

KATRINA AND PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH FOREVER

William DiFazio

KATRINA AND THE devastation that the hurricane caused the Gulf Coast is now forever linked to the presidency of George W. Bush. Hundreds of deaths, the destruction of the Gulf Coast, and the permanent destruction of parts of New Orleans exposed to the world the dangers of the conservative policy of privatization which, in the context of the United States is the corporatization of government services and which has crippled the ability of the government to respond to the terrible flooding and the destruction of the levees. The United States government has been undermined by almost forty years of a policy that began during the Nixon administration and that has now become global and the basis of the current free market capitalist crisis of the state. In the United States, the crisis has become apparent because of Katrina and the inability of the world's only superpower to wage a successful war in Iraq. The United States is so weakened by this crisis that it is increasingly unable to provide to its citizens the services that are necessary for legitimation (that is the maintenance of social order and a compliant citizenry) and the wars that are necessary for the accumulation of capital. We should remember that crises are also moments of opportunity for they often provide increased capital investment for the corporate sector but for an organized left they become an opportunity to raise consciousness. Why then has the left been so silent in the face of the current crisis?

It is an illusion to believe that the Katrina disaster and the Iraq war will eventually be resolved because of the power and immense resources of the United States. The problem is neither the result of the breaking of the social contract, which was broken decades ago, nor the failure of government. Rather, the problem is the result of a real crisis of the state in free market capitalism, in which the state has been so weakened over decades of privatization that it has become difficult to fulfill two of its crucial functions: legitimation and capital accumulation. This free market state continues to implode as it increasingly fails to provide health care, housing, retirement benefits and education to a massive percentage of its population. This failure is easily visible, as the median family income in the

United States has been stuck at between \$43,500 and \$44,500 for Bush's whole tenure as president. At the same time, all of the interests of big capital are not in agreement with the current administration's extreme social and economic policies. Thus, the Bush administration has tried to unify the various fractions of capital with massive tax cuts for the top 5% of the population, and has tried, but failed, to buy the loyalty of Wall Street with a revision of social security that would guarantee the investment of billions of dollars of retirement money into the stock market. Still, the power of this conservative state, hollowed out as it is for services to ordinary people, remains formidable.

In many ways President George W. Bush is the perfect president for this world of "post legitimacy" because every failure just seems to embolden him and his administration. Every failure of the capitalist free market is used as an excuse to increase corporatist policies and provide more tax money to companies such as Halliburton, Wal-Mart and Home Depot. In this age where the free market ideology has been reduced to simple phrases, "we are just making profit," "we must do more with less," and the services which government once provided are diminished and privatized and made more expensive, everyday life just become more unaffordable for ordinary Americans. Our monosyllabic president presents the religion of profit and pain laced with many "God Blesses" as the general misery of Americans increase. And still he was reelected. That the polls are now against him does not seem to worry him. He kept visiting New Orleans after it was too late to give the impression that he was on the ground for the much weaker Rita and then Wilma, but there is a noticeable wound in his once impervious armor. His promises of aid to the devastated areas are already being reduced and in the weeks and months to come, as the victims of Katrina and Bush are forgotten life will only get harder for this massive population. New Orleans will be rebuilt as a resort, the low wage workers will live in the trailer parks and the housing projects; it will no longer be a city but a simulacra shadow of its once great past.

We must not forget that the current crisis of the capitalist state means that it cannot meet one of its primary functions, that of providing capital to corporations. Despite the free market myth, the private sector is not independent of the state. In actuality it is dependent on the massive tax revenues that the state supplies to continue the accumulation process, and herein lies the current crisis, not only for the victims of Katrina but for the capitalist state and corporations as well. Conservative policies of decreasing taxes for the wealthy and the corporations have almost bankrupted the

government and made it very difficult for it to fulfill the requirements of both capital accumulation and legitimation.

At the same time conservatives understand that there is a crisis and, as if they have read Marx, are planning to take advantage of this opportunity. Tax revenues are not limitless so they are already figuring out ways to simplify and equalize taxation between the super rich and every one else. Here simplifying and equalizing means making an already non-progressive taxation even flatter, thus adding to the prior tax breaks for the upper 5%. They are developing new ways to squeeze the working and middle classes (one should remember that class structure in the United States is so distorted that I have used the plural "classes" because there are a great many differences between working people grouped in these categories in terms of income, education and life style and that 50% of U.S. citizens are living below the median income and cannot be categorized as middle class in terms of their standard of living).

On the other hand the liberals take two steps back and try to do what "old school" conservatives did in the past: try to balance the budget. They worry about corruption in the Republican Party and new judges for the Supreme Court but act impotently when the chips are down. Yesterday's fiscal conservatism and today's neo-liberalism are their new policies, and liberals are quiet about the subjugation of the poor and middle classes as well. "The left" has a fetish about the poor but it never really concerns itself about what it would really take to end poverty in the United States. To end poverty you must make every one at a minimum middle class. Here, I mean that everyone would be paid at the wages and benefits that guarantee affordable and good housing, education and health care. The left cannot make this argument because it ignores the "middle classes", in consumption terms, and embraces the myth that they are affluent while in fact most non-poor people are struggling to make ends meet. The mainstream left has lost touch with the daily struggles of ordinary people to maintain their living standards. They usually view these struggles as trivial and "consumerist." In reaction to this an ignored working and middle class correctly believes that the left is irrelevant to these struggles, which are central to their lives. Here is a crucial problem; the left has negated itself because it has detached its politics from the daily lives of the majority of people.

