Among the roughly 15,000 people gathered in Detroit for the U.S. Social Forum (USSF) this year were some 250 grassroots activists and organizers from New Orleans. They were seeking insight from activists in Detroit—the other U.S. city with the largest percentage of empty or unlivable housing—even as the Rust Belt took several decades to achieve what Hurricane Katrina did overnight.

Of all the housing issues that New Orleans faced following Katrina, the battle over public housing developments stands out for its blatant bigotry and unfairness. Not long after Katrina, politicians, developers, and planners began talking about tearing down all the remaining public housing in New Orleans because, as Baton Rouge Congressman Richard Baker gloated, they had “finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans! We couldn’t do it, but God did.” In truth, a lot of the public housing had made it through the storm in solid condition and with a few repairs could have been used for many years to come. But the decision-makers had their own agenda and chose to follow their prejudices and stereotypes with city council president Oliver Thomas (who later went to prison for a corruption scandal involving bribes related to a city contract for a parking lot) stating, “There’s just been a lot of pampering, and at some point you have to say, ‘No, no, no, no, no’! We don’t need soap opera watchers right now.”

Nadine Jarmon, the appointed chief of the Housing Authority of New Orleans (HANO), seconded Thomas’ opinions. If “they don’t express a willingness to work, or they don’t have a training background, or they weren’t working before Katrina, then [we’re] making a decision to pass over those people,” she declared. Meanwhile, thousands of undamaged housing units sat empty six months after the hurricane as homeless New Orleanians and those whose homes had been damaged and had nowhere to go faced eviction from FEMA hotels and trailers. Quick to blame the victims, Thomas, Jarmon and their supporters did not even make exceptions for the elderly, injured, and disabled.

Effects of Race and Class on Public Housing

The attack on public housing residents was based, without a doubt, on race, class, and gender. And at a certain point, the attacks crystallized into an outright support for eugenics when Representative John LaBruzzo of Metairie proposed tubal ligation and vasectomies for public housing residents and people receiving government aid. “What I’m really studying is any and all possibilities that we can reduce the number of people that are going from generational welfare to generational welfare,” he told a Times-Picayune reporter. While LaBruzzo’s proposals may...
have been too extreme even for the right-wing Republicans in the Louisiana legislature, his comments reflect the attitude held by many toward poor residents.

“LaBruzio talks about poverty as though it were an infectious disease rather than a condition people are condemned to by Louisiana’s lack of investment in education, employment, affordable housing, and quality health care programs, services, and resources,” countered members of the Women’s Health & Justice Initiative (WHJI).

Before the evacuation, more than 14,000 families in New Orleans were receiving some form of housing assistance from HANO. Over 9,000 families were in Section 8 housing and of the 7,700 public housing apartments, 5,146 units were occupied—the rest being vacant, supposedly awaiting repairs and refurbishment. Most of the occupied units were in the so-called Big Four developments: Lafitte, B. W. Cooper, St. Bernard, and C. J. Peete. Although large, these developments were not like the anonymous housing towers of Chicago or New York. They were two- and three-story houses with porches and balconies set among pedestrian walkways, courtyards, and in the case of Lafitte, large oak trees.

Following Katrina, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) announced a plan to tear down almost all the remaining units in the Big Four—over 4,500 apartments—and build 800 new units, only a fraction of which would be set aside for former residents. The battle had begun, and the city would never be the same again.

During a demonstration at the St. Bernard development in April 2006, former resident Pamela Mahogany expressed surprise at the city’s sudden concern over unlivable conditions. “We’ve been having mold, mildew, and backed-up sewers for years,” she said. “I’ve been here 42 years and it’s been a hazard the whole time. They never cared before!” Furthermore, as a working nurse, Mahogany busts the myth about public housing residents being inveterate “soap opera watchers.”

In the months following the demonstration, many former residents of the Big Four—some of whom had returned from exile in Houston—and activists who wanted to stand in solidarity, moved into some of the allegedly unlivable homes. Occupants of Lafitte and St. Bernard developments were quickly arrested but at other locations, they remained for months—even without electricity, as in the C. J. Peete complex.

A Masterplan Aided by a Hurricane

The effort to tear down the city’s public housing was part of a national trend that had begun in 2000. In eight years, HUD demolished 100,000 units of housing but rebuilt only 40,000 of them. In New Orleans, public housing had been under threat for decades, facing declining services and demonization by the media.

