



PR with Principles

September 2005

Welcome to the SPIN Project's monthly e-newsletter. Although this space is normally given over to our monthly compendium of news, notes and ideas, this issue is devoted entirely to Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath.

While we sincerely hope that loss of life in this tragedy will not be as great as was originally feared, there can be little doubt that both the sheer scale of this disaster, and the government's response to it, make it an issue of profound national importance.

Like many of you, we here at the SPIN Project have been looking for ways to help support leaders in the aftermath of the storm and the tragedy that followed in its wake. We want to help raise up the voices of local groups- the organizations working in affected communities before the hurricane will be some of the most critical voices in the weeks of recovery and months of rebuilding ahead. If you work for an organization whose work has been affected by the hurricane, the SPIN Project stands ready to help you as you plan your communications efforts in the recovery period, free of charge. If you know of an organization in Louisiana, Mississippi, or Alabama that could use our help, please feel free to forward this offer to them. Anyone looking for assistance can reach us at info@spinproject.org. We would be honored to help, in whatever way we can.

The SPIN Project has also put together a memo outlining communications considerations arising from the hurricane and its aftermath. You can download a PDF of the memo at <http://www.spinproject.org/downloads/Katrina.pdf/>.

Below, we offer some resources we have found helpful and outline our thoughts on what this means for the organizations we work with, and the progressive movement as a whole, in the near- and longer-term.

THE DAYS AHEAD: NEAR-TERM THINKING

What does it mean?

A number of organizations have begun the hard work of explaining how the failure to adequately respond to Hurricane Katrina is related to so much of the work that our organizations are involved in. Some of the work we've found interesting here at the SPIN Project include:

- Alternet (<http://www.alternet.org>) Our sister organization at the Independent Media Institute has been turning out some truly outstanding coverage on the Hurricane, and the larger issues it has uncovered.
- The Pew Center for the People and the Press (<http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=255>) has released the results of a poll they conducted in the wake of the storm, detailing the deep divisions in Americans' understanding of the hurricane and what it means. Perhaps the starkest portrayal of the deep divisions that remain in our country: when asked if they believed the government response to the storm would have been faster if most of its victims were white, two-thirds of African-American respondents said yes; among whites, only 17% said yes.
- Newsweek's cover story this week is called "The Other America." (<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/9287641/>) It's a fascinating look at how the mainstream press is responding to the storm.
- Wade Rathke, the Founder and Chief Organizer of ACORN and SEIU Local 100 in New Orleans has first-hand accounts of the storm and its aftermath at <http://www.chieforganizer.org>.
- New California Media (<http://news.ncmonline.com/news/>) NCM has been providing an invaluable roundup of Katrina stories from a wide variety of community and ethnic media outlets.

Engaging the media

Localize the Story: How does this disaster relate to your issue? Does it highlight missing safety nets in your community? How is your town's neglect by the federal government similar to that of New Orleans? How would your organization's members or constituents fare in a similar situation?

Start Where Your Audience Is: This event brought up incredible passion in many people. But we can't assume that those in our target audience understands the issue the same way we do. While Katrina has opened a window to issues of race and class, many Americans may still not be ready to talk about those issues head on. Remember to start where they are, and focus on values you share with them:

- “Hurricane Katrina has laid bare the deep divides between rich and poor, and black and white, that still exist in this country.”
- “National security is meaningless if we can't protect the most vulnerable among us.”
- “This is what happens when the government doesn't protect its people: those who can afford to get out, and those who can't get left behind.”

How we can help

Americans have responded to requests to aid those suffering as a result of the hurricane with donations totaling more than \$1 billion dollars. Most of this money has gone to organizations such as the Red Cross and the Salvation Army, who are focused on providing for the immediate needs of those made homeless by the storm. These immediate needs are certainly great, and we're sure that a good number of you have already donated to these fine organizations, but we would ask you to consider the long-term needs of the communities effected by the hurricane.

Rebuilding homes and organizing communities when infrastructure has been completely destroyed and people have been scattered across the country will require a huge investment, and pose special challenges for those attempting to organize these communities. With that in mind, we would ask that you consider donating to organizations whose long history of work in the effected communities make them deserving of your donations-- they were there before the hurricane, and they will be there long after the disaster responders have gone.

ACORN (<http://www.acorn.org>)

ACORN is organizing a series of town halls in cities across the country hosting survivors as a first step towards building an organization of and for them. At the same time, ACORN's national headquarters in New Orleans, and the homes of many of its members, have been devastated by the hurricane. To donate to ACORN's Hurricane Recovery and Rebuilding fund, visit <https://secure.groundspring.org/dn/index.php?id=36>.

