Int’l tribunal on Katrina & Rita:

We charge genocide

By Monica Moorehead

New Orleans

Aug. 29 marked the second anniversary of when Hurricane Katrina began its reign of devastation along the Gulf Coast, especially Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama. Before many Gulf Coast residents could recover from Katrina, Hurricane Rita quickly followed, deepening the mass destruction and the suffering.

Fast forward to Aug. 29, 2007—while George W. Bush and Democratic presidential candidates Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama were in New Orleans taking their photo-ops, two significant events were taking place in other parts of this city. One was a march in the morning of about 1,000 people from the Industrial Canal—site of the broken levee in the lower 9th Ward—to Congo Square. The other was the opening session of the International Tribunal on Katrina and Rita, which was virtually boycotted by the national mainstream media.

The tribunal, initiated by the People’s Hurricane Relief Fund (PHRF), was supported by many national and international organizations, and was attended by hundreds of survivors of both hurricanes along with political and community activists from around the country and the world.

The main purpose of this people’s tribunal was to expose to the world a multitude of crimes against humanity amounting to genocide carried out by the U.S. government on a local, statewide and federal level against the survivors, then and now.

The goals of the tribunal were to fully expose the human rights abuses committed by the U.S. government and its agencies and operatives in the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita; to attain national and international recognition as Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) for all the survivors of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita; to attain comprehensive reparations for all Gulf Coast IDPs (including migrant workers and communities); to strengthen the Gulf Coast Reconstruction Movement and build a broad national and international movement in support of its aims and demands; and to hold the rogue U.S. government accountable for its human rights abuses and crimes against Gulf Coast IDPs.

On July 16, Bush, along with Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco, Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour and New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin, were sent letters by the tribunal’s prosecuters.
Kenneth Foster wins last minute clemency

By Gloria Rubac

Just six days before his Aug. 20 execution was to take place, Texas death row activist Kenneth Foster Jr. won a major victory. Texas Gov. Rick Perry followed the recommendation of the Texas Board of Pardons and Paroles and signed a clemency order.

This happens so rarely in Texas that Foster’s family and supporters were stunned when they received the news. The family’s lawyers cheered and shouted of victory filled the air—in Huntsville and around the world. Family, friends and activists were gathering in Huntsville for the 6 p.m. execution and Foster’s immediate family was finishing their last visit when, minutes after noon, Perry released his decision.

Foster’s father, Kenneth Foster Sr., got to give his son the news. Then Tasha—Foster’s spouse—was allowed to kiss him through the wire mesh in the visiting area. Foster was convicted under Texas’ law of parties, which allows the death penalty to be given to accomplices in murder cases. He was sentenced to death in 1997.

But Foster was not an accomplice. Mauricio Brown, a passenger in Foster’s car, shot and killed Michael LaHood Jr. Foster was convicted of murder as he was less than 100 feet away at the time, in his car with the windows up and the radio blaring.

‘What you all did mattered!’

After news of the decision, family and supporters gathered outside the governor’s mansion in Austin for a rally and celebration.

Foster’s attorney Keith Hampton, who had filed numerous appeals, thanked the grassroots movement that started in Austin and spread around the world for putting necessary pressure on the board and the governor.

Hampton particularly thanked Foster’s supporters from overseas. “If you’re German, Australian, English, French or Italian, you had an impact that is larger than just Kenneth’s case. Texans, particularly policymakers, generally don’t care about what anybody outside of Texas thinks. I think this well-entrenched attitude has changed. I can personally tell you that decision makers were visibly shaken when they heard about them. ‘Here are thousands of signatures from Germany,’ when I casually mentioned, ‘The Italians are lighting up the Coliseum;’ when I pointed out the French deputy minister’s letter alongside Dessoude’s and Jimmy Carter’s; and when I delivered beautifully handwritten letters from all over the UK. What you all did mattered.”

Bryan McCann, a leader of the campaign to End the Death Penalty and a pen pal of Foster’s, said: “This was a political victory. ... There is no understanding the historical significance of what we won. ... While the death penalty is on the defensive across the nation, Texas continued to be the trend’s exception. However, we made a dent in the Lone Star State’s arm with the Kenneth Foster case.”

McCann had visited Foster just before a week’s scheduled execution. The Save Kenneth Foster Campaign began last May after Foster received an execution date. Activists in Austin with the Campaign to End the Death Penalty, the Texas Moratorium Network and Students Against the Death Penalty joined with Foster’s family and friends. A little over an hour away in San Antonio to begin the fight.

Over the summer, there were rallies, marches, concerts, petition drives and forums. Foster’s family and supporters did interviews after interview. Slowly, the tide began to turn. Major newspapers around the state were editorializing to stop the execution. Texas legislators contacted the governor.

After the media began to examine Foster’s case, even some death penalty supporters decided a person like Foster, who was merely in the car nearby, should not be executed. Foster’s case impacted people living all over the world, not just in Texas. Perry’s office had received correspondence from more than 11,000 people worldwide opposing Foster’s execution, said Katherine Cesinger, a spokesperson for Perry, in an e-mail. The office received correspondence from only 11 people supporting his execution.

Claire Dube broke into tears when she heard the good news. She and Foster became close friends while attending John Marshall High School in San Antonio together and have known each other 15 years. Dube began writing Foster when she found out he was on death row and has been active in his defense work for several years.

“Wow, three days later, and I am still in shock and for a loss. Words are inexpressible that is known is true and we did it!” Dube told Workers World.

She added, “Everyone here and from around the world deserves a great big hug and a pat on the back for their efforts and part in saving his life. I am so thankful to everyone that came together and made the impossible possible here in Texas! There are no words that can express what I feel and how much my heart goes out to each and every activist. Kenneth means so much to his family, his friends and his supporters.”

The day after the stay was issued, Foster’s spouse, father and grandfather issued the following statement:

“Look at all our activism, swallowed and full of smiles! Finally the death row nightmare is over, no more seeing him from behind glass—soon we will be able to hug him. Nydesha [Foster’s daughter] will be able to hug him. Without your hard work from all of you—it would have not been possible. You guys worked around the clock, made the calls, wrote the letters, marched with us, signed petitions, helped us organize, contacted the media and made this cross bearable for us.”

Foster has been moved from death row to a diagnostic unit for processing and will be assigned to another prison unit soon. Workers World newspaper will report on his new address as soon as it is known. Check www.freeken-net.com for updates.

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Coalition organizes to ‘Restore Justice in Michigan’

By Kris Hamel

“Restore Justice in Michigan” is the theme of a demonstration set for Sept. 10 in Detroit. Called by a coalition of rights groups, it will express support for Judge Thomas who is under investigation for alleged violations of Michigan law. Under the Michigan Constitution and state law, any judge can and must sign a warrant for a capital or corporal charge within 91 days. Attorneys for the poor are forced to hold back spending on a case until it’s going to trial due to scarce resources. As a result, they can’t produce the needed evidence within the short time frame. Thomas noted that lawyers appeared to represent indigent defendants in Wayne County Circuit Court are among the lowest-paid in the country. Judge Thomas also explained that in recent years the court has passed excluding anyone who ever had a felony conviction from serving on a jury. This is yet another example of the potential to revive, as blacks are disproportionately jailed in this racist society.

At the coalition organizing meeting, Judy Goldberg, a local progressive new-

DANFORR honored at Women’s Equality Day event

By Workers World Detroit bureau

Shallee Daniels at June 30, 2006, DANFORR action.

WWWPhoto: cherYL LABash

Special Recognition Awards were presented to Marisol Ybarra, NOW activist and former leader of Wayne State University’s Feminist Majority Leadership Alliance and to Judge Thomas and Judge Kelly to the Detroit Action Network for Reproductive Rights.

Organizers Shallee Daniels and Kris Hamel accepted the award for “outstanding contributions to the feminist community” on behalf of the Detroit Coalition and the audience. “We need to get more young women involved in the struggle to save and advance our rights. That’s part of what we’re all about!” Hamel noted DANFORR’s friendship and alliance with Detroit NOW and encouraged everyone to continue to work together for reproductive freedom and equal rights.

Battle continues to rage

Same-sex marriage rights won for an instant in Iowa

By Caleb T. Maupin

The firmly established order represent- ed by both the Republic and Democratic parties has been of purposeful and na- tural and trans people should not enjoy the same rights as others, was cracked for a brief moment in Iowa on Sept. 29. A judge in Polk County declared same- sex marriage legal, overturning the law of the state legislature which had passed, euphemistically called “in defense of marriage.”

As soon as the announcement was made, LGBT people began to pour into the county to receive marriage licenses.

Gregory Mathias and his partner didn’t make it to Polk County quickly enough. Mathias told the Cedar Rapids Gazette: “It’s very disappointing, but I guess it’s now back in the hands of the court. As for the rest of my child because I’m gay. In the 1980s I was excommunicated from my church because I’m gay, I’ve had a lot of walls thrown up at me because I’m gay, this is just one more.”

It is the movement in the streets that has won the LGBTT progress that has been made in the courts. It is in the streets that need to get more support and state discrimination against same-sex couples will be won.
Smithfield workers demand justice
By Sue Kelly

On Aug. 29, 150 workers at the Smithfield Foods pork processing plant in Tar Heel, N.C., and their family members traveled to Williamsburg, Va., to confront the stockholders of the corporation. The workers were joined by hundreds of supporters from New York, Virginia, Philadelphia, Richmond, Maryland, South Carolina and elsewhere, swelling the loud, passionate and diverse crowd to more than a thousand.

Almost everyone in the crowd wore a bright yellow “Justice/Justicia for Smithfield” shirt. Chants like “What’s disgusting? Union busting!” and “What’s outrageous? Sweatshop wages!” rang out along the march route.

The demonstration was the largest ever seen in Williamsonburg, a tourist site built by the Rockefellers and often the site of international and national meetings of ruling class “dignitaries.” This time it was the shareholders, the “owners” of Smithfield Foods—the large pork processing company that has been fighting the workers’ right to form a union. The plant in Tar Heel is the world’s largest hog processing plant, and the work there is difficult and dangerous.

Injuries have jumped 200 percent since 2003, due largely to speeded up lines and inadequate training. Poverty wages, brutal working conditions and crippling injuries are faced by the more than 5,000 workers at the Tar Heel plant, who are overwhelmingly African American and Latin@.

Cited by Human Rights Watch for violations of international human rights standards, the company has tried to create an atmosphere of intimidation and violence for workers who want a union voice on the job. In a classic tactic of the ruling class everywhere, the company has attempted to suppress workers’ efforts to fight back and organize by trying to foster racial tensions among the workers. Smithfield workers at the Tar Heel plant say no!

The rally and march began with an interdenominational national faith service; First Baptist Church was packed. Afterwards, the group, stretching as far as the eye could see in any direction, marched to the site of the stockholders meeting. Although the local cops kept most of the demonstrators from getting near the meeting, a small contingent of workers, union and community leaders were allowed to speak to the shareholders inside the meeting. The contingent presented the stockholders with petitions signed by thousands of Tar Heel workers, representing a strong majority of the workers at the plant.

Press reports after the event said Smithfield bosses agreed to the talks with the United Food and Commercial Workers Union. The rally ended with workers making clear their commitment to see this struggle through—chants of “We will be back!” filled the air.

What can we do? Many store brands are actually made by Smithfield. Find out where the bacon you buy is made and if it’s from Smithfield foods. Ask for retirees will make up the difference. However if it’s from Smithfield. Find out where the bacon you buy is made and if it’s from Smithfield foods. Ask for your local store to not carry it. Visit the Justice for Smithfield Web site at www.smithfieldjustice.com or email smithfield@ufcw.org.

UAW negotiations

Rank-and-file activists challenge ‘prescription for disaster’
By Martha Grevatt

The union contracts between the United Auto Workers and Ford, General Motors and Chrysler will expire on Sept. 14. Negotiations continued through Labor Day weekend. The Aug. 31 Detroit News reported that the pace of negotiations is accelerating. As of this writing next to nothing has been conveyed from the national UAW leaders to the rank-and-file.

There is a high level of anxiety among workers in the plants, with all kinds of rumors floating and questions being asked: “Will they take a pay cut and how much? Will we lose ‘30 and out’—the right to retire with full benefits after 30 years regardless of age? Are we better off retiring under the current contract? Will the companies sell off the remaining parts divisions?”

UAW Vice President Cap Rapson said on Sept. 2, “I can tell you one thing, we are determined not to put any more costs on retirees for their health care.” Speaking in Flint, Mich., Rapson couldn’t easily peddle concessions to an audience that included the last surviving participants in the Great Sit-Down Strike of 70 years ago. They and all UAW retirees are hoping Rapson’s words are true, because Ford and GM retirees are—for the first time since health benefits were negotiated—paying close to $800 out of pocket for health insurance.

The bigger question concerning health care is whether the UAW will agree to Big Three bosses’ demands to establish a Voluntary Employee Benefit Association—VEBA. The companies want the UAW to assume complete responsibility, via the VEBA, for its members’ health coverage in exchange for a one-time cash contribution. This would be a huge bonanza for the automakers, who are tens of billions of dollars in debt for employee and retiree health care costs.

The rank-and-file-based Soldiers of Solidarity explains in a leaflet, “Vandalsize Employee Benefits Again? VEBA is a plan for the company to walk away from retiree health care commitments, and shift all the risk to you. VEBA lets the companies off the hook, and puts the UAW in the position of taking responsibility for and limiting benefits. VEBA permits the company to put in less than the real cost of health care. Increasing out-of-pocket expenses for retirees will make up the difference. However

On the picket line

Court order halts ‘no-match’

After the AFL-CIO, the American Civil Liberties Union, the National Immigration Law Center and three San Francisco labor groups sued the Department of Homeland Security, Immigration and Customs Enforcement and the Social Security Administration in federal court in San Francisco on Aug. 29, a judge issued a temporary restraining order Aug. 31 blocking the DHS’s new so-called “no-match” rule from going into effect Sept. 14. It also stopped the SSA from sending notices informing 140,000,000 workers of the rule.

The rule, which would affect approximately 8 million workers, requires bosses to give workers 90 days to fix problems when their Social Security numbers don’t match the system’s database. If the problem isn’t resolved, bosses must fire workers or face criminal prosecution for failing to report workers.

The AFL-CIO sued saying, “The new rule would place millions of U.S. citizens and non-citizens with work authorization at risk of losing their jobs because of discrepancies in the Social Security Administration tax record. There are 17.8 million errors in the SSA database—more than 70 percent affecting U.S.-born workers.”

The AFL-CIO President John Sweeney was quoted in an Aug. 31 ACLU press release: “Employers have historically used SSA ‘no-match’ letters to fire workers when workers try to organize, when they report a wage claim or workplace hazard, or when workers become pregnant. The new rule is simply a new, stronger pretext for engaging in such unlawful conduct.” Stay tuned.

Immigrants bolster union movement

Much of the growth in the union movement in the last decade is thanks to immigrant workers. The number of immigrant union members grew by 50 percent from 2000 to 2006, while the number of U.S.-born members decreased by 9 percent. (blog.afilcio.org, Aug. 30)

Based on analysis of census data, the Migration Information Source reported that immigrants made up 15 percent of the U.S. workforce in 2000 and 12 percent in 1990. This means nearly one in 10 immigrants was a union member in 2006. Percentages of immigrants have increased in all sectors of the economy since 2000. For instance, the percentage of immigrant workers in construction jumped from 21.5 to 26.9 percent in three years. (www.migrationinformation.com)

AFL-CIO for universal health care

The AFL-CIO kicked off its Labor Day celebration by announcing a new drive to bring about universal health care coverage by the end of 2009. (Louisville Courier-Journal, Aug. 30) The announcement came the day after the Census Bureau announced the number of uninsured people had risen to 47 million—nearly a sixth of the population.

The national labor organization outlined several essential features of a national health-care system: It should control “rising and irrational” health care costs, provide comprehensive high-quality care for all and preserve the right to choose your own doctor. Last week the American Medical Association, also launched a campaign to cover the uninsured.

UTLA endorses anti-war action

The Board of Directors of United Teachers Los Angeles passed a resolution Aug. 23 renewing its call for the immediate withdrawal of troops from Iraq and Afghanistan and endorsing all fall anti-war activities, including the Sept. 22-29 tent cities at Los Angeles’ downtown Federal Building and the Sept. 29 marches in Los Angeles and Washington, D.C. The resolution noted that the billions of dollars spent on the war would be better spent on meeting pressing human needs at home, especially disaster recovery for Katrina survivors.

Immimlon: Bill Sorro

Labor and community activist and one of the most revered members of San Francisco’s Labor movement, Bill Sorro, died Aug. 27. Sorro was a founding member of the I-Hotel Tenants Union, which fought for years against evictions of mostly senior citizens from investors and for the preservation of these tenements in 1977. Since then, a successful struggle was waged to save the historic Manilatown community and to secure the former hotel site as disaster recovery for Katrina survivors.