Prior to Hurricane Katrina, the big housing fight in the city had been over the fate of the St. Thomas development in the Tenth Ward. Built in 1937 and expanded in 1952, it was originally one of several “White-only” developments integrated by the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Many White families moved to the suburbs in response to integration and soon after, the federal government began to cut funding for maintenance and to evict people for having too much income. By the time developers got involved with St. Thomas, HUD had been undermining the community for nearly 20 years by leaving apartments empty—up to 50 percent of St. Thomas was vacant—which destroyed the sense of community and created a vicious cycle of bad living conditions. This approach reflected the policies of successive
administrations since the 1980s and bolstered the case for tearing down all public housing.

Of course, if the government had taken half the money it would spend on tearing down St. Thomas and invested it in repairs, maintenance, and supporting community organizations like Black Men United, the development could have become a model community.

“HOPE VI [the federal program to transform public housing] is a joke!” says Kool Black, one of the founders of Black Men United for Change, an organization active in the St. Thomas housing development. “This country is getting out of the public accommodation business. Look at health care; look at charter schools. Public education was developed for White people initially. In the ’60s, people of color [were] integrated [into] the system, and it became time for the government to get out of that service. The country is downsizing public responsibility.”

The St. Thomas neighborhood has since been renamed River Garden and is, according to lawyer Bill Quigley, a collection of “cute gingerbread pastel houses.” The redeveloped area has some housing—only a small percentage was reserved for former residents—several vacant lots, and a Wal-Mart. Some of those kicked out no doubt moved into non-subsidized housing. But it’s likely that most former residents were shifted to Section 8 apartments, moved in with relatives, or ended up homeless. “How many of the 1,510 families who used to live in St. Thomas have been allowed back in?” asks Quigley. “About a hundred. [And some of those] families have had to force their way in through litigation by the Greater New Orleans Fair Housing Action Center.”

Elitism, Not Profit Is Motivator

Activists who came to New Orleans after Katrina often assumed that affordable housing was being torn down because there was money to be made. That high-priced condos, luxury hotels, and boutiques would be built in its place, as had happened in other major cities, from San Francisco’s Bayview to Chicago’s Cabrini-Green to New York City’s Lower East Side. But New Orleans’ housing market has never been that robust. The Lower Ninth Ward was not likely to be turned into a golf course or condominiums. The truth is, the elites simply did not want poor people back in the city because they were seen as criminals and parasites. And this attitude was not limited to White elites.

The final city council vote to tear down public housing was unanimous, with no apparent dissent from any council members. Cynthia Hedge Morrell and Cynthia Willard Lewis, the two Black city council members who between them represented the devastated neighborhoods of the Lower Ninth Ward, New Orleans East, and Gentilly had for a long time been reliable opponents of all affordable housing—public, Section 8, and low-income—in their districts. It’s a popular position among their base of middle class and wealthier Black voters. James Carter, a more progressive Black city council member representing the French Quarter, Tremé, and the West Bank neighborhood of Algiers had seemed more open to arguments on behalf of former residents but in the end, offered no dissent.

From the day St. Thomas was evacuated, everybody—politicians, business leaders, and the daily paper—were united in calling for an end to big housing developments. Most White residents and a significant percentage of the Black community of New Orleans wanted to see public housing destroyed as well.

And suddenly, advocates who believe in decent, affordable housing for all, found themselves in a difficult position. For decades, political attacks on public housing had succeeded in halting most repairs and
upkeep, making the housing less desirable. So when the demolition orders came, advocates had to choose between defending the people’s right to less than livable housing or accepting its destruction. Demolition proponents used this conundrum to their advantage, often recruiting tenants to make public statements about the unlivable conditions and the need to demolish and rebuild. But the truth is, however substandard the public housing, it is still preferable to homelessness.

**Sound Strategies Bring Few Victories**

In the two-and-a-half years following Hurricane Katrina, the public housing campaign used many tactics, from protests to lawsuits to direct action. Several organizations in the city worked on the issue, each with specific goals and approaches, but all of them utilized direct action elements, which often entailed former residents moving back into their sealed-off homes, and all secured some real victories.

