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## The Missing Katrina Story

By Peter Dreier and John Atlas

A week after Katrina hit New Orleans in September 2005, staffers from the national community-based organizing group ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now) discovered that tens of thousands of displaced homeowners were in danger of losing their homes due to foreclosure by banks. Most of these New Orleans refugees had lost their jobs and were scattered across Louisiana, Texas, Mississippi, and elsewhere, living in motels, shelters, apartment buildings, and with relatives. ACORN organizers rushed to disaster shelters in Houston, Baton Rouge, and other cities to locate these mainly low-income African-American homeowners and discover why their homes were being foreclosed when lenders had made highly publicized claims of mortgage relief after the hurricane.

What ACORN organizers discovered was dismaying, but not surprising for anyone who has done work in low-income, racially segregated communities. Major lenders had given their middle-class customers ninety days or more to make mortgage payments. In contrast, many of the banks and lending companies that had targeted low-income consumers—called "sub prime" lenders—were offering mortgage relief for only one month.

On September 22, ACORN released a report, "How the sub prime mortgage industry is sandbagging Katrina-affected homeowners," to expose the industry's double standard. After *The Wall Street Journal* and other major media publicized the report, ACORN—along with labor unions and consumer groups—demanded meetings with mainstream and sub prime lenders and successfully negotiated plans to prevent foreclosures.

This story offers an important lesson, and raises two questions. The lesson: grassroots organizations comprised mainly of working class and poor people have been a critical factor in catalyzing the rebuilding of New Orleans' more vulnerable areas. The questions: why is the public unaware of the work of these community groups? And if poor, uprooted people can do so much in the wake of disaster, why hasn't the federal government done more to rebuild New Orleans' low-income neighborhoods?

Much still needs to be done. And the answer to these questions has important implications for the millions of caring Americans who extended their hearts, wallets and volunteer efforts that became the lifeblood for thousands of the victims of Katrina.

Katrina brought out some of the best aspects of American society. Tens of thousands of people donated money, food, blood, skills, and other resources to help Katrina's victims, channeled through dozens of philanthropic groups. But ultimately the rebuilding of New Orleans, especially the areas where the poor live, cannot depend on charity. It will require that poor people and their allies gain a voice in the decisions made about the city's future. And only strong grassroots organizations—unions and community groups—that understand how to get and wield political power have the persistence and savvy to make that happen.

### PART I: The "Helpless Victims" Myth

The campaign to avert foreclosures was only one of many victories—large and small—that ACORN and other community-based organizations achieved by mobilizing Katrina survivors to confront banks, insurance companies, and public officials. These achievements by grassroots groups belie the image of Katrina survivors as helpless victims, grateful for any assistance they received from private charities or government agencies.

ACORN did not simply parachute its organizers into New Orleans and other cities after Katrina struck. It had been organizing low-income and working class residents in New Orleans for three decades, and already had a sizable constituency who were used to challenging the authorities. In 2002, for example, ACORN mounted a successful grassroots campaign in New Orleans to enact a citywide minimum wage pegged at a dollar above the federal wage level. After the surprise victory, the city's business leaders sued, and the wage law was overturned by the state's right-wing Supreme Court. But ACORN had made a name for itself as a grassroots David willing to take on powerful Goliaths.

Indeed, ACORN is one of three national community groups that built a grassroots base in New Orleans, Houston, Baton Rouge, Jackson, and other cities in the Katrina Diaspora. Local chapters of the two other organizing networks—the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) and the Pacific Institute for Community Organizing (PICO)—have, along with ACORN and several other community groups, kept up the pressure on the city, state, and federal governments to address the problems facing Katrina survivors.

ACORN, the largest and most effective of these groups, has pushed public officials and business leaders to spend more money on housing, economic development, and the levees; stop home foreclosures; and bring out

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voters for the elections (including the New Orleans mayoral primary and run-off elections last April and May). It has also organized a large-scale clean-up and gutting program for homeowners, which that has encouraged people to return.

Their efforts to help Katrina survivors, especially those who want to return to the devastated Lower Ninth Ward neighborhood to rebuild their homes and their lives, has mostly been ignored by the nation's mainstream media. But without these community organizing groups' persistent protests, demands, and negotiations, the voices of ordinary residents would have been excluded from the plans crafted by business and political leaders to rebuild the city in a top-down manner.

