

IN THE WAKE: WHAT KATRINA HAS SHOWN US ABOUT HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE UNITED STATES

Strong and effective government that is capable of guaranteeing the full range of economic and social rights – housing, food, education, health, social security and decent work – is in the interest of the vast majority of people in the United States. Nonetheless, there has been little support for social programs that guarantee these rights. Looking just at health, Medicaid funding is being reduced and capped, and public health insurance being undermined as a concept, the universal health insurance debate is stalled and being diverted with the issue of tax credits, and even the bankruptcy laws which primarily protected individuals impoverished by health care debt, have been weakened with regards to consumer protection. It is incomprehensible to the rest of the world that ordinary Americans are not vigorously demanding protection of their economic and social rights.

In many ways, Katrina has shown us why. The face of poverty in America is not White. This does not mean there is no White poverty. Indeed, there are more poor Whites than poor Blacks in this country. But poverty has been racialized and individualized. Black, Latino, immigrant and indigenous communities are the poorest of the poor, and most images of poverty involve these communities. Members of these communities have little access to good schools, jobs and homes, and healthcare, yet they are also often blamed for the very circumstances imposed on them. The racist structures which deny people access to transportation, as well as decent jobs, education, and housing are barely understood by the public as they are rarely analyzed in mainstream press or other venues.

Those left behind to die without food and water in New Orleans were the poorest households without access to transportation and primarily Black. The general public's initial reaction was that no one deserved to be left in those circumstances, and for a brief moment a conversation about race and poverty in the U.S. appeared to be evolving. Yet, those not being welcomed back, as public schools remained closed and undamaged public housing units are not being made available, are also the poorest and primarily Black. As the reconstruction conversation moves on, the same community is being left behind once again, but this time there are no stark and painful images to prick the conscience of America.

If this dynamic were limited to unique circumstances in New Orleans and other affected areas, it would be an unacceptable but localized human rights situation. In the wake of Katrina, however, we must face the fact that to different degrees New Orleans represents all of the U.S. There is no locality where communities aren't facing extreme poverty unnecessarily, and where that poverty isn't disproportionately shaped by race. More significant is the bitter reality that hostility towards economic and social rights in the U.S. stems from a perception that the beneficiaries are Black, Latino, immigrant and indigenous, and those that would bear the costs are White. That this has no bearing to reality, that almost everyone in society would benefit from economic and social security and good services, that the majority of those suffering violations are in fact still White, seems to do little to alter the general perception of the Black "welfare queen" or that "Medicaid fraud" is practiced by "minority" communities.

In essence, we are a society that is still fractured by race and driven by perceived, not even actual, self-interest. We have yet to embrace the moral imperative that human rights are universal, and that only by ensuring and recognizing the rights of everyone

regardless of race, class or any other status, can we truly ensure the rights of anyone. There is a desperate need to develop a political community that is grounded in human rights and solidarity to counter this dynamic. We cannot abolish poverty, sexism, and racism in separate struggles. Traditional civil rights approaches will not dismantle structural racism which is primarily social and economic. Mainstream feminism will not touch the lives of women of color. Race blind approaches to poverty will never guarantee the rights of communities of color. And until we successfully situate our specific struggles within a broader human rights effort, we won't become part of the solution.