An ironworker, Sorro was an active trade unionist and community activist. His decades of tireless service as a tenant and community advocate were recognized in 2005 when he received a Local Hero Award from the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations.

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Death of trans immigrant in detention forges united protests

By Leslie Feinberg

Olga Arellano spoke at a rally at the Federal Building in downtown Los Angeles on Aug. 27 about how her 23-year-old daughter, Victoria, died July 20 at an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention facility in South Los Angeles.

“I can only find the strength to talk about this because I want people to understand what is going on inside that place,” Olga Arellano stated. “I don’t want another family to have to live through this nightmarish experience.”

Authorities reportedly refused to give Victoria Arellano—an undocumented Mexican transwoman with AIDS—urgently needed medical attention and cut off her oxygen, despite mass protests on her behalf by other immigrant detainees. Authorities had imprisoned her since May in a men’s mass detention cell.

Outrage over Victoria Arellano’s death is focused on the lack of organizations that fight for immigrant rights, AIDS care, and trans, lesbian, gay and bisexual rights. The bilingual Los Angeles vigil and media conference was organized by the Coalition of Bisexual, Gay and Lesbian Task Force; The National Network for Immigrant Women & Girls; Fundación México; Borderland Theater; and Wingspan—Southern Arizona’s LGBT Community Center.

Wingspan’s board co-chairman, Maria Lopez-Medina, said: “This case exemplifies why we need to be working in coalition to meet the needs of people living with HIV/AIDS.”

The Aug. 26 call for the vigil was signed by Grupo de Apoyo HIVIDA in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico; the following California-based groups: Asian Pacific American Legal Center of Southern California; API-MLG: Asian Pacific Islander Community Organizing; and Binational—a Latina/o community service and advocacy organization working toward the needs of people living with HIV/AIDS.

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Outrage over Victoria Arellano’s death is focused on the lack of organizations that fight for immigrant rights, AIDS care, and trans, lesbian, gay and bisexual rights. The bilingual Los Angeles vigil and media conference was organized by the Coalition of Bisexual, Gay and Lesbian Task Force; The National Network for Immigrant Women & Girls; Fundación México; Borderland Theater; and Wingspan—Southern Arizona’s LGBT Community Center.

Wingspan’s board co-chairman, Maria Lopez-Medina, said: “This case exemplifies why we need to be working in coalition to meet the needs of people living with HIV/AIDS.”

The Aug. 26 call for the vigil was signed by Grupo de Apoyo HIVIDA in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico; the following California-based groups: Asian Pacific American Legal Center of Southern California; API-MLG: Asian Pacific Islander Community Organizing; and Binational—a Latina/o community service and advocacy organization working toward the needs of people living with HIV/AIDS.
We charge genocide

The ten charges that the prosecut-
ing team would present at the tribunal to face evidence and testimony were gross violations of the human rights: (1) to be free from racial discrimination, includ-
ing discrimination based upon perceived immigration status; (2) to return, includ-
ing the resettlement and reintegration of internally displaced persons; (3) to life, human dignity, and recognition as a per-
son; (4) to be free from torture and other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment; (5) to freedom of associa-
tion and assembly and freedom of movement; (6) to work, to adequate health care and adequate housing; (7) to an adequate standard of living, freedom from poverty and right to education; (8) to vote, includ-
ing electoral rights and right to participate in governance; (9) to a fair trial, to liberty, security of the person and equal protec-
tion under the law; and (10) to privacy, family life, and missing relatives.

Roderick Dean testified on prisoners’ rights abuses. His voice filled with emo-
tion, Dean, who was falsely arrested in New Orleans before Katrina, talked about the subhuman treatment that he and other prisoners suffered when Katrina hit. Prisoners were not allowed to leave their cells and had to wade through feces-
contaminated water; he and other pris-
ers were denied their medications; and prisoners had to endure languishing on a bridge in 105-degree heat for days with-
out food, water or toilet facilities. Dean was released from jail in early December 2005 with no charges.

Charlene Smith, a child nutritionist, was arrested and jailed for writing a bad check in 2005. She said she became a mother and chil-
dren needed items to survive after Katrina. Some of her experiences in jail included being housed with 19 other women in one cell, hearing a prisoner scream while being beaten by a guard and being denied sani-
tary napkins and her medications.

Under the police brutality session, Rosell Madison, a Black dentist, spoke on how his brother Ronald was shot five times in the back by white cops with assault rifles on the Danziger Bridge. Last December, white cops were indicted for shooting and killing several members of the Bartholomew family, including chil-
dren, trying to flee the flood waters across the same bridge.

Impact of Katrina on women

Mayaba Levanzhal, from the group Incite! Women of Color against Violence, gave testimony on how poor women, espe-
cially single mothers, are more unlikely to be able to evacuate during a hurricane because they don’t have the means to do so. She also spoke on the failure to reopen public schools; the lack of shelters in the midst of a rise of domestic violence and sexual assault; and how stress dispar-
ionately impacts Black and poor women, especially in New Orleans. An estimated 187,000 workers lost their jobs in New Orleans post-Katrina, and 50 percent of those jobs belonged to women.

Stephanie Mingo, from the St. Bernard section in New Orleans, gave testimony on her struggle to survive after Katrina as a single mother of four and a grandmother. Her 89-year-old mother died on a bridge, a Danish filmmaker, were shown at the documentary called “Welcome to New Orleans,” directed by a Danish filmmaker, were shown at the tribunal.

Nkechi Taifa, a tribunal prosecutor from the Legacy Empowerment Center, officially opened up the first day of the tri-
bunal proceedings Aug. 30. She spoke elo-
quently about how “the spirit of Emmett Till” was being felt at the tribunal. It was almost 50 years ago to the day that Hurricane Katrina hit that Till, a 14-year-
old African-American youth from Chicago, was tortured and shot to death in Money, Miss., by racists for allegedly whistling at a white woman.