### **Media Image vs. Reality**

To most Americans, the lingering images of Katrina are of nameless victims desperately waiting for help—families perched atop roofs surrounded by water, or crowded into the Superdome like cattle, or sitting in a motel room in a town hours from New Orleans unsure of their future.

Our image of the government's response to the disaster is frozen in time as well—angry politicians like New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin and Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco pointing fingers at each other and at President George W. Bush; Bush congratulating FEMA director Michael Brown ("Brownie, you're doing a heck of a job"); and then Brown being grilled by Congress for his and his agency's incompetence.

These images were burnished into our national consciousness within weeks of the disaster. Since then, the media has reported on the recovery effort, but much less consistently. In these reports, we usually recognize some familiar faces—Mayor Nagin, who was re-elected in May, or President Bush, who makes an occasional photo-op visit to the Gulf Coast to demonstrate his administration's efforts. TV and print journalists tend to put a positive spin on the recovery, when the fact is that New Orleans is still in pretty bad shape.

As of the fall of 2006, New Orleans' population was still under 200,000, less than half its pre-Katrina level. Water and electrical service were unavailable in some areas, garbage collection unreliable, many schools and hospitals were still closed, and the city buses and trolleys unpredictable. Vast swaths of the city's low-income neighborhoods—particularly the Lower Ninth Ward—looked as though they were recently bombed out. Evacuees living across forty-four different states had no way to know the current state of their homes and neighborhoods: whether their water was running, or their local schools were open, or whether their former jobs—or any jobs—were available. The most pertinent government decisions were not reported by the national news reports or local broadcasts in their new communities. Because of the media's misleading coverage, the massive national commitment that must be sustained in order for millions of Gulf Coast residents to get back their lives may wane—or worse, be misdirected.

### **What The Media Missed**

In reporting on Katrina's aftermath, the nation's mainstream media have missed the story of grassroots organizations like ACORN. Even the most sympathetic accounts of Katrina's victims have failed to recognize the key role that political protest and community-based organizing have played in relieving the plight of the hurricane's most vulnerable victims.

Spike Lee's four-hour HBO documentary, *When the Levees Broke*, aired on the first anniversary of the Katrina tragedy. Reviewing Lee's film, most newspaper commentators praised his sympathetic and dramatic storytelling. He gave voice to Katrina's many victims. He captured the bungled response of government officials. He portrayed the racial and class issues through interviews with a wide diversity of people and with stark footage of the devastation and the recovery efforts.

*When the Levees Broke* is a complex story of the failure of the government at all levels to respond to the natural disaster. It is also a tortured tale of a community abandoned by its elected leaders, and coming to grips with what it lost.

But Lee's documentary, though visceral and heart wrenching, is also emblematic of the misleading media coverage and analysis of the Katrina disaster. Like readers of the *New Yorker* and *Newsweek* pieces that appeared around the same time (August 21 and September 4, respectively), viewers of Lee's documentary never get any sense that there were organized poor and working-class people fighting back—and winning enough victories to keep up their hopes that they might eventually prevail.

For example, in his lengthy *New Yorker* article, "The Lost Year," author Dan Baum describes three Cornell University graduate students in city planning sitting at a table drinking coffee and studying an inventory they had made of the Ninth Ward's assets, an inventory of the businesses, public buildings and parks, schools and social agencies. What Baum doesn't mention is that the students were interns with ACORN, sitting at Loretta's, a praline shop and cafe around the corner from ACORN's office. Or that their "asset mapping" is a technique used by community organizers and urban planners to help identify a neighborhood's strengths that can be drawn on

when residents are mobilized for political action. Baum, like others in the media, failed to note that this study was one of several projects done by ACORN's staff, members, interns, and invited planners, engineers, and architects from several universities that the organization recruited to craft a rebuilding plan it could present to public officials to demand that poor and working class families are given the opportunity to return home to affordable housing, living wage jobs, and good schools.

