

**Only solidarity can prevent a greater disaster:
A Whirlwind Report with Photographs from the Gulf Coast Justice & Solidarity Tour**

By Arnaldo García, National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights

During five hectic days in early November, some 40 organizers and activists from across the country – representing immigrant rights, environmental justice, faith, labor, Indigenous and African American community organizations, accompanied by community leaders from Louisiana, Mississippi, and neighboring states – participated in a solidarity and justice tour of the Hurricane Katrina-devastated Gulf Coast region. We went to meet with leaders and residents of devastated communities and began to dream together how to collectively overcome the severe challenges and obstacles the not-so natural disaster poses to achieving justice with healthy community in the Gulf region and country.



Angela Winfrey-Bowman after taking a small group through a tour in her devastated office at the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, New Orleans, LA

Organized by the San Antonio-based Southwest Workers Union with Project South and Grassroots Global Justice, we converged on Jackson, Mississippi, on November 2, going immediately late that afternoon into the first of many meetings and discussions that were to take place over the next four days on the road, in churches, on porches, in driveways and parking lots. Early the next morning we hopped into three vans and drove to New Orleans beginning an intense and heart-felt journey filled both with sadness and hope at what we saw.



United Houma Indian Nation lands: Before and After: Impact of Hurricane Rita

We learned first-hand about the impacts of the natural disaster and its devastating political consequences for African Americans, Latinos, Asians, Indigenous people and other poor and working class communities in New Orleans, Gulf Port MS, Houma Indian lands and various parts in between.



Manuel Pino, Acoma, standing in front of Baptist Church in Gulf Port, Mississippi

We heard how the overwhelmingly African American and poor communities were left behind as Katrina hit the coast, then forsaken by U.S. government relief efforts, and now being prevented from returning. We learned how Latinos were denied FEMA and Red Cross aid, as federal marshals, immigration police and other security forces sicced on them because they were “illegal” Or how immigrant contract workers, recruited from as faraway as Los Angeles, New York, and Miami, were being abandoned, exploited and worked like slaves; exposed to hazardous and toxic conditions where they worked and lived.

Lifelong and recent residents continue being denied access to their homes, others returning to find their belongings on the streets, evicted, and strangers living in their former dwellings now priced out of dignity. Others finding their homes, while in ruins, being demolished or slated for demolition; still others prevented from entering their neighborhoods

During the tour, New Orleans government laid-off over 3,000 city workers and announced the virtual privatization of the education system, firing principals and converting them into charter schools. On our last day back in Jackson, the front page of the state’s main newspaper carried the “news” scapegoating immigrants are sucking up state services, draining the state coffers and the bane of the fiscal crisis.

In spite of these cruel stratagems imposed on communities of color, we witnessed undaunted community-based recovery efforts in action:

- The Common Ground Collective, an all-volunteer health clinic providing food, medicine and other vitals, organized by a former Black Panther and an elder visionary community leader and first President of the NAACP in the region. Recently raided by ICE, the immigration police, Common Ground Collective has withstood harassment by police,

vigilantes, and the FCC – for installing a community radio broadcasting shout-outs so that families and neighbors could locate each other

- Community Labor United’s heroic drive collecting the stories and voices of the forcibly displaced African American community and organizing the People’s Hurricane Relief Fund and Accountability Campaign with the unprecedented goal of getting all the displaced to return to rebuild New Orleans with justice and health. PHRFAC/CLU is convening a national people’s assembly of the displaced December 8-10 in Jackson, culminating in a national day of action on International Human Rights day;

- Saving Our Selves, which began as seven friends decided to take a van-load of supplies into the hurricane devastated region, believing this was just a stop-gap measure while the government-led relief kicked in with FEMA and Red Cross. Initially paying for it out of their own pockets and credit cards, SOS has now delivered over 300 tons of supplies and FEMA and Red Cross come to them for help.



- Her home destroyed by the hurricane, Victoria Cintra, a tough organizer with the Mississippi Immigrant Rights Alliance, continues battling for the rights of the foreign-born while living in a rented RV. MIRA is doing bold work with immigrant workers and communities, calling out the Red Cross as they expelled Latinos – or those perceived to be immigrants; defending and helping stranded contracted workers ripped off by greedy and unscrupulous contractors.

Kool Gang emerging with photo collages from his office at the People's Institute for Survival & Beyond

- And the United Houma Indian Nation on their southwest Louisiana coastal lands, telling us the 9,000 year history of the region and their continuing struggle for self-determination and survival after the latest storm. We visited their makeshift relief center housed in the Robichaux family’s former store and actively witnessed their work to restore an elder member’s home, as we helped hammer some nails and clean up the detritus left in the wake of Hurricane Rita.
- There are still other extraordinary stories of community-based relief and solidarity: the Vietnamese community national support efforts bringing in volunteers and supplies from afar; young activists making the trek to volunteer with these and other community organizations working to clean-up and rebuild their homes and neighborhoods and the yet to be told stories of survival, displacement and return to rebuild.

What began as volunteer efforts to help relatives, neighbors, friends and fellow organizers and activists are becoming new institutions and projects that will go beyond the initial community-lead disaster relief and assistance we witnessed.

This was the most impressive part of our visit to the Gulf Coast region: the boundless generosity and solidarity bestowed upon us by the host community organizations. Their courage and determination to take on the disaster's impact on their communities shined through the debris and wreckage, their vision of all displaced communities being able to return and reclaim their neighborhoods and homes, to mourn lives lost and together make a new history based on their dignity with hope, justice and health.