Emmett’s mother, the late Mamie Till Mobley, demanded in 1955 that the cas-
et of her murdered son be opened for the world to see her horrifically disfigured body. Taifa stated that the tribunal is about “opening the casket”—the casket in this case being the racist, anti-poorest treatment that Katrina and Rita survivors still face today.

On Aug. 31, two dozen activists from across the country, along with New Orleans public housing residents, entered the Housing Authority of New Orleans and the Federal Housing and Urban Development offices in the Gently sectors of New Orleans, protesting the lack of affordable public housing post-Katrina. They conducted a stand-in, shutting down the main offices and outpost offices across the city. Some of these same activists attended the International Tribunal on Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, where they testified Sept. 1 on the housing crisis Katrina survivors still face and presented video footage of the takeover the day before.

—Monica Moo rehead

Malik Rahim gives evidence on military occupation Sept. 1.

Malik Rahim, executive director of Common Ground Collective in New Orleans, gave close to two hours of riveting testimony on the racist military occupation of New Orleans post-Katrina. This occupation included the National Guard, state and local police, Blackwater mercenaries and local armed white vigi-
lantes, all working in concert with each other. Many of the National Guard had just returned from Iraq.

COG is a grassroots, multiracial orga-
nization that provides free health care, clothing, tools and much more to Katrina survivors. Rahim spoke on seeing dead bodies, of Black men shot to death, in the streets. He recounted seeing military per-
sons, forced by survivors, rather than rescuing them.

Portions of a documentary called “Welcome to New Orleans,” directed by a Danish filmmaker, were shown at the tribunal. White vigilantes, with their guns drawn, “jokingly” spoke on how they were “protecting their neighborhoods and their city from Black men.” Rahim reminded the tribunal that this reign of racist terror in New Orleans was sanctioned by Gov. Blanco, who publicly gave orders to the National Guard to “shoot to kill” to restore “order”—a codeword for protecting private property against “looters.”

On Aug. 31, Dale Warren testified on the horror that she witnessed when the police forced her to stay in New Orleans. She end-
ed up in the Convention Center with thou-
 sands of others. Lights and air condition-
ing were shut off. Dead bodies were found in the freezer instead of food. Toilets were overflowing. On the fourth day, she wit-
nessed a man shot in the head by a nation-
 al guardswoman after he jumped on top of the jeep in motion. The man had told her that he wanted to commit suicide. The guards-
man kept driving after the shooting.

Sobolwe Shukura, an Atlanta representa-
tive of the National Network of Cuba, gave testimony on how the U.S. govern-
ment denied Cuba’s gesture to provide humanitarian aid to Katrina survivors. This aid included close to 1,600 disaster-
trained physicians along with medicines and equipment. The U.S. also denied relief aid from the Venezuelan government. The snubbing of this aid is further proof of how the U.S. government put politics before saving the lives of poor people, especially if they are African Americans.

Other tribunal sessions focused on gen-
trification and housing rights, children’s rights, forced dispersal, environmen-
tal racism, health care, cultural rights, Indig encious rights, voting rights, labor and migrant rights, misappropriation of relief, education rights and more.

Chokwe Lumumba, a lawyer from Mississippi and a Republic of New Afrika member, gave a powerful talk summariz-
ing the findings and putting the testimo-

New Orleans housing protest:
‘We want to come home’

Left to right, Attorney Tracie Washington, tribunal witness Lillie Mae Stokes and Stokes’ mother Rosie M. Bias.

But at the end of the day, Malik Rahim, speaking on the need for a popular movement to defend the rights of Black survivors, said: “We want to come home.”
Tribunal defends

Legacy of cultural resistance in New Orleans

By Larry Hales

New Orleans

It has been two years since the tragedy along the Gulf Coast was unleashed by the winds of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and escalated by state neglect. This year, the Peoples Hurricane Relief Fund decided to put the local, state and federal government on trial at an international Tribunal on Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

Testimony was given by many New Orleans residents attesting to the systemic, deliberate destruction, going back to the days of slavery; the great poverty that existed there before the storms; the crumbling educational system; police brutality; and more. Indeed, every feature of capitalist society was on full display in New Orleans, and perhaps more intensely than in any other area.

One of the topics covered was the culture of New Orleans, how it is endangered and now being co-opted and commodified by those who despise the culture of the oppressed.

It is said that roots run deep in New Orleans; that a person is never separated from their heritage or his connections to the city. Perhaps this can be said for all Black people who descend from Africans brought to the U.S. as chattel slaves, because the roots of Black culture—nourished by the sweat, tears and blood of African slaves and absorbed by the ground they tilled, kept and harvested—is thick as tubers to the core of the Earth.

Africans have been in New Orleans since before the city’s establishment in 1718 and the Afro-Creole culture people born in the cuisine, the speech and has defined the city.

Unlike in most cities, especially in the South, Africans were allowed a space to gather, socialize and play music, albeit only on Sundays. This place is still known as Congo Square. A precursor to the banjo is on display in the square, as well as many other instruments.

According to the African American Registry, the Congo Square was established as a special symbolic importance to African-Americans. It is significant because of the role the square played in New Orleans’ musical heritage and as a symbol of the early African contributions to the origins of jazz and other American musical forms.

In the twenty-first century, standing in tribute to the accomplishments of the tightly knit New Orleans musical community, Congo Square remains a memorial to the art that was transformed their land and exported it throughout the world.”

Mardi Gras

One of the traditions often misunderstood and stood that is in danger of being lost is the tradition of the Mardi Gras Indians. While never recognized as a cultural tradition by the Arts District of New Orleans, it is at the same time exploited as a draw for tourists.

