

WORK, FAMILY COMMUNITY:

Unions Help Rebuild after Disaster

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Over the past six years, America's working families have been hit hard by many catastrophic events – 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, the Southern California wildfires, to name a few. These natural and man-made disasters have devastated and dislocated thousands of working families. In the midst of these tragedies that also affected thousands of union members, the labor movement was there – leading rescue efforts, donating blood, volunteering time, and providing the comfort, relief, support, and resources to help their brothers and sisters in need.

UNION FAMILIES IN THE AFTERMATH

In October 2007, the Southern California wildfires burned thousands of homes, forcing working families to evacuate from their communities and leave their homes. Union families sought refuge in San Diego's Qualcomm Stadium awaiting news

about the fate of their homes and belongings. Fortunately, not many lives were lost, but many working families were left homeless, without funds or support to rebuild their lives.

Two years earlier, in August 2005, Hurricane Katrina unleashed devastation at a scale that left almost two thousand dead and thousands of working families displaced. Although the working poor were hit the hardest by Katrina, the disaster also impacted the empowered middle class workers – union members – who found that they were just one or two paychecks away from losing everything. Biased, discriminatory and anti-union reconstruction policies in cities like New Orleans have made it harder for working families to rebuild their lives even though it has been over two years since the hurricane struck (See Front Page Story).

Six years ago, over 600 union members died in the 9/11 attacks. Many union brothers and sisters risked

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their lives and died at the frontlines of rescue missions to help victims and survivors. Many union members lost their livelihoods. For example, over 6,000 SEIU members lost their jobs, leaving them without resources to support their families. Years later, many members continue to suffer from depression, respiratory problems, insomnia and other illnesses linked to what they witnessed and inhaled during the 9/11 aftermath.

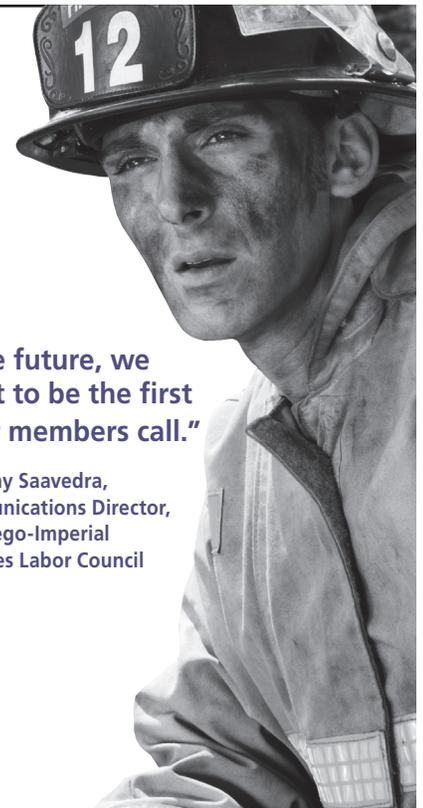
LABOR COMES TOGETHER TO 'SUPPORT ITS OWN'

During the 9/11 rescue efforts, workers, represented by several different unions, worked as EMTs, paramedics, dispatch operators, janitors, police officers and firefighters. They helped clean up Ground Zero, raised money and donated blood. Renée Boyd, a heavy equipment operator and member of AFSCME DC 37, didn't worry about the impact her work would have on her health. “I just wanted to help our country and our workers recover from that terrible crime,” Boyd says. Unions in New York City, Virginia and Washington DC played a big role in bringing the



Dr. Brenda Mitchell, President of the United Teachers of New Orleans.

Photo courtesy John C. Little, Illinois Federation of Teachers and the International Labor Communication Association (ILCA). www.neworleanslabormedia.org



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community together and rebuilding in the aftermath of 9/11. AFSCME/CSEA 1000 members raised over \$17,000 for New York City relief in the hours just after the attacks. The AFL-CIO Executive Council and individual unions urged Congress to act immediately to address the pressing health needs of workers exposed to Ground Zero toxic substances.

NEW ORLEANS LABOR MOVEMENT FIGHTS BACK

The labor movement in New Orleans suffered a big blow due to the anti-union policies that took control of the city's rebuilding efforts post-Hurricane Katrina. Teachers, bus drivers and other public transit employees, construction workers, health care workers and public employees were among the many unionized workers in New Orleans who lost their jobs to private businesses and contractors. But they are coming together and fighting back.

Dr. Brenda Mitchell, President of the United Teachers of New Orleans (UTNO/AFT) says the teachers' union has been engaged in rebuilding itself from the ground up with legal battles, support for former members still in the city and an aggressive organizing drive reaching out to the new teachers working without a contract. According to Mitchell, the AFL-CIO and AFT provided staff and assistance in organizing and political strength to help the teachers regain their voice. "The labor movement in this city is alive and well. You need to tell the story of how labor came together to support its own because if they can come after one of us, they can come after all of us," says Mitchell.

Where the Federal government and local business have failed to act, the labor movement may be providing the best hope of rebuilding and returning for the exiled working families of New Orleans. The unions are building manufactured housing, retail and health care facilities. In 2006, the AFL-CIO announced a \$1 billion union-sponsored Gulf Coast

Revitalization Program (GCRP) that includes a training component as well as \$750 million for construction projects in New Orleans. With this funding, the Building Trades, the AFL-CIO and the Louisiana Works Workforce Commission have established a career center to provide training so that the program graduates can enter union apprenticeship programs in the building and construction trades. The goal is to build a labor force to support Gulf Coast reconstruction efforts.

LABOR MOVEMENT BUILDS SOLIDARITY IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

During the Southern California wildfires, the San Diego-Imperial Counties Labor Council Community Services staff set up fire assistance centers to help union members affected by the fires. According to Anthony Saavedra, Communications Director at the San Diego-Imperial Counties Labor Council, many members didn't know that their union could help outside of the workplace, which made the task of reaching out a bit challenging. "We learned a lot of ways to improve our initial response. We had to be proactive in finding those who needed help. In the future, we want to be the first place our members call," he says.

In spite of the challenges, the Labor Council, in collaboration with the San Diego United Way, was successful in reaching out to 194 families, 42 of whom lost their homes. "Not everyone we helped lost their homes, and often those are the people who are forgotten," says Saavedra. Many members could not afford to live in a hotel for two or three days after they were evacuated so the Labor Council helped pay for a few nights. Additionally, the Labor Council provided gift cards to help pay for food and other essential needs. Saavedra believes that the collaboration with the United Way was essential in the Labor Council's success in reaching out to fire victims. "It is important to build coalitions with community groups to be effective in times of need," he says.

HOW UNIONS CAN BE PREPARED:

- **Work** with members to build a disaster fund (like a strike fund)
- **Educate** members about the union's resources and programs for disaster relief
- **Get acquainted** with and partner with AFL-CIO Community Services
- **Create** a volunteer pool in case of emergency

Where To Look For Help?

- **AFL-CIO's Community Services Network** that helps union members in crisis. The Network is connected to United Way and the Red Cross and helps connect union members to local resources: <http://www.aflcio.org/about-us/allies/csn.cfm>.
- **Call the AFL-CIO Disaster Support Hotline: 877-235-2469 or 877-AFL-CIO9.**

Reprint freely with the following acknowledgement: Reproduced from the Winter 2008 issue of the Labor Family News – Newsletter of the Labor Project for Working Families. For more information, please email info@working-families.org, call 510-643-7088 or visit www.working-families.org