### Looking at New Orleans from the Bottom Up

Katrina was not an equal opportunity disaster. There were clear class and race fault lines. Prior to Katrina, New Orleans was not only one of the nation's poorest cities (one quarter of its population was below the poverty line), but its poor people were among the most concentrated in poverty ghettos. Housing discrimination and the location of government-subsidized housing contributed to the city's economic and racial segregation. According to the Brookings Institution, the area experienced a faster exodus of jobs—as well as middle-class and wealthy families—to the suburbs than in other metropolitan areas. This exacerbated the city's fiscal crisis, and thus undermined its capacity to provide such basic services as police, fire, and city planning.

For almost a year after Katrina hit New Orleans, local, state, and federal government officials dropped the ball in developing a plan to rebuild the city, especially the poorest neighborhoods most devastated by the hurricane. To the extent that those neighborhoods have made a comeback, their recovery is due largely to the grassroots organizing groups that would not let the powerbrokers forget them: ACORN, The Metropolitan Organization (the IAF affiliate in Houston, where many Katrina survivors fled), All Congregations Together (PICO's New Orleans chapter), the People's Hurricane Relief Fund Committee, and Common Ground. We will focus on ACORN, the largest of the groups involved. Each group, however, could tell a similar story.

Before the storm, ACORN's New Orleans chapter was considered a feisty and effective community group that politicians and business leaders had to take seriously. It had more than 9,000 member-families. In addition to its work on the municipal minimum wage, ACORN's membership has been the engine behind the decade-long struggle to unionize the downtown hotels. ACORN helped elect several candidates to office, including Marlin Gusman, who was elected sheriff in 2004. In the spring of 2005, New Orleans ACORN had been awarded a certificate by the City Council in a special ceremony for its neighborhood work.

Then the hurricane hit and ACORN became unmoored: its members lost, its office flooded, its staff displaced. But because it is a national organization with chapters around the country [see box], it had the resources and flexibility to respond. After the storm and flooding, thousands of ACORN members in cities across the country opened their homes to house evacuees. ACORN'S New Orleans chapter soon got back on its feet, aided by reinforcements from as far away as Flint, Michigan. Here's what ACORN has accomplished over the past year:

**STOPPING HOUSING DEMOLITION.** Within weeks after Katrina struck, New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin announced that the city would demolish approximately 50,000 homes in the city's low-lying areas. After holding community meetings, ACORN decided to sue the city to stop the demolition. In January 2006, it won a court settlement requiring that homeowners be notified and given the opportunity to appeal before any action is taken. To mobilize opposition to the city's plan, ACORN plastered "No Bulldozing" signs on homes, trees, and broken fences all over the Lower Ninth Ward. At one point, ACORN activists chased off a backhoe crew preparing to demolish a home.

**RESTORING THE NINTH WARD.** To jump-start the city's recovery effort, Mayor Nagin asked some of the region's business, real estate, and legal powerbrokers to form a blue-ribbon task force to make recommendations. Nagin and the task force froze community activists out of the process. Not surprisingly, this top-down group emerged with a plan to shrink the population of New Orleans. At its core, the plan would sacrifice the neighborhoods that had been hardest hit in order to improve flood protection for the rest of the city. The plan called for restoring the city's affluent neighborhoods, its major businesses, and its tourist attractions—the port, the hotels, the French Quarter, the Garden District, and the Superdome—while paying almost no attention to the plight of the low-income residents, many of them scattered in cities hours away, who comprised the bulk of the city's workforce.

In his *New Yorker* article, Baum described a meeting of over 100 angry homeowners from the devastated Lower Ninth Ward who want to return to their homes. He describes the confrontation between the homeowners and two federal agencies—the Small Business Administration and FEMA—that had failed to provide money for small business loans, or even turn on the electricity so the homeowners could begin to fix their homes. What Baum fails to tell readers, however, is that the meeting was organized by ACORN. These angry residents just didn't spontaneously show up in the same place at the same time to prod the government into action. The meeting was the result of long hours of phone calls, leafleting, conversations on doorsteps, preparation sessions, and designing T-shirt logos and slogans. Without New Orleans ACORN, this meeting, like scores of other meetings and demonstrations organized in the wake of Katrina, would not have happened.