Cherice Maria Harrison-Nelson, an educator for the Recovery School District, spoke about that tradition and the threat imposed by the right to return of residents of the city. Harrison-Nelson is a Big Queen in the Mardi Gras Indian tradition, co-founder of the Mardi Gras Indian Hall of Fame and daughter of Big Chief Donald Harrison Sr. of the Guardians of the Flame “krewe,” who died in 1998.

A movie about the tradition of the Mardi Gras Indians, “Tootie’s Last Suit,” is about Allison “TooTie” Montana, who “masked” or donned his suit for 52 years and died in City Council chambers while protesting police brutality.

Mardi Gras itself is a tradition that can be traced back to European customs. In fact, the name itself is French and means “Fat Tuesday.”

There had always been separate celebrations, one for whites and one for Black people, because of racism and the history of slavery.

The tradition of the Mardi Gras Indians and of “masking” grew out of a close relation of Black slaves with Indigenous tribes and a desire to pay homage to Native people for the assistance they gave to Black slaves in escaping and evading recapture. (mardigrasneworleans.com) It is an attempt to blend an homage with African traditions, and the people who carry on the tradition do their own beadwork and make their own costumes.

Traditions of resistance

Given that the tragedy of New Orleans before and after the storms in 2005 uncoverts the conditions of the poor and oppressed in U.S. society, it is painfully obvious to those in power in New Orleans and the U.S. ruling class that the city may become the raving cry of the Black masses, along with Latin@ and Indigenous peoples, for freedom from oppression and the system from which that oppression springs.

New Orleans was home of the largest slave revolt, led by Charles, a slave on the Deslondes plantation. Nearly 900 slaves, inspired by the successful revolution in Haiti in 1804, fought for freedom.

The city stands as a testament to the will and determination of oppressed people—in its traditions, songs, dances, speak, ideals, hope, and as Amilcar Cabral once stated, “seed of resistance.” One need look no further than the traditions of New Orleans—how the culture was forged from expressions of the enslaved, their desire for freedom and their resistance.

The attempt to deny the right of return—to make New Orleans a playground for the rich—is not merely about the land. It is also an attempt to break up communities and pockets of resistance to racist oppression. And it is playing itself out in cities across the country. This is not simply natural migration, but ethnic cleansing, and if not addressed for what it is by the broad movement, then a dangerous period in history may give way to more intense oppression.

Solidarity statement from BAYAN U.S.A. to Tribunal on Katrina and Rita

The U.S. Chapter of Bagong Alyansang Makabayan, or BAYAN USA, wishes to send its warmest and most militant greetings of solidarity to the organizers and participants of the International Tribunal on Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in New Orleans this August 29.

As a national alliance of over 12 Filipino organizations in the United States, we grieved and stood indignantly alongside the rest of the nation and the world as the Bush administration embarked on an illegal war, a war of terror and martial law tactics against the predominantly African-American communities of New Orleans and hurricane Katrina and Rita.

We believe venues such as this historic tribunal are the muscles of the people’s movement in full flex when government and its social services have failed its peop, and we support the broadening mass movement led by the most oppressed and disenfranchised from the region to demand accountability from the U.S. government for the devastation and forced impoverishment of their communities.

We believe this will ultimately push for concrete change in a system [that] continuously fails the economically marginalized inside the world’s most powerful imperialist country.

Imperialism is still at the heart and root of the so-called natural disasters that struck the innocent people of the Gulf Coast. While the Bush administration is playing the natural disaster card, the truth is the devastation against the people could have been prevented. It was the Bush administration’s choice to protect and uphold multinational corporate interests over the safety of families that created the unsafe conditions that eventually struck the people of New Orleans. The government-approved development aggression that saw big oil companies occupying the wetlands surrounding the Mississippi delta weakened natural barriers needed to moderate flooding in the area.

While corporate greed destroyed the safety and security of the living areas of the Gulf Coast, the negligent state answered disaster by pounding even harder on the evacuees once flooding got underway, with militarization and absence of genuine relief efforts.

As an alliance of mainly Filipino immigrants and U.S.-born Filipinos, our own dislocation from our homeland is also brought about by similar factors like corporate interests over people’s interests. The Bush regime that turned tales on the evacuees is the same Bush regime that allocates millions in U.S. tax dollars to Philippine soldiers that turn their rifles on the Filipinos people back home, and sustains the most terrorist U.S. puppet regime our people have seen in years.

The state militarization of New Orleans parallels the undecleared martial law under de facto Philippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, a martial law that surpasses the state terrorism of the former U.S.-Marcos dictatorship and has claimed nearly 900 lives and 200 abducted since 2001.

The national struggle of the majority of our people for land under a feudal agricultural system in the Philippines parallels the struggle of the people of New Orleans for land that has been seized from them. We unite with the objectives of the Tribunal and hope this creates a broader and expanded movement to further isolate the Bush regime for its crimes against humanity.

We especially congratulate the organizers—Peoples Hurricane Relief Fund, the Mississippi Disaster Relief Coalition, the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, and the U.S. Human Rights Network—for their lead initiative in building and strengthening a powerful and significant struggle from within the belly of the beast. Your struggle is our struggle.

Interviews with Iraq veterans

What’s the mood in the U.S. military?

By John Catalinotto

After four-plus years of a failed occupation of Iraq and a U.S. regime that refuses to leave, two questions have become vital: Who is the war against? The real cause of the Iraq war? Who is fighting and dying in Iraq? Why are the families of veterans in D.C. and L.A. and immigrants desperate for a quick-and-easy path to U.S. citizenship are giving the active-duty troops the tools they need to resist. In the end it is the soldier’s decision.

