

An Outrageous Proposal-- A WPA for Hurricane Cleanup and Reconstruction

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Hurricane cleanup is a perfect candidate for a 21st Century WPA (Work Projects Administration). Not only would it direct U.S. tax dollars to needed reconstruction but it would also benefit U.S. citizens caught in a poverty trap. The labor force is being remade but it won't look like the WPA.

In the height of the depression, the WPA employed more than eight million workers to produce bridges, roads, buildings, airports, and parks. By providing useful work for millions of victims of the Great Depression, it attended to the financial needs of individuals, and by restoring some of their purchasing power, it also put money back into the economy.

So why not bring back the WPA?

First, the U.S. Government has already dedicated billions to recovery and reconstruction. Congress opened with a \$62 billion down payment on post-Katrina reconstruction work and more followed.

Second, pre hurricane Louisiana already had high rates of poverty. Katrina media coverage attached faces to the findings of the U.S. Census Bureau. On 30 August 2005 it reported that the U.S. was experiencing a rise in poverty, that the rate for the Southern region was higher than other regions, and that among racial and ethnic groups, African-Americans had the lowest median income. States most affected by the hurricanes, Mississippi and Louisiana, rank in the bottom five for average real medium household income, and in top four for average poverty rates. A WPA reconstruction program that hired economically marginal residents would provide income, skills, and dignity for those caught in a poverty welfare cycle.

Third, the ranks of the previously poor were augmented by the hurricane-poor. Clean-up and reconstruction jobs for the recently impoverished and displaced could make a small dent in the horrendous financial tragedy that all the hurricane victims suffered.

A WPA for hurricane cleanup and rebuilding sounds like common sense, doesn't it? Nope.

The 1930's model is not possible in 2006.

Despite the recently-released White House study (Feb, 2006) describing the federal government response to Katrina as flawed, there would be little public support for a WPA type of government spending. The American public embraces the sentiment that the government is inefficient, bloated, and must be downsized. Politicians heeded this call by reducing and privatizing government operations, even parts of the U.S. Armed Forces. If there were protests in 2001 against hiring airport security personnel as government employees, there would certainly be objections to adding hurricane rebuilding personnel to the government payroll. Big government is discredited despite the billions of tax dollars being spent, and despite the reports of millions in fraudulent claims.

Second, downsized governments are less prepared and able to address crises of this magnitude. So, where the government has spent, it has been directed toward those businesses that are well established. Contracts for clean up and rebuilding went to companies that also appeared on the Iraq reconstruction list. Bechtel, Fluor, and CH2M Hill all signed on to construct temporary housing in New Orleans, and Halliburton (and its subsidiary BK & R) signed contracts with the Pentagon to begin rebuilding Navy bases in Louisiana and Mississippi (Wall Street Journal 12 September 2005; Mother Jones 14 September 2005). Some local firms have complained about being left out, but let's accept, for the sake of argument, that these larger private enterprises are leaner, more efficient, and better prepared to do the job than either the government or the local businesses.

The third obstacle to creating a WPA is the use of undocumented workers. Part of "leanness" of those large companies derives from their ability to keep down labor costs, and they do so by drawing from a labor pool which includes undocumented workers. Perfectly legal. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) issued a notice on September 6, 2005 that it would not sanction employers for hiring workers who were unable to provide documentation normally required under Section 274A of the Immigration and Nationality Act. Employers were given a 45-day grace period for completing and retaining Employment Eli-

gibility Verification (I 9). Federal installations were the one exception.

When federal agents identified suspected illegal immigrants working at the naval base where the Haliburton subsidiary KB&Root is leading reconstruction, thirteen workers were barred due to a lack of proper papers. However, many worry that demanding documentation, and the early reinstatement of Davis-Bacon will inflate reconstruction costs.

As early as 13 September 2005, the Mexican paper *La Jornada* reported that undocumented workers from Mexico and Honduras were hired to clean out contaminated water and debris without tools, gloves, and other protective covering. After being evacuated from New Orleans to Houston, they were contracted by Belfor of Houston to work in cleanup activities and returned to New Orleans in company buses. The workers repeat the commonly heard phrase “if we don’t do it, who will?” *La Jornada* reported that the Mexican government calculated that there were approximately 100,000 Mexicans already in the affected zones, and they were given a “letter of recommendation” from President Fox who said that Mexicans are good at construction (NYT 5 September 2005). The press has been filled with reports of undocumented workers arriving from other parts of the U.S. and from Mexico and Central America. Defenders of immigrant labor complain about the low salaries, the living conditions, or the working conditions—particularly the relaxed occupational and health standards.

Both those critical of the hiring of undocumented workers, and those critical of the treatment of Hispanics, complain about the salaries. (Clearly the comparison is with the pre-hurricane salaries, not the salaries in Honduras, or the \$5. hour that one undocumented worker reported that he earned in the tobacco fields of NC). The LA Regional Carpenters Council said it had received complaints from union members who had been replaced, and unionized electricians say they were let go by BK&R in favor of lower wage immigrant workers after the suspension of Davis-Bacon.

Those who are critical of the treatment of Hispanic workers also point out that they are living in tents or crowded quarters, often without running water or electricity. Other write that the working conditions were so bad that “Some workers ended up going to MS because

the conditions in LA were unsafe, unclean, and hot”.

The labor force is being remade but not to look like a WPA-style .

Following an exceptional tragedy, corporations are successfully restructuring work and transforming the labor force. Under the umbrella of “extraordinary urgency”, jobs offer less compensation for regular and overtime hours, regular jobs are transformed into day labor, and work takes place without attention to occupational and safety conditions.

We will have missed the opportunity to think creatively about how to integrate the marginal and poor populations that resided in the hurricane-damaged areas. A WPA-like solution would not only attend to the cleaning and rebuilding of damaged structures, but also contribute to the building the economic self-sufficiency and spirit of the residents in that impoverished region.

Many will object to a WPA-like endeavor for the reasons outlined above. But many may also agree that there is something myopic, and even socially irresponsible, about programs that distribute millions of tax dollars to the unemployed and displaced who are currently residing in other cities on the one hand, and millions more to contractors and newly arriving non-citizen workers on the other. Instead of using this tragedy to reduce the gap between society and what Wm. J. Wilson once called the “underclass”, we are pursuing a policy which further marginalizes one already-marginalized population and fortifies a labor force built on marginalize immigrant labor.