

## Why Are They Making New Orleans a Ghost Town?

By Bill Quigley

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On Halloween night, New Orleans will be very, very dark. Well over half the homes on the east bank of New Orleans sit vacant because they still do not have electricity. More do not have natural gas or running water. Most stoplights still do not work. Most street lights remain out. Fully armed National Guard troops refuse to allow over ten thousand people to even physically visit their property in the Lower Ninth Ward neighborhood.

Despite the fact that people cannot come back, tens of thousands of people face eviction from their homes. A local judge told me that their court expects to process a thousand evictions a day for weeks.

Renters still in shelters or temporary homes across the country will never see the court notice taped to the door of their home. Because they will not show up for the eviction hearing that they do not know about, their possessions will be tossed out in the street.

In the street their possessions will sit alongside an estimated 3 million truck loads of downed trees, piles of mud, fiberglass insulation, crushed sheetrock, abandoned cars, spoiled mattresses, wet rugs, and horrifyingly smelly refrigerators full of food from August. There are also New Orleans renters facing evictions from landlords who want to renovate and charge higher rents to the out of town workers who populate the city. Some renters have offered to pay their rent and are still being evicted. Others question why they should have to pay rent for September when they were not allowed to return to New Orleans.

New Orleans, known for its culture and food and music, is now pushing away the very people who created the culture and food and music. Mardi Gras Indians live and paraded in neighborhoods that sit without electricity or water. The back room cooks for many of the most famous restaurants cannot yet return to New Orleans. Musicians remain in exile. Housing is scarce and rents are soaring. Over 245,000 people lost jobs in September. Public education in New Orleans has not restarted. The levees are not even up to their flawed level in August.

Dr. Arjun Sengupta, the United Nations Human Rights Commission Special Reporter on Extreme Poverty, visited New Orleans and Baton Rouge last week. He toured the devastated areas and listened to the evacuees still in shelters and those living out of town with family. Dr. Sengupta described current conditions as "shocking" and "gross violations of human rights." The devastation itself is shocking, he explained, but even more shocking is that two months have passed and there is little to nothing being done to reconstruct vast areas of New Orleans. "The US is the richest nation in the history of the world. Why cannot it restore electricity and water and help people rebuild their homes and neighborhoods? If the US can rebuild Afghanistan and Iraq, why not New Orleans?"

The longer the poor and working class of New Orleans stay away, the more likely it will be that they never return. That, some say, is exactly what those in power in New Orleans and Louisiana and the US must want. Otherwise, why are they making New Orleans a ghost town?