA tried to give Toussaint a face-saving way to end the strike and claim victory: they withdrew a demand for raising the retirement age for new hires, which the union had vociferously opposed – in exchange for first-time, precedent-setting health care cutbacks. They added a dubious pension refund promise based on a side deal, which at best would have the MTA refunding what many transit workers had already earned.

After the contract deal was made public, the media aimed their fire at the MTA for offering any sops at all, echoing Governor Pataki, who threatened to veto the pension deal to boost his run for the Republican presidential nomination. But then they realized that the contract was a great deal for the capitalists, reversed course and threw their support behind the contract. (See "Racist Anti-Worker *New York Post* Backs Toussaint's Contract," in *RTW* 31.)

WHY THE SELLOUT?

Toussaint had done his best to avoid a strike, refusing to mobilize his members or make strike preparations. (When the strike was called, rank-and-file members took the lead in setting

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