Along with organizing protests, ACORN'S New Orleans chapter launched a proactive plan to save these

communities by encouraging residents who wanted to return to do so. Beginning in December, ACORN crews and volunteers from across the country began working day and night to repair the homes of member-families in the threatened areas. ACORN's crews tore down moldy drywall, ripped up flooring, and carted decades worth of ruined possessions to the curb; then stored salvageable personal belongings, sanitized structures to prevent future mold growth, and put tarping on roofs to prevent further water damage and deterioration. They got the houses ready for rebuilding. Relying on volunteers and private funding, ACORN's clean-up/house-gutting program has saved nearly 2,000 homes that are now ready for rehab. More than 5,000 volunteers have helped with the project, including students on spring break, and workers from the AFL-CIO, and the Canadian Autoworkers Union.

**PROTECTING GOOD-WAGE JOBS.** In addition to helping rebuild homes in the Lower Ninth Ward neighborhood, ACORN allied with the AFL-CIO and the NAACP to put pressure on the city's powerbrokers to make sure that local residents were hired to work on the massive federally funded rebuilding projects in other parts of the city. And they lobbied and protested to insist that workers be paid the prevailing, pre-hurricane wages for construction work. President Bush had tried to rescind the federal law requiring union-level wages on government-funded construction, but Congress overturned his decision in the wake of pressure from labor unions and community groups like ACORN.

**PRESERVING THE RIGHT TO VOTE.** ACORN also went to court to ensure that New Orleans' displaced, largely black population would have access to out-of-state polling places, especially in Atlanta and Houston, for the municipal elections held last April and May. The suit argued that the state's election plans would violate the voting rights of thousands of primarily African American voters displaced from the city after Katrina. ACORN demanded that satellite stations be set up in other states and that absentee ballots automatically be sent to the exiles. The federal judge rejected the demand, but ACORN organizer Stephen Bradberry led a successful campaign to get state officials to open several satellite offices in Louisiana. ACORN, the Metropolitan Organization (the IAF affiliate in Houston), and other community groups registered over 20,000 absentee voters for New Orleans municipal elections.

**OBTAINING TAX CREDITS.** ACORN staffers recognized that one of the most crucial forms of federal assistance was the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), a program that provides an income supplement to low-wage workers—from a few hundred dollars to \$4,000 a year—to help lift them out of poverty. To obtain the benefit, however, people have to file a tax form, even if they don't actually have to pay any taxes. In February 2006, ACORN got funding from the William J. Clinton Foundation to reach out to Katrina survivors in ten cities: Birmingham, Alabama; Little Rock, Arkansas; Atlanta, Georgia; Baton Rouge, Lake Charles, and New Orleans, Louisiana; Jackson, Mississippi; Dallas, Houston, and San Antonio, Texas. ACORN also provided on-the-spot tax preparation and helped direct displaced residents to other much needed federal and state benefits programs for Katrina survivors.

**CREATING A SURVIVOR'S ASSOCIATION.** During the first few months after the hurricane, ACORN organizers fanned out across the South to identify members who had been displaced by Katrina. ACORN held meetings in more than a dozen cities to gauge whether the members wanted to return to New Orleans, or create new lives for themselves in their adopted communities. To maintain their momentum, they formed the ACORN Katrina Survivors Association (AKSA). While organizing to address urgent local problems, the group had a broader agenda: to push the Bush administration and Congress to take bolder and quicker action to assist the Katrina survivors to rebuild their lives and their neighborhoods.

Communicating primarily by cell phone, AKSA drafted a united platform, which they announced to the national press via teleconference. Soon, delegations of ACORN members were on buses to Baton Rouge and planes to Washington D.C. They mobilized public protests, held press conferences with friendly state legislators and members of Congress, lobbied public officials, and engaged in regular negotiations with FEMA officials to ensure that the agency continue to provide disaster housing and other assistance to displaced survivors. Mixing confrontation and collaboration, ACORN's tactics sometimes offended government officials and business leaders, but they proved effective. They won a greater voice for residents in the decisions that will shape the future of their city and their neighborhoods.

