

On the anniversary of Katrina: Capitalist murder is not a ‘natural disaster’

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Crimes of capitalism: New Orleans 2005, Lāhainā 2023.

Aug. 27 — As many people prepare for last-minute summer outings and back-to-school shopping this Labor Day weekend, it is important to remember the anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, particularly in the context of the fires in Maui and Lāhainā.

Aug. 29 marks the 18-year anniversary of Katrina making landfall in Louisiana. At least 1,823 people, mostly Black and poor, lost their lives when the storm struck and the levees broke. The unfolding disaster created a permanent diaspora of over a

million people.

Katrina destroyed whole communities and the people who lived in them. Much of the suffering, death, and destruction was preventable.

Nothing natural about it

The levees that broke, resulting in the destruction of the Ninth Ward and the loss of hundreds of lives in New Orleans, was not an “act of god,” but rather the negligence of the government that failed to repair the levee system.

Neither “god” nor “nature” blocked people trying to flee the city in the aftermath of the hurricane. Witnesses reported that police fired over the heads of desperate people.

On Sept. 4, 2005, New Orleans police shot and killed two unarmed victims and badly wounded four others on Danziger Bridge.

“Nature” did not herd displaced people into the Louisiana Superdome in conditions unfit for animals.

Prisoners were abandoned by prison officers who evacuated themselves. Close to 1,000 prisoners at the Orleans Parish Prison, a third of whom were awaiting trial and had not been convicted of any crime, were left to fend for themselves.

When generators failed, prisoners waited for four days in total darkness, in chest-high water, with no food or water. Some 517 were never found.

These are all human-made failures. More accurately, capitalist failures.

The inadequate response to saving lives is also directly related to resources diverted to imperialist war – in this case, the war on Iraq.

The 256th Infantry Brigade of the Louisiana National Guard was sent to Iraq. Ironically, when they returned on Sept. 8, some 80% had lost their homes. Many lost their families, too.

On the other hand, Cuba, a small island nation led by President Fidel Castro, offered the assistance of 1,000 doctors and medical personnel. Bolivarian Venezuela offered oil shipments.

President George W. Bush, deeply engaged in the war against Iraq, turned down this assistance.

Cuba's offer, while spurned, marked the founding of the Henry Reeve International Medical Brigade, which has since provided assistance to people throughout Africa, Latin America, Asia and Europe.

Maui and Lāhainā

Those glued to the news from the Pacific can't help but reflect on the gruesome similarity of Xs marked on burnt-out homes in Lāhainā to the Xs marked on homes in New Orleans' Ninth Ward after they were searched for bodies.

During Katrina, people clung to roofs without food or water, writing S.O.S. messages; in Lāhainā, people were forced to jump into the Pacific Ocean to escape the smoke and flames, risking hypothermia and drowning.

The death toll in Maui now stands at 115, while at least a thousand people are still unaccounted for. Over 3,000 acres burned in Lāhainā and neighboring communities. Eighty percent of this historic town was burned.

Called Lele in the Hawaiian language, Lāhainā was the capital of the Kingdom of Hawai'i from 1802-1812 and again from 1820-1845. Native Hawai'ians have inhabited the islands for about 1,500 years. U.S. imperialism annexed Hawai'i in

1898.

Native heritage was torched while its present-day people remain unhoused, fending for themselves through mutual aid and solidarity.

While there are differences between Katrina and the Maui fire, the negligence and contributing factors to this disaster have similar causes and culprits.

There were no warning sirens enacted by the local government, leaving families to scramble, trapped in the inferno. Many died in cars trying to escape.

Just as New Orleans levees went unrepaired, there is mounting evidence pointing to the Hawaiian Electric Company, which failed to properly shut off the electricity. Today there are nine different lawsuits aimed at holding the electric company accountable.

Like the irony of Louisiana National Guard members who returned to no homes, it is unnerving that there was no action by the U.S. military to counter the fires in Hawai'i'.

Hawai'i' is the headquarters of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command. While trillion-dollar warships, aircraft carriers, and submarines are dispatched to the South China Sea to threaten the people of China, no one from the U.S. military base was rushed to the dreadful scene to save the people of Maui.

Almost simultaneously, President Biden met at Camp David, Maryland's presidential retreat, with Japanese and South Korean leaders to escalate threats against both China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea).

While \$200 million in additional military aid to the U.S./NATO proxy war in Ukraine was announced, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) plans to pay out a measly \$700 per Lāhainā household.

The latest threat is from profit-mad developers who seek to permanently displace the working class and Indigenous people who lived on the land. The story is the same whether it is New Orleans or Puerto Rico — capitalists, land-grabbers, profit while people die and suffer.

Resistance will be crucial.

It's high time to change our language. There is nothing natural about what happened in New Orleans, Maui, Puerto Rico, or in many other places – far too many to enumerate in a short article.

Global capitalism, its systemic climate crisis, imperialist war and occupation, white supremacy and colonialism, and the refusal to plan or prevent the loss of life and horrific suffering that follows, is not natural — it is murder by a ruthless system that not only has a name, capitalism, but also faces: the capitalist ruling class.

This writer traveled to New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina to participate in protests demanding justice for the Ninth Ward, witnessing much of the destruction following the storm.

