

# “Did it happen in the United States? To us?”

NEXT YEAR will see Zeitoun, Dave Eggers' book following one family's experiences of Hurricane Katrina, turned into a major film. Just over five years after devastation hit New Orleans, **DAVE GORTON** revisits the events that rocked and ultimately helped end George W Bush's presidency.

**L**ET'S FACE it, we all looked on in astonishment. The scenes of utter devastation, beamed out as Hurricane Katrina laid waste to New Orleans, were something we'd never expected to see. Thousands left stranded, helpless, fending for themselves - and dying - in the world's 'superpower'. Capitalism was laid bare at its very heart.

Hurricane Katrina was a natural phenomenon. Abdulrahman Zeitoun, the main subject of Dave Eggers' book wonders "if the world at large could already see what he was seeing, a disaster mythical in scale and severity". But the devastation Katrina caused was not a natural disaster.

Over 1,800 people died, a figure still disputed as too low by some residents. Around the world, people watched TV coverage with disbelief and horror as bodies floated down main thoroughfares.

## Thousands abandoned

THE WORKING-class poor, mostly African-Americans, were abandoned to their fate. 27% of New Orleans' pre-Katrina population of 485,000 residents lived below the poverty level. 67% were African-American, more than 50% of them living in poverty. When the hurricane hit, tens of thousands were left to find their own way out of, what had become for them, hell on earth.

When the 'order' came to evacuate the city, the authorities gave far too little assistance to those wanting to flee. The Wall Street Journal titled an article "Evacuation was a model of efficiency - for those who had a car."

There were few other options. Even if you could get a bus out of town, there was nowhere to go except another city to sleep rough on the streets. This section of the population did not have access to credit cards to book motel rooms.

Many of those forced to stay were directed to the Superdome, its roof in danger of collapse with every gust of wind, to live out the storm in horrendous conditions. Here 30,000 residents lasted days without food, enough water or medical attention. Others took refuge in the conven-

tion centre with no food or water, or protection.

Even before Katrina, New Orleans' African-American population was used - though certainly not resigned - to being treated as second-class citizens but those stranded in New Orleans were treated more like criminals than disaster victims.

## A military occupation

WHEN 'RELIEF' came in the form of military and police help, New Orleans' residents, far from being the recipients of humanitarian aid, found themselves at the centre of a virtual military occupation. Exaggerated claims about the breakdown of law and order were used as justification. Of the ten deaths at the Convention Centre and Superdome only one was attributable to homicide.

Undoubtedly there was violence but little was done to protect those facing it. Incredibly, in the same Convention Centre, basically left unpoliced, there were 250 armed members of the Louisiana National Guard, camped separately, who were never called upon to provide any relief or assistance with crowd control. Of course, this number was dwarfed by the 6,000 National Guard from Louisiana and Mississippi in Iraq at the time.

There was looting - but most of it by poverty stricken residents, left abandoned to fend for themselves, desperately trying to stay alive seeking food and water. Louisiana governor, Kathleen Blanco, declared a shoot-to-kill policy for anyone found looting! The Bush administration's response to this 'looting' clearly demonstrates the capitalist class's first priority is not to protect ordinary people but property and profits.

In Zeitoun, Eggers relates the story of Merlene Maten, 73 years old, a Baptist Church deaconess and a diabetic, one of the 'lucky' ones with a credit card who had booked into a hotel. She and her husband had left some food in their car outside.

Maten went to retrieve a pack of sausages but, returning, was apprehended and handcuffed by the police who accused her of looting groceries to the tune of \$63.50. Her bail



Hurricane Katrina: capitalism laid bare.

was set at \$50,000. The usual bail for such a misdemeanour would be \$500. She was held prisoner for two weeks, sometimes having to sleep on the concrete floor, before her lawyer was able to convince a judge she was innocent, pointing out the not inconsequential fact that the store she was accused of looting didn't even sell the type of sausages she was carrying!

## Pursuit of profit

THE WORST affected area of New Orleans was, unsurprisingly, the lowest-lying, mainly African-American populated, Lower Ninth Ward.

The levees, supposedly at a level to prevent the worst flooding, were built at least 18 inches too low. This is not hindsight, despite Bush's statement: "I don't think anyone anticipated the breach of the levees." It was a generally recognised fact among engineers many years before Katrina.