FOUNDATIONS FOR RECOVERY (<http://www.foundationsforrecovery.org>)

A partnership of the Baton Rouge Area Foundation and the Greater New Orleans Foundation, Foundations for Recovery has set up the New Orleans Recovery Fund to focus on rebuilding the infrastructure to provide basic human services of the devastated areas.

UNION COMMUNITY FUND (https://secure.ga3.org/08/UCF_Katrina_Relief?)

The Union Community Fund and the AFL-CIO are working with the labor federations in affected states and with relief organizations to target donations where working families need them most. They are setting up Worker Centers in Houston, TX, Pearl, MS, and Mobile, AL, making computers and phones available to help working people get information and post messages letting family and friends know they are safe. Unions are sending off caravans loaded with relief supplies and getting crucial information to emergency responders about what they must do to stay safe while delivering aid.

COMMUNITY LABOR UNITED

(http://www.qecr.org/Public_QECR.nsf/PublicLinkIDs/Public2AA857E1647E8AE185257074003D5B82?OpenDocument&justframe&style¬itle)

A New Orleans coalition of labor and progressive community organizations, has put out a call to activists and organizations across the country to work on a "people's campaign" of community redevelopment. Organizing efforts will take place across hundreds of temporary shelters.

KATRINA.MAYFIRST.ORG (<http://www.katrina.mayfirst.org>)

Katrina.mayfirst.org provides a clearinghouse for links to grassroots/ low-income/ people of color-led Hurricane Katrina Relief. If you're interested in adding your organization to the list, e-mail katrina@mayfirst.org with details about your organization's work.

THE MONTHS AHEAD: LONG-TERM THINKING

Shifting the debate

Looking forward, its clear that Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath will have a huge impact on our nation as hundreds of thousands of people are forced to relocate for an extended period of time, and a massive rebuilding effort, that will take years and cost many billions of dollars, gets underway. What is also clear, however, is that this

storm, and the government's response to it, have opened up a space for discussion on two incredibly important areas. In the months ahead, it is critical that we understand, and are able to speak to, what the storm says about race and class in America, and about the role of government in our society.

Race and class

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, many who believed that racism no longer exists in this country have been forced to reconsider. The pictures of the devastation on their televisions every day showed them an entire class of people abandoned by their government and struggling to survive, and almost all of them were poor and African-American.

For many Americans, racism is something that we faced long ago, and defeated. Racism for them means slavery and the Civil Rights struggle. What they need to be told is that racism is still with us as long as the schools black children attend are worse than those that white children attend. Racism is still with us when chemical plants are sited in poor neighborhoods. And racism is still with us when concentrations of poverty exist in all of our cities, condemning those that live there to perpetuate the cycle of poverty.

When even President Bush acknowledges that the poverty revealed by the hurricane "has roots in a history of racial discrimination, which cut off generations from the opportunity of America," it is clear that something has changed in the national discourse. It is imperative that we not let this moment pass without seizing it to highlight the continuing inequalities in our nation. We must hold the President to his promise of "bold action" to confront these issues, and we must offer a positive vision of what racial and social justice might look like in America.

For more on dealing with issues of race and class as revealed by the hurricane, The Praxis Project and Youth Media Council (<http://www.thepraxisproject.org/news/katrina.html>) have put together a collection of talking points and story ideas.

The Role of Government

What we saw this month, and what all Americans saw, is the natural result of conservative policies. Those with the resources to do so evacuated the stricken areas. Those who could not afford to-- hard-working, tax-paying citizens-- were left behind.

Beyond the clear racial and class divisions the hurricane has exposed, something equally fundamental about American political life has become clear. For the past thirty years, conservatives in America have told anyone who would listen that government is the problem, not the solution, and that the genius of the free market should be left to work its magic on all our problems. In the last few years especially, conservative ideas about privatization of government services and massive tax cuts in the face of huge and growing deficits have become reality, all in the name of "starving the beast."

What the hurricane has made clear is that these conservative policies have decimated the government's ability to protect all of us from disasters, both natural and man-made. If we cannot protect the weakest among us, then none of us are safe.

For more on government's role in our society, visit DEMOS: A Network for Ideas & Action (<http://www.demos-usa.org/home.cfm>).

That's it for this issue of the SPIN Project's e-newsletter. Please feel free to forward any of this information to anyone you think might be interested—we'd greatly appreciate it.

Thanks,

The SPIN Project Staff

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