

The (Improbable) History of the Gulf Coast Civic Works Project

The Gulf Coast Civic Works Act (HR 4048) is based on a simple idea: create 100,000 living wage jobs for Gulf Coast survivors and evacuees to rebuild the public infrastructure that was damaged in Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. This idea has gained support from Gulf Coast groups, like ACORN and ACT (All Congregation Together), and from national organizations, like the RFK Center for Human Rights and ColorofChange.

Improbably, the roots for this federal bill are found 2,200 hundred miles from the Gulf Coast on a college campus in the heart of Silicon Valley. The group of students and faculty that took the lead role in developing the Gulf Coast Civic Works Project (GCCWP) had no money and few political connections when they began. What they did have was a powerful idea, and they have not wavered from the belief that civic work has the potential to transform the Gulf Coast and America.

A year after the creation of the GCCWP, Rep. Lofgren (D-CA), along with Reps. Charlie Melancon (D-LA) and Gene Taylor (D-MS) as original co-sponsors, introduced the Gulf Coast Civic Works Act (HR 4048) into Congress. The bill focuses on infrastructure, job creation, community oversight, and creating the conditions to allow for people to return home. More specifically, HR 4048 will: (1) jumpstart the recovery by creating the Gulf Coast Recovery Authority to coordinate the federal response to the devastation of the Gulf Coast; (2) rebuild critical public infrastructure, such as police and fire stations, schools, city halls, court houses, roads, water and sewer systems, and cultural centers; (3) promote sustainable community development by providing job skill straining and apprenticeships in high-wage construction trades work and by having local advisory councils determine which projects are implemented;

(4) develop opportunities for public/private partnerships through the creation of a minimum of 100,000 jobs for Gulf Coast residents, and (5) require oversight through project review boards and financial audits.

From the development of the Gulf Coast Civic Works Project to the introduction of HR 4048 into Congress: this is the story of this generation's human rights movement.

The Creation of the Gulf Coast Civic Works Project

On a crisp November evening in 2006, a group of 40 San Jose State students and a professor gathered to spend the night in solidarity with the poor and homeless. The students were responding to a recently released report that Silicon Valley had become the “homeless capital” of Northern California, with 7,600 people without housing on any given night. In response to this report, students decided to call for a campus sleep out entitled “Poverty Under the Stars” to demonstrate their solidarity with the poor.

With a long night in front of them, the students decided to watch “When the Levee's Broke” by Spike Lee, since the newly released video highlighted how over 250,000 American families had been made homeless. Over the next four hours, the students watched the social suffering that took place in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, and then over the following year. After each of the four “acts” in the movie, the students shared their thoughts and reflections. The students were upset and even outrage at what was taking place in the Gulf Coast. As the students slept out that night, few were aware that their outrage would transform itself into a viable solution for the issues confronting the Gulf Coast.

The next morning, I was teaching from my book, “Social Solutions to Poverty,” and coincidentally, the topic was the public work programs of the New Deal. We learned that in two

months from President Franklin Roosevelt signing an Executive Order creating the Civilian Works Administration in 1934, 814,511 people were hired to do construction work (i.e., school repair, sanitation work, road building, etc.), and in two months, 4.2 million were at work. The students also learned that the Works Project Administration (WPA), which replaced the CWA, went on to employ a total of 8 million people in its 7-year history, and its accomplishments were many: the WPA built or improved over 140,00 buildings, including 2,500 hospitals, 5,900 schools, 13,000 playgrounds, and hired almost 250 bands and orchestras to play music. In addition, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) provided jobs to 500,000 young men (ages 18 to 25) to work on environmental conservation projects, and their accomplishments were stunning: three billion trees planted, one billion fish stocked, 20 million acres from soil erosion arrested, and 800 state parks built (Myers-Lipton, 2006).

It didn't take long for us to put two and two together. We started to wonder, why couldn't we do the same thing today: put local people to work at a living wage—train them if necessary—and rebuild the public infrastructure of the Gulf Coast. It seemed that public work, or what we renamed civic work—since the “civic” didn't seem to be working for the citizens of the Gulf Coast—had effectively and efficiently rebuilt the infrastructure of our nation in the 1930s, and perhaps as important, had rebuilt the lives of the people. For the unemployed worker of the 1930s, a public work job meant self-respect and dignity, as well as a prevailing wage. This focus on the rebuilding of the public infrastructure and the dignity that comes from a living wage job have been the focus of the Gulf Coast Civic Works project since the beginning of the project. Public infrastructure is needed, since four out of seven of New Orleans general hospitals remain closed, while across the Gulf Coast, police officers and firefighters conduct their business in FEMA trailers since their stations remain closed. Equally important, prevailing wage jobs for

Gulf Coast residents will provide them with the self-respect and dignity that comes from working to rebuild one's community. Equally important, Gulf Coast residents' faith in the government will be restored.

There is a College Movement Afoot

Over the past year, the Gulf Coast Civic Works Project has had two major goals: (i) to develop a college movement to support legislation based on the project and, (ii) to find regional and national coalition partners to help push Congress and the President to enact a bill. To develop a college movement, the project has developed five powerful events, with the goal of catapulting New Orleans and the rest of the Gulf Coast back into the national consciousness, and to support the passage of HR 4048. These events include: (1) Louisiana Winter, