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Pushed Out and Pushing Back in New Orleans

By Tram Nguyen

Housing crisis? Corporate giveaways with public money? It's already happened in the Big Easy, where, out of demolitions and displacement, has come a new demand: housing as a human right.

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For 29 years, Sam Jackson lived in a three-bedroom apartment in central New Orleans. He and his wife, Shirley, raised their five children in a tight-knit community within the sprawling, 1,546-unit public housing complex known as the B.W. Cooper. Every summer, Jackson boarded up the windows during the hurricane season, and the family always managed to ride out the storms inside the sturdy walls of one of “the Bricks”—the local name for New Orleans’ public housing projects.

In 2005, the Bricks survived Hurricane Katrina, too. The Jacksons had no water or electricity, though, and after hearing about broken levees and flooding in other parts of town, they packed up their truck and drove to Baton Rouge. A month later, Sam Jackson drove back to check on things at the B.W. Cooper. He found the door to his apartment broken open and the apartment ransacked. When he returned a week after that, there were “No Trespassing” signs everywhere. A metal fence had been put up around the property, and Jackson soon realized that it was the residents themselves who were being kept out.

The Bricks made it through Katrina with little flooding and minor damage. But none of the city’s four big public housing developments—the B.W. Cooper, C.J. Peete, Lafitte and St. Bernard—survived the demolition plans of the government and private developers in the post-Katrina rebuilding. Two years ago, the New Orleans city council cast a controversial, unanimous vote to tear down and redevelop what became known as the Big Four. The demolition of all those homes turned Sam Jackson into an activist.

“We had nowhere to stay when we came back, and I said, ‘We should go and make some noise,’ even though we had only a few residents here to protest,” Jackson recalls.

With a few other returnees, he held one of the first press conferences on the demolitions; eventually, he traveled to Indonesia and Thailand as part of an

international delegation to meet with tsunami victims and share rebuilding strategies. "As the process went on, I wanted to let people know we were forced out of our place and we couldn't return. We have to be the ones keeping the noise up about it. You just can't give up."

Community advocates estimate that almost 20,000 people, all Black and low-income, remain displaced and separated from their communities. Worse, the 4,500 or so Big Four households have been thrown into a tight rental market, competing with thousands more low-income people also living precariously in a city where rents spiked almost overnight. This includes nearly 9,000 families transitioning out of the Disaster Housing Assistance Program, which provided subsidies for people whose homes were destroyed by hurricanes Katrina, Rita or Gustav.

In New Orleans, "there are more people who are scared of losing their housing than feel secure in it," observes Eric Tars, an attorney with the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty.

He could have said the same about the rest of the country, where the combination of widespread foreclosures, rising tenant evictions and double-digit unemployment hitting like hurricanes is pushing the lack of adequate housing to crisis proportions. According to the National Housing Institute, nearly half of all renters in the United States face unaffordable housing costs, defined as paying more than 30 percent of one's income for housing.

New Orleans seems a particularly good place to understand the problems engulfing so many U.S. cities, because things here are so extreme and exposed. By some estimates, close to 6 percent of the city's residents are living in deplorable conditions. They include families with children living out of cars, immigrant workers packed eight or ten in an apartment and many elderly, mentally ill or disabled people squatting in abandoned buildings.

In a city with a total population hovering around 300,000, at least 12,000 people are homeless. That's double the number before Katrina and Rita, according to the homelessness agency Unity of Greater New Orleans. The group estimates that at least another 5,000 people are living in abandoned properties, of which there are about 65,000—a third of all buildings in the city.

The city's housing crisis also reflects the disastrous impact of public housing demolitions and redevelopment policies. In New Orleans, many former public housing residents say that on top of losing their homes, they were shut out of participating in the redevelopment process. For many, it was clear that there was just too much money at stake to let the residents get in the way. In the wake of Katrina, Louisiana became a bonanza of federal subsidies for firms ready to take advantage of the opportunity to rebuild. The developers, as a former staffer for one private company put it, stood to "make money hand over fist" through a number of unusually generous bond deals.

That all the homes in the Big Four are gone is a stark reality in New Orleans. So now, after decades of government policies that put housing needs into the hands of private developers, local activists are looking beyond simply fighting for better and more affordable housing. They are joining with housing advocates throughout the nation to emerge from the national crisis with nothing less than the assertion of housing as a human right. •

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