

Rural Organizing Project: Annual Meeting
May 5, 2006 – Woodburn, Oregon
Dan Leahy's Talk Notes

Introduction

Marcy asked me to act as an outsider and to make a few comments about what I see. I'd like to talk about three things: (1) who you are, where you are and what you're about. (2) Your linking of Katrina and Iraq and, (3) your idea of Community.

First Point

Your Walk from Salem to Portland last June demonstrated possibility, showed direction and held promise. That promise exploded onto the streets in March, April and on May Day with the leadership of Latino youth. I want to congratulate you on that Walk. It is the hard, on the ground organizing that makes that type of explosion possible.

The walk outs, marches and boycotts by young Latino and other immigrants in 200 cities across the US is just the beginning of a much needed turn around in this country.

You are talking about the need for a new contract with America. These Latino youth, other immigrants and their supporters want a new contract, just like the survivors of Katrina want a new contract.

We do need a new contract. The old contract has been broken. That old contract said government had a public duty to remedy social injustice.

Now government says there is no such thing as a public duty, a public responsibility to people who come here looking for a better life. Government now says "you are on your own."

This is what they said to the people of New Orleans. This is what government is saying when they try to criminalize immigrants or criminalize New Orleans survivors. You are on your own. You are a criminal.

We have to remember who we are. A nation of immigrants. My Dad came here from Quebec. He had no papers. They didn't find out about that until he was in his 50s.

We need a new contract with America, a new understanding about what we get as workers.

2. Someone on the radio said about the tension between organized labor and immigrant workers. I thought about that a bit.

Yes, there has always been a tension but when labor has moved it's been when immigrant labor unites with African American labor and shows organized labor how to fight.

The Knights of Labor was an alliance of immigrant Irish labor starved to death by British Free Trade policy and newly freed African American labor. It built the largest labor movement of its time in the 1870s.

The IWW in the first part of the 20th century was immigrant labor... Italian and southern European labor. They fought the textile mill owners of New England to a stand still.

The Congress of Industrial Unions in the mid-1930s was immigrant labor from Eastern Europe aligned with African American labor that organized the industrial machine of U.S. capital.

Finally, the public sector movement of the late 1960s that aligned itself with the Civil Rights movement was built by African American labor and Latino labor.

One of the great things about this May Day Action was that Latino workers just might teach the rest of the American working class about the meaning of May Day. I often marched in Mexico city on May Day and it always amazed me how the Mexican workers know all about the US workers struggle for the eight hour day in 1886 and about the Chicago martyrs and the origins of May Day as the celebration of that struggle. Yet, American workers know virtually nothing about it. Immigrant labor just might teach them.

But, I also want to say that just as we are focused here in the United States about immigrant labor, we need to listen to what is happening in Mexico too. Right now, the Vicente Fox government is engaged in a brutal repression of communities in the Texcoco and San Salvador Atenco. Sub comandante Marcos has placed the EZLN on red alert. These communities are fighting to preserve their land and their ability to sell their own produce.

So, the first point I want to make is that I think you are in the right room, at the right time and with the right alliances of organizations.

Second Point: Your linking of Katrina, New Orleans, the Gulf Coast and the War in Iraq

Iraq and Katrina are two reflections of the same set of policies, one foreign and one domestic, but the same policies. And, since I'm a professor at The Evergreen State College, I've prepared a test for you.

Which one is this? Iraq or New Orleans and Southern Louisiana

Years of premeditated destruction of infrastructure and impoverishment of its people. (Mississippi and Louisiana are the two poorest states in the nation – the only city with a higher poverty rate than New Orleans is Washington, D.C.)

Elimination of its public sector. No public schools, no public housing, no public health care. (All these things remain closed in New Orleans)

Establishing an external authority to replace its indigenous government. (The proposed Crescent City Recovery Corporation with eminent domain power is analogous to the Coalition Provisional Authority of Bremer)

Criminalizing its local population when they make efforts to survive the breakdown of the social order. (Iraqis resisting US occupation are equivalent to US media characterization of New Orleans citizens as looters)

Dispersing people throughout the region with no plans to bring them home. (The New Orleans Diaspora is the largest scattering of a population since the Great Depression)

Issuing no bid contracts to multinational corporations to rebuild infrastructure unrelated to public needs. (The same in both arenas –the true “looters”)

Mobilizing the military as the only real federal response to the break down of a social contract. (The US military mobilization was the largest on domestic soil since the Civil War.)

Finally, refusing to talk about the driving force behind all of it: OIL (Louisiana’s 600 oil and gas platforms, 10,000 miles of oil and gas canals is 15% of domestic oil supply and only place where supertankers can offload foreign oil)

KATRINA AND THE FLOOD WAS

Most costly domestic disaster in US history (100b)
Largest pre-evacuation of people in US history (1m plus)
Largest Diaspora since the Great Depression (770,000)
Largest military mobilization on US soil since the civil war
Largest oil spill in US waters since Exxon Valdez

NINE MONTHS LATER

The levees have not been repaired
Utility service is still not available in half the city
43% of city are renters: no provision for rental housing
Half the neighborhoods are still abandoned.
Public housing is locked up
Public hospital is locked up
Public Schools are locked up
And Southern Louisiana sinks due to Oil extraction

There is one difference. Iraqis here in the United States were given satellite voting facilities so they could participate in an election. This resource was denied to the dispersed citizens of New Orleans.

MY POINT – I THINK YOU ARE RIGHT.

Seeing Katrina, New Orleans and the Gulf Coast is seeing Iraq. Both are examples of the single minded and militarized pursuit of oil regardless of its costs to society. It must stop. And only ground up organizing can do it.

POINT THREE: YOU TALK ABOUT COMMUNITY.

You've been organizing places. Small rural communities all over Oregon. Place is important. It's ground. It's your survival.

You've been organizing across communities. It's mobility. Horizontal movement. It allows for different strategies and tactics.

You've been organizing across barriers, breaking them down, race gender, sexual orientation. This is intelligence. You gain know how.

Last June, you organized a March, a Walk. This is visibility. It's a recruiting mechanism.

COMMUNITY HAS TO BE ABOUT VISIBLE RESISTANCE THAT RECRUITS.

Look at the Common Ground Collective. In the midst of racist savagery (cracker squads, police repression and complete governmental abandonment) Malik Rahim put out a call. Come down here and help.

Thousands of volunteers responded. Only recently students came over spring break to suit up and clean out houses. Young people need a visible call, a mission, a calling.

Your Annual meeting here is about organizing your next major call. It's extremely important. People are ready to join, but they must see it and a role for themselves

One final point about Community. I hope your community will move within the global community. Social Forums have been organized since 2001 in Brazil, India and Venezuela. At the end of June, 2007, there will be the first US Social Forum in Atlanta, Georgia.

Organizers see the Forum not as an event, but as a movement building process. The host organization is called Project South and I hope you'll consider building your community and strategy with in this larger, global social movement.

CONCLUSION – RIGHT PLACE, RIGHT ALLIANCE, RIGHT TIME
RIGHT ANALYSIS OF IRAQ AND KATRINA
NEED TO CONSTRUCT A COMMUNITY OF RESISTANCE