The mainstream media has been writing about the upcoming Congress sessions as if some epic battle between anti-war forces and the Bush/Cheney cabal will take place there. Not many are as excited about it as the media is. After the last national election, newly elected Democrats wasted no time in making the war their top priority, whether from the standpoint of war funding, and that calls to impeach Bush in D.C., and in Los Angeles. The number of AWOL troops and deserters is increasing. There is more drug use, people are escaping. They want to get out of the military and are finding many ways to do it. The majority don’t want to go back to Iraq. It’s taking a toll on the chain of command—the brass are finding they have to deploy people who normally would be discharged. On the other side there is growing resentment toward the brass. We feel on the verge of a mass exodus. People are leaving their stations or leaving the Army because they don’t want to go back to Iraq and be part of the occupation. We have been through a lot.

The IVAW will have a three-pronged approach: truth in recruiting, mobilization of active duty soldiers; defending war resisters.

WW: What is the mood now among active-duty troops?

Paul Foley, civilian organizer with the Different Drummer cafe in Waterford, N.Y., near Fort Drum, home base for the 10th Mountain Division, which has sent its brigades multiple times to Iraq and Afghanistan:

There is a chapter of IVAW at Ft. Drum now. We had a meeting at the Different Drummer Aug. 23. Both speakers, Eli Israel [who refused duty while in Iraq recently]—WW and Camilo Mejia, are well spoken and they had a powerful message.

Phil Aliff, IVAW board, at Fort Drum:

In the Army three years ago, while many of the rank and file were skeptical about the war, there was still resistance. Now, after the “surge” and the growing deterioration of the situation in Iraq, more are resisting, especially at Ft. Drum.

Madden: Over a year ago a poll said 70 percent wanted the U.S. to start getting out within a year. Now that year is up. This is compounded by the longer length of tours, the lack of a real break between tours, the accelerated operational tempo. The troops are involved in a conflict where they see little progress. And they are witnessing the contradiction between the public’s support for the war and what the troops are told they are there and what the reaction of the Iraqis is.

Foley: Many of the IVAW members are on their third tour, which is shipping out to Iraq for a second time. The Second Brigade just got back from Afghanistan. The Second Brigade is due back at Ft. Drum in November after an extended tour in Iraq doing house-to-house searches. Now there are more hassles in town of soldiers who get into trouble because they are really upset. They’ve been through a lot.

Mejia: The number of AWOL troops and deserters is increasing. There is more drug use, people are escaping. They want to get out of the military and are finding many ways to do it. The majority don’t want to go back to Iraq. It’s taking a toll on the chain of command—the brass are finding they have to deploy people who normally would be discharged. On the other side there is growing resentment toward the brass. We feel on the verge of a mass exodus. People are leaving their stations or leaving the Army because they don’t want to go back to Iraq and be part of the occupation. We have been through a lot.

WW: Will the IVAW also confront recruiters?

Stevens: The IVAW will have a three-pronged approach: truth in recruiting, mobilization of active duty soldiers; defending war resisters.

The IVAW “truth in recruiting” campaign is designed to give a strong link to the communities that are vulnerable to the recruiting of the military. We do it not to tell people what to do—teenagers have enough people telling them what to do already—but we will help them make an informed decision.

Mejia: We will provide information about what life is really like in the military. We won’t tell people not to join. But we know there are recruiters telling people about benefits and salaries. This might be the answer.

Continued on page 11
**Activist attorney sees first-hand**

**Palestinian political prisoners defy occupation courts, prisons**

By Greg Butterfield

Statement of American-Iranian Friendship Committee (AIFC), Aug. 31

On Aug. 28, 2007, U.S. troops at a checkpoint near the Tigris River had verified the legitimate and legal traveling documents of the members of an Iranian Energy Ministry delegation and allowed them to proceed to their destination at the state-owned Sheraton Ishtar Hotel nearby. The entire delegation, which included two Iranian diplomats, was officially invited by the government of Iran to help resolve Iraq's electrical power crisis. One member of the group, who is directly guided by President Bush's state department, said: “How did you meet Sa'adat?” and “What is his position?” One witness said he knew who Sa'adat was because he'd seen him on the news.

Three military judges were seated at the front of the room and barked out orders as they heard requests for bail, followed by the disputing of those in the back, telling them to be quiet. At the end of the hearing, one judge said to a prosecutor, in a very tendentious tone, “Why do you bring all these witnesses? We don’t need them.” The implication was clear: they’ve already made up their minds.

While we observed this hearing, Sa'adat was seated in a box to our right. His feet were shackled. He would pay attention to the proceedings only when another Palestinian prisoner was on the stand. Sa'adat has maintained throughout that he absolutely refuses to recognize the legitimacy of these courts. He refuses to stand for the judge. His attorneys observe and compile very detailed notes, but they will not participate in what is at its core an illegitimate process with no authority to pass judgment on Sa'adat or any other Palestinian.

WW: Did you see a connection between Palestinian prisoners and political prisoners held by the U.S.? CK: Right now, the U.S. maintains a maximum prison at the Guantanamo Bay prison. The basis of secret hearings defy or all real process. The so-called war on terror has justified the criminal enterprise and flagrant disregard of all international laws for the relations between nations and sovereign states, the U.S. military officials at first claimed that the Iranian delegation had unauthorized weapons, but were forced to retract that excuse when the Iraqi government publicly announced that the weapons belonged to the Iraqi officials. Regardless of the facts, the U.S. government does not admit guilt or wrongdoing and pays no cost for its illegal, aggressive acts.

It is crystal clear that these arrests and the harassment of the Iranians were directly guided by President Bush’s statement made a short time before at the American Legion Convention that he had given the order for U.S. troops to “confront” Tehran’s activities in Iraq.

The American-Iranian Friendship Committee (AIFC) urges all honest and fair-minded Iranians and Americans to protest this latest act of instigation to raise tensions and animosity and confugurate more crises in the war-wearied Middle East. The unity of the United States remains responsible for these provocative acts of war.