## **PART II: Why the People's Government Didn't Do More What Government Didn't Do**

The calamity of Katrina was a failure of political will. A short catalog of sins include the following:

- \* The federal government ignored many early warnings that the levees were not sufficiently strong;
- \* The federal, state, and local governments failed to prepare and implement disaster plans to evacuate the population;
- \* The Bush administration failed to quickly respond to immediate needs such as food, water, and emergency housing when Katrina struck;

\* Bush and Congress failed to provide adequate funding to clean up and reconstruct the region's infrastructure, levees, schools, hospitals, businesses, and homes.

Lee's documentary portrays the Bush administration as uncaring and incompetent. Bush shows up in New Orleans for a press conference on September 12, fifteen days after Katrina hit. Mike Brown tells CNN's Soledad O'Brien four days after the hurricane struck that he was unaware of the lack of food, water, and basic health care at the Superdome. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is shown on a Manhattan shoe-shopping trip while New Orleans drowned. Neither Governor Blanco nor Mayor Nagin comes off looking very competent either. Lee called the Katrina disaster a "system failure." The *New York Times* critic correctly summed up the film's message as "collective failure of will." Everyone was at fault.

This is the framework through which the major media have reported about Katrina. In *Newsweek's* special September 2006 issue on Katrina, reporters Evan Thomas, Jonathan Darman, and Sarah Childres blamed the disaster on shoddily built levees; a vacationing, clueless White House; and the Forces of Nature. "The blame game for New Orleans's sorry state is many-sided. The Bush administration, the governor's office in Baton Rouge and City Hall all share some responsibility for the slow state of reconstruction. So does the culture of New Orleans itself." Even Donna Brazile, the Democratic Party campaign operative, writing in *VanityFair.com*, blamed the disaster on a White House that "stumbled for weeks, along with state and local officials, trying to figure out what to do."

What is missing from this analysis is something Baum only hints at in his *New Yorker* piece. He quotes White House officials who killed a bold plan unveiled by Congressman Richard Baker, a Baton Rouge Republican, in January 2005 that would have provided a \$30 billion bill to guarantee that homeowners received at least 60 percent of the equity in their homes. That money would have helped to jump-start the revitalization of New Orleans by encouraging the rebuilding of most of the 200,000 homes. Bush spokesmen said their opposition was "ideological." "We don't want to set up another bureaucracy."

### **Indifference not Incompetence**

Why did the leaders of the world's richest nation fail so abysmally to prevent a predictable hurricane from wreaking such havoc on a major American city?

Lee, Baum, and many other journalists essentially attribute the government's mishandling of Katrina to incompetence. By doing so, they failed to link Katrina's human disaster to the ideology of conservative governance as practiced by the Bush administration. The conservative strategy had three prongs: shrink domestic government services such as FEMA; shift public responsibilities to private corporations (even at the expense of the well-being and safety of American citizens); and engage in pay-to-play politics where personal gain counts for more than government performance. This lethal combination is not the traditional conservative belief in small government. It's contempt for government. A central tenet of conservative ideology is the belief that government interferes with individual liberty, is less efficient than the private sector, and in many cases is simply unnecessary. Among the world's industrial nations, the United States has the lowest overall level of taxation (especially for the wealthy), the weakest regulations on business for consumer and worker protections, and the smallest safety net in terms of health insurance, childcare, and antipoverty programs.

Even so, conservatives like President George W. Bush, his Republican allies in Congress, his intellectual strategists like Grover Norquist of Americans for Tax Reform and William Kristol of the *Weekly Standard*, and the corporate-sponsored policy wonks at the American Enterprise Institute, Cato Institute, and the Heritage Foundation argue that (with the exception of military spending) we need to further reduce government, in large part by cutting taxes even more, especially for the very rich. They call this "starving the beast," reducing taxes so much that government in general, and the federal government in particular, will be virtually paralyzed.

With the Katrina disaster, these conservatives got what they were looking for. When it was needed most, government was paralyzed. The administration's failure was a natural outgrowth of the Bush administration's fundamental hostility to government itself. In the subsequent year, we've been watching the consequences play out in the daily lives on the people described by the media.

The people of New Orleans were victims of incompetence compounded by along ideological assault on government, which began as a small movement following Republican Barry Goldwater's defeat by Lyndon Johnson in the 1964 presidential contest and reached its goal with the election of President Ronald Reagan in 1980. Reagan famously said in his 1981, inauguration speech, "Government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem." More recently, the influential conservative activist, Grover Norquist, quipped, "My goal is to cut government ... down to the size where we can drown it in the bathtub."

Government can be competent or incompetent, and, at times, it can be not only effective but also bold. This was true with FDR's efforts to respond to the Depression and win World War II, Truman's postwar efforts to rebuild Europe as a United States ally, and JFK's pledge to put a man on the moon. The federal government has a

reasonably good track record of responding to so-called "natural" disasters like earthquakes, floods, and hurricanes. President Lyndon Johnson quickly and competently responded to Hurricane Betsy, a major hurricane that struck New Orleans in September 1965. More recently, the Clinton administration significantly professionalized and improved FEMA, appointed an experienced administrator (James Whitt), increased its budget, and developed close working relationships with governors, mayors, and their disaster management agencies. The Clinton administration's success in overseeing relief and reconstruction after the 1994 Los Angeles earthquake suggests that the federal government can act effectively and efficiently in times of crisis.

The Bush administration's actions might better be characterized as indifference rather than incompetence. For example, the administration apparently assumed that people would evacuate New Orleans on their own, without giving much thought to who these people were, what resources they had, or where they would go. They acted as if everyone had an SUV full of gas and family or friends (or a second home) waiting to take them in somewhere safe. In fact, among the city's African Americans, 35 percent did not own a car, compared with 15 percent of whites. Many reports had warned that tens of thousands of people would have difficulty evacuating New Orleans in the case of a flood. Even so, FEMA Director Michael Brown resorted to typical blame-the-victory conservative rhetoric. He attributed the death toll in New Orleans "to people who did not heed evacuation warnings."

In reality, the government had plenty of competent bureaucrats who even under Bush tried to do their jobs. Even under downgraded conditions, FEMA's middle management and on-the-ground employees were highly capable. On August 28, 2005, the Department of Homeland Security had compiled a forty-page "fact analysis" report and emailed it to the White House at 1:47 am on August 29. It warned that any hurricane rated category 4 that hit New Orleans would likely lead to severe flooding and/or levee breaching, leaving the city submerged for weeks or months. Long-time FEMA employees such as Marty Bahamonde provided accurate and timely information to FEMA's front office and its director, Michael Brown.

President Bush and the rest of the catastrophic conservatives in his administration hired their cronies, outsourced core functions, and shrunk government until it was too small to respond effectively once Katrina struck.

After Katrina, FEMA rewarded lucrative no-bid contracts to companies like Halliburton (\$125 million) and Bechtel instead of to qualified contractors who had worked in New Orleans, lived in New Orleans, who wanted to go back home and rebuild. FEMA, for example, paid the Shaw Group, a giant engineering firm, \$175 per 100 square feet to install blue-tarps on storm damaged roofs, even though the actual installers earned as little as \$2 per 100 square feet, and the tarps were provided by FEMA for free. The Shaw Group and Halliburton had hired the lobbyist Joe Allbaugh, a former FEMA director and Bush's 2000 presidential campaign director, to secure the federal contracts. Halliburton gave 91 percent of its PAC donations to Republicans; Bechtel Corporation gave 72 percent.

If the Bush administration can be labeled inept, it was an incompetence by design. A government without resources and talent can't perform effectively when major challenges arise.

### **We Only Get What We Demand**

The media did a good job of evoking our sympathy for the hurricane's victims and our anger at elected officials for failing to come to their aid. But the national media failed the public when it framed the story of Katrina as a tale of passive victims and inept government, instead of telling the real story of an organized grassroots effort of citizens struggling for their homes and livelihoods against a government ideologically unwilling to help.