One early victory involved the Lower Ninth Ward, which housing activists saved from mass demolition with a combination of legal action and physical occupation of a house near the levee break. “In January 2006, they were going to bulldoze the entire neighborhood,” said Kali Akuno of the Malcolm X grassroots movement. “But Ishmael Muhammed and the Praxis Project brought a lawsuit, the Common Ground people moved into a house in the neighborhood and ACORN [distributed] placards in the neighborhood saying ‘No Bulldozing.’ The placards got attention on TV. People were saying, ‘I didn’t know my house was in danger until I saw that story on TV.’” The fact that people still live in Iberville (though it continues to be under threat of demolition) stands as another important victory of these efforts.

In Akuno’s opinion, although the work to preserve public housing was strategically solid, organizing among the poorest and the displaced was a serious problem. “Understand what this displacement has meant,” he says. “We have 100,000 less people now. It’s hard to sustain actions like this while much of your base is in Houston.”

Over the years, however, the tide has turned some, bringing support for public housing from surprising quarters, such as *New York Times* architecture critic Nicolai Ouroussoff, who spoke out against the demolition. Singling out the Lafitte development, he wrote:

“In its rush to demolish the apartment complexes—and replace them with the kind of generic mixed-income suburban community so favored by Washington bureaucrats—[HUD] demonstrates great insensitivity to both the displaced tenants and the urban fabric of this city…

“In arguing to save the buildings, preservationists point to the human scale of the apartment complexes, whose pitched slate roofs, elegant brickwork and low-rise construction reflect a subtle understanding of the city’s historical context without slavishly mimicking it.

“Tellingly, neither housing agency has closely examined alternatives to demolition, like renovating some buildings in the complexes and replacing others…”

In the U.S. Congress, Representative Maxine Waters led House Bill 1227, “The Gulf Coast Hurricane Housing Recovery Act of 2007,” which would have saved much of the housing or at least provided one-for-one replacement. But the bill was killed in Senate, largely due to the opposition of Louisiana senators David Vitter and Mary Landrieu.

**Deceit, Subterfuge Win the Day**

The public relations battle was intense, with HANO stating that it was cheaper to tear down the developments than to rebuild even though their internal documents told a different story. As attorney Quigley pointed out:

“The Housing Authority’s own documents show that Lafitte could be repaired for $20 million, even completely overhauled for $85 million, while the estimate for demolition and rebuilding many fewer units will cost over $100 million. St. Bernard could be repaired for $41 million, substantially modernized for $130 million, while demolition and rebuilding less units will cost $197 million. B.W. Cooper could be substantially renovated for $135 million, compared to $221 million to demolish and rebuild fewer units. Their own insurance company reported that it would take less than $5,000 each to repair the C.J. Peete apartments.8

“It’s clear that HUD and HANO have been routine-
ly and regularly lying to the public,” Quigley told a reporter. “The discussions that they’ve had internally and with each other are completely different from what they’ve been saying publicly.”

Quigley and civil rights attorney Tracie Washington were aided in their efforts by the Advancement Project, a national legal project, and others in New Orleans and outside. They succeeded in winning delays, buying time for activists to organize, but in the end, all legal strategies were exhausted. There were solidarity protests at HUD offices around the United States and White activists from the Anti-Racist Working Group and Catalyst Project chained themselves to the offices of HANO.

After decades of struggle, the future of New Orleans public housing came down to a meeting at city hall, just before Christmas 2007. Despite low expectations, activists found the events of the day traumatic. Supporters of public housing were for the most part denied a chance to speak and most were not even allowed in the building. Those who insisted on speaking were tasered and arrested. But ultimately, it all came to naught. The council voted unanimously to demolish the housing and within weeks, several public housing developments across the city were torn down.

Meanwhile, homelessness was on the rise. An estimated 11,000 or almost five percent of the city’s population was believed to have been rendered homeless. A new homeless-led group—Homeless Pride—set up camp across from city hall, serving as a daily reminder to the city’s politicians of the consequences of their policies. But the mayor’s office just closed the park. When Homeless Pride set up a new encampment under a highway overpass a few blocks away, officials worked with UNITY for the Homeless, the city’s main homeless advocacy alliance, to place the people in temporary housing. Although this brought immediate relief to those people, it also served to silence the larger debate about systemic solutions.

Endnotes
3. Ibid.
10. Source: UNITY for the Homeless.

Jordan Flaherty is a journalist and community organizer based in New Orleans and an editor of Left Turn magazine, a national publication dedicated to covering social movements. This article is adapted from his book Floodlines: Community and Resistance from Katrina to the Jena Six published by Haymarket Books, Chicago, Illinois, 2010. www.haymarketbooks.org.