The left's silence on the needs of the working and middle classes has not only led to its political irrelevance but also to its failure to impact the citizenry on its traditional concerns: the anti-war movement, global poverty

and inequality. They have made a decision that their social movement is not for everyone. Left elitism avoids contamination with the contradictions of working and middle class lives. In many ways it is not shocking that they are not concerned with these classes because they have for the most part given up class politics in general. They have also forgotten that class is not just a category but is about the struggle over the defining interests of society. In forgetting class struggle the Left has lost their standpoint. Even the US labor movement has given up class politics and, as a result, class struggle and the strike weapon. The strength of the global corporation is never confronted at its premise as a form of class domination but as a consequence of specific corporate corruption. The left has reduced class struggle to a moral issue and they can only have specific moral victories and sometimes they even get the courts to impose financial penalties on specific corporations. But their victories are narrow and their losses are broad. Though there are exceptions, in general they have missed the historical terrain of class struggle and they are left with the moderate free-market solutions of the Democratic Party and Union officialdom.

Instead of maintaining their moral purity, a “new new left” should take advantage of the current crisis at this time to expand their base into the thoroughly debt-ridden, under paid and under serviced working and middle classes. Instead it engages in the 21st Century version of “left-wing infantile communism.” I mean this only in the sense of its refusal to concern itself with the lives of ordinary non-poor Americans and their struggles because they cannot compromise their radical purity. This purity has left them with a “lesser of two evil” solution and as a result a de facto subservience to the Democratic Party. They are also in denial about their need to have an organizational strategy for influencing the majority of the citizenry. As a result the left continues to believe that it has the right politics even though it hasn’t any base of power. Because it doesn’t have a base of power it can only wage moral wars and it can only have moral victories. Thus we see a left that can organize a sizable population through Move On and the labor movement can raise hundreds of millions of dollars but only for the campaigns of the Democratic Party. They are rewarded for their efforts by being ignored both in terms of the policy positions of the Democrats on war and peace and wages and benefits. Nor can the left imagine that with their ability to raise these formidable sums of money that they can begin to build a powerful alternative third party movement. The left seems to be unaware that it’s just not the poor who cannot afford everyday life in the United States. As the Republicans continue to break their promises of billions of dollars to help the suffering working and middle classes

and the poor in the Gulf Coast and in the country at large, both the Democrats and the left remain quiet. The left believes that they cannot confront the powerful Republicans and the weak Democrats because they neither have a base of power in the working and middle classes nor do they have an alternative to the dominant conservative free market capitalist solutions that are failing to work for these classes.

There are many ways to understand crisis but ultimately there must be a realignment of power. These changes must occur on both the left and the right. At some level the Bush administration understands this and W. has started to sound and act a bit like a liberal with his promise of aid to flood victims and Jimmy Carter hammer in hand ready to build houses. But there is a massive contradiction between his words and deeds and despite this media show, ultimately a real alignment must occur. It may mean that the United States' standing as the only super power will be short lived and that the United States will have more trouble competing in the world economy. The current crisis puts a real hole in the ability of the Bush administration to provide tax revenues to the corporate sector. To provide those revenues it must raise the taxes of the working and middle classes and cut Medicare but it may have resistance on this front. The conservative tax revolution of the seventies may have turned. It may mean a real legitimation crisis with masses of Americans becoming unwilling to just continue to play their roles as workers and citizens. As privatization continues to reduce their services and because this corporatist practice means that most Americans must pay more money for health care, housing, retirement and education and because wages and benefits are stagnant in their "more with less" workplaces, they all have a personal crisis of living in a world that they can no longer afford. The Republican revamping of the tax codes against the majority of Americans is a golden opportunity to develop an alternative politics on taxing. Thus the current capitalist crisis is not only a crisis for the Bush administration and for the corporate sector but it should also be an opportunity for the left.

What should a left do that now realizes that it must attach itself to the ordinary struggles of daily life of the poor but also to the lives of working and middle class people? First, it must make an analysis that links the lives of the poor to the struggles of these classes, particularly that globalization undermines wages and benefits and creates a global condition, the so-called "rush to the bottom" which equalizes wages and benefits for working people all over the world. Global competition puts all workers in competition with each other ; this competition becomes a game of who'll work for the

least. This global condition really benefits no one. For working people in the United States this means lower wages and fewer benefits. Most Americans feel this already; for example, unionized workers, including public employees, have to pay higher premiums for their health insurance. The left has to demonstrate to ordinary citizens that it is beneficial to all that we begin to struggle for a guaranteed standard of living in which all citizens cannot be paid below a “universal living wage.” A “universal living wage” would guarantee wages and benefits that would enable all citizens the right to good housing, education and health care as a minimum. This is a beginning of a struggle that has to be made at the level of the workplace, the community, and at the national level. It is a struggle for equalization not as a rush to the bottom but as a “rush to the top.” This is the minimum struggle that has to be made and it is contingent on the left’s ability to make itself relevant to ordinary, poor, working and middle class people by enabling them to see their possibilities of developing a social movement around the important issues of their daily lives.

Finally, a left that is relevant may mean that a new labor movement can be rebuilt. It would demand that Katrina victims in the Gulf will not be shoved into greater depths of poverty. A real living wage struggle can result because the wages of Wal-Mart, FedEx and Home Depot are no longer valid. Maybe people will understand that corporations that pay miserable sub-living wages and have inadequate benefits did not really save the day but created the conditions of the disaster. In the best sense of crisis, it is an opportunity for people to learn to pay attention to their own interests. It is an opportunity for the working and the middle classes to come to the knowledge that the interests of corporations and the capitalist state are not the same as their interests and that the game of life is rigged against them. In the best sense, a crisis becomes an opportunity for ordinary people to struggle and increase their power and share of the economy’s best benefits.