Not surprisingly, The *Times-Picayune*—New Orleans' daily newspaper—has covered ACORN and its community organizing counterparts with regularity since Katrina hit. A Lexis/Nexis search reveals over 100 Times-Picayune articles mentioning ACORN alone. Any local reporter with an ounce of street smarts understands ACORN's key role in the power struggle over the city's future. Likewise, the *Houston Chronicle* has paid attention to organizing work of The Metropolitan Organization (the local IAF affiliate) and ACORN among the Katrina survivors in that city. But to the major national newspapers—The *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Los Angeles Times*—the community organizing groups are, with some notable exceptions, virtually invisible. These papers' reporters found lots of individual human interest stories of loss, tragedy, and even resilience and courage, but when hundreds of individuals join together to demand respect and rights from government and business leaders, their efforts rarely find their way into the nation's most prestigious newspapers, news magazines, and news broadcasts.

Although the mainstream press doesn't know how to cover grassroots organizing, it recognizes lobbying, even by the poor. So when ACORN brought more than 500 Katrina survivors to Washington in caravans of buses last February for two days of rallies, protests and meetings with elected officials to demand an end to FEMA's "paperwork nightmare" and more funds to rebuild New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, the *Washington Post* put the story—and a color photo—on its front page. "We want all of New Orleans rebuilt, not just parts," said Dorothy

Stukes, a leader of ACORN's Katrina Survivors Association. "And we don't want a Chocolate City. We want a Gumbo City, a city that has a little bit of everything in it." At a meeting with Democratic allies, ACORN members applauded when Rep. Barney Frank (D-Mass.) called the Bush administration's failure to help rebuild New Orleans' low-income neighborhoods "a policy of ethnic cleansing by inaction."

Once the protesters returned to New Orleans, however, neither the *Washington Post* nor other major newspapers followed up to see what ACORN had accomplished in its own backyard. Indeed, ACORN is a difficult group for the mass media to follow because it is so unlike the nonpartisan, apolitical soup kitchen-type of volunteerism that is so beloved by politicians and so ubiquitous in America. While providing clothing and "doing good," ACORN is not a "feel good" community group rushing into New Orleans with cans of food and other charity work. It's been there for over thirty years organizing the poor and working class people to put pressure on the system from the outside. And its leaders and staff are made up of shrewd and tough political infighters whose goal is building political power.

Even progressives are sometimes so cynical about politics that they have a hard time believing that a group like ACORN, with its blunt emphasis on power, is capable of winning economic and political victories for poor and working class people, doing so in the most conservative of times, and in the face of intractable odds.

If there's any hope for a progressive future, it will turn on the work of a new generation of labor unions activists, environmentalists, and community organizing groups like ACORN that understand the importance of grassroots organizing to rebuild a political constituency for change.

The lessons of Katrina reflect both the worst and best aspects of our democracy. Worst—the ideological indifference and crony capitalism reflected by the now-discredited Bush administration. Best—the hopefulness mobilized by ACORN's unflagging commitment, even in the worst circumstances imaginable, to organize ordinary people to challenge business-as-usual and build a movement for social justice.

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ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now) is the largest community organization of low-income and working-class families in the United States, with 220,000 dues-paying families organized into 850 neighborhoods spread across more than 100 American cities. The ACORN family of organizations includes two public-employee unions, two southern-based radio stations (KNON and KABF), several publications (including the magazine *Social Policy*), a housing development corporation (ACORN Housing), a law office, and a variety of other vehicles that supports its direct organizing and issue campaigns, such as Project Vote and the Living Wage Resource Center.

Since its founding in the early 1970s, ACORN has mobilized people around welfare, housing, lending discrimination (called "redlining"), economic development, and other issues, combining protest and politics to win real improvements for poor people and their neighborhoods. ACORN has been the prime mover behind the nationwide "living wage" movement, which in the past decade has pushed more than 100 cities to adopt local laws raising incomes for the lowest-paid workers. In 2004, ACORN launched a successful ballot initiative in Florida to raise the state's minimum wage by a dollar an hour. In November, ACORN and its labor union allies sponsored similar measures, all successful, in four other states—Missouri, Ohio, Colorado, and Arizona, while unions led similar successful campaigns in Montana and Nevada. Their grassroots minimum-wage campaigns increased voter turnout enough to help Democrats Claire McCaskill in Missouri and John Tester in Montana defeat incumbent Republicans and cement the Democrats' majority in the U.S. Senate. For more information about ACORN go to [www.acorn.org](http://www.acorn.org)

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