The natural defences in Louisiana, that could have drastically lessened the devastation, have been eroded over the years in the pursuit of profit. The quest for oil has led to mass deforestation; the wetlands have been reduced to provide navigation channels for the rich to go sailing.

Barack Obama's administration called the recent BP oil spillage (once again off the coast of this blighted area) the worst 'environmental disaster' in US history - yet an area the size of that potentially ruined for decades by the oil spill-

age is lost every seven to ten days in the wetlands around New Orleans.

## After the storm

AROUND 200,000 people have never returned to New Orleans, the majority in the rented sector. As New Orleans was rebuilt, rents doubled, preventing evacuees from returning. There are now more hotel rooms and restaurants in New Orleans than before Katrina.

Abdulrahman Zeitoun's nightmare didn't end quickly. I won't ruin the 'story' ... but the words: "You guys are Al Qaeda!" move it almost to the realms of horrific fantasy. Abdulrahman's wife Kathy utters: "Did all that really happen? Did it happen in the United States? To us?"

The catastrophe of Katrina caused many Americans for the first time to begin to question the capitalist system - an unplanned, anarchic system, incapable of preventing or adequately preparing for natural disasters and their potential destructiveness - and start searching for an alternative. A system which prioritises the interests of the majority, based on human solidarity and unity - socialism.

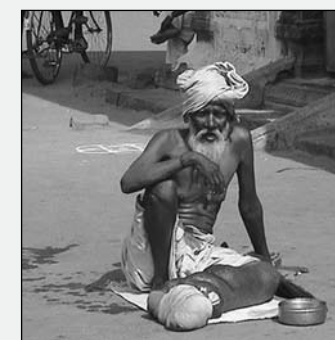
**Zeitoun by Dave Eggers. Publisher: Hamish Hamilton. Hardback edition £18.99 + 10% p&p available from Socialist Books, PO Box 24697, London E11 1YD. 020 8988 8789. (paperback available in February 2011. £11 including p&p)**

## the committee for a workers international

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Reporters for Offensiv, weekly paper of Rättvisepartiet Socialisterna (CWI in Sweden)

## White House played down Gulf oil spill

**W**HILE PUBLICLY rounding on BP over its devastating oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, the White House deliberately played down the size of the potential environmental damage, according to the National Oil Spill Commission.

The commission accused US president Barack Obama and his administration of being over-optimistic about BP's ability to handle the disaster and of a failure to speedily mobilise resources to contain the spill.

White House energy advisor Carol Browner was singled out for criticism following her sanguine public announcement that: "The vast majority of oil was gone."

As The Socialist pointed out at the time of the spill, the federal authorities and 'big oil' have long enjoyed a cosy relationship which amounted to self-regulation of the industry - with fatal and environmentally devastating consequences.

## Stalinism and capitalism - a toxic brew in Hungary

**N**EARLY 700 million litres of toxic red sludge poured from a ruptured industrial reservoir flooding three villages and polluting rivers in Hungary. Eight people were killed, hundreds injured and hundreds more evacuated as an area of 40 square kilometres was inundated. The authorities are hastily constructing a barrier to contain a threatened further spill of 500 million litres of poisonous waste from the aluminium plant.

This environmental catastrophe is a legacy of 50 years of aluminium production in the area - covering both the era of Stalinist bureaucratic mismanagement of the Hungarian economy, followed by privatisation in the 1990s when safety and regulation was subordinated to the rule of private profit.

Unbelievably the Hungarian Aluminium Production and Trade Company at the centre of the disaster initially attempted to dodge its respon-

sibility by stressing that European Union rules meant that the waste product could be classified as "non-toxic".

The government has now 'temporarily' taken over the company having castigated it for corporate greed - an unwitting acknowledgement that capitalist ownership has catastrophically failed.

The managing director Zoltan Bakonyi has also been arrested on suspicion of criminal negligence; although this may have more to do with political rivalries in the country.

Zoltan is the son of Arpad Bakonyi, a businessman who played a central role in the privatisation of the country's aluminium industry and is the largest shareholder of the company now under investigation. The elder Bakonyi is also a close business associate of a former prime minister, Ferenc Gyurcsany, who is a political arch-rival of current prime minister Viktor Orban.