Let us not forget that the U.S. government has not released the five Iranian diplomats, who were arrested by U.S. commandos raid in Irbil, Iraq, in January of this year, again in violation of the international rules governing occupying powers.

Please contact: American-Iranian Friendship Committee (AIFC), 914-589-0744 or email AIFC@optonline.net
We salute our taxi drivers

By Deirdre Griswold

As the fallout from the mortgage crisis continues to spread throughout the economy, more attention is being paid to the enormous and growing gap between the incomes of corporate executives and the wages of the workers who keep their companies running. According to a new report by the Institute for Policy Studies, that gap is now 364-to-1. In other words, if a CEO’s desk and give the orders that have resulted in the pay is $1 million, the worker would have to work for almost $364 million to equal the CEO’s income.

The NYCTWA has been fighting the law that defines the drivers as independent contractors. They are workers, like those in transportation and every other service industry, and deserve the right of collective bargaining to negotiate decent contracts with their employers and other benefits. The NYCTWA voted for a two-day strike, but the struggle is part of an ongoing campaign that the labor movement, community organizations and other groups must continue to support. The majority of the drivers are immigrants from many different lands. When they win economic and social justice, all workers, organized and unorganized, will win. An injury to one is an injury to all. 

Mortgage crisis and inequality

More than managers are at fault

The problem is capitalism. Rather than focus just on the high-profile executives who rake in millions, we must recognize that without some concessions there’d be a workers’ revolution.

Today, the housing market is approaching a complete collapse. Some 25 percent of the subprime loans, with a total value of about $67 billion, are already in default. Many more are about to “reset,” that is, begin to charge a much higher interest rate that makes it impossible for those whose incomes haven’t kept pace. While foreclosures are already high, some 2 million families are estimated to be at imminent risk of losing their homes. They include many who qualified for prime mortgages, who are also seeing a rise in defaults and foreclosures.

“Gift to Wall Street”

Into this turmoil has stepped President George W. Bush. Fresh from dealing with his “victories” in Iraq, he says he has an initiative to get Congress to pass legislation giving the Federal Housing Administration the power to rush to make easy credit available to mortgage companies in order to keep them from going bankrupt. Indignation has risen over the huge salaries paid to managers like Mozilo.

Behind the front-men

However, while it is easy to hate the greedy executives, the decisions may have hardened the debacle, and who line their pockets when it is clear that the Sword of Damocles is about to fall on the heads of their customers, reducing executive salaries is a picayune approach to the problem.

The super-super-rich may not sit behind a CEO’s desk and give the orders that have resulted in the pay is $1 million, the worker would have to work for almost $364 million to equal the CEO’s income. To understand why Wall Street banks and brokers are so greedy, we must look to their owners. Forbes lists the top 25 richest of the very, very rich, with fortunes ranging from $14 billion to $89 billion.

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To the general public, taxi users and organized labor:

Workers World Party and newspaper hail the heroic effort made by tens of thousands of New York City taxi drivers who went on strike Sept. 5 to keep from being forced out of business. The Temporary Taxicab Commission to accept global positioning systems and touch-screen monitors for credit card payments in the cabs.

The New York City Taxi Workers Alliance, which represents more than 20,000 drivers, was joined by the city’s 44,000 licensed drivers, says the GPS amounts to spyware, since the TLC can use it to track every trip the drivers take.

Bhairavi Desai, executive director of the NYCTWA, says her members describe GPS as robbing cabdrivers of privacy. One driver compared it to the ankle bracelets used in house arrest.

The drivers work for franchise owners who own medallions—metal plates issued by the city that shows the taxi is licensed. These medallions are selling for as high as $600,000 apiece.

The Taxi and Limousine Commission (TLC) can use it to track every trip in the cabs they drive. Many local officers, struggling to hold on to the gains they have made over the years and fighting a seemingly losing battle to stave the hemorrhaging of the workers knew exactly who exploited them, their International leaders, “Which side are they on?” The rank-and-file are likely to be facing the UAW’s Big Vote No! “two tier wages and abuse of temp flags” such as VEBA, a lucrative retirees and workers will have to pay.

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Workers take to the streets in Chile

By Jaimeon Champion

On Aug. 29, hundreds of thousands of workers took to the streets of Santiago, Chile, to protest neoliberal economic policies that privatization in key industries, the opening up of markets to the imperialist powers have attempted to force on the countries of Latin America for decades. These policies include greater economic privileges for the imperialist powers than those enjoyed by the people of the countries they are trying to conquer, including greater economic opportunities for the imperialist corporations.

The demonstrations were also attended by hundreds of thousands of members of the Chilean workers and students movements who are organizing a National Truth-in-Education Day. The demonstrations were billed as a “National Day of Action,” and were initiated by the largest federation of trade unions in Chile, the Confederal Workers Union. These protests are a part of a three-day movement called “National Day of Action,” and were initiated by subcontracted mine workers that have shown the ability to effectively challenge mining companies.

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El problema del Pentágono

Las ocupaciones fallidas de Irak y Afganistán están llevando el problema básico del Pentágono al punto de ebullición. Tal cambio de cantidad en las fuerzas militares estadounidenses es que los suicidios de tropas se han triplicado y las tasas de disensión sin precedente. Un artículo de opinión del 29 de septiembre en The New York Times, publicado por el Sargento Camilo Mejía, un héroe resistente a la guerra en el 2003, como director de la Junta del VICG, subraya ese paso de promover la resistencia militar. Esas tropas que resisten merece el apoyo total del movimiento contra la guerra. La elección del Sargento Camilo Mejía, un héroe resistente a la guerra en el 2003, como director de la Junta del VICG, subraya ese paso de promover la resistencia militar. Esas tropas que resisten merece el apoyo total del movimiento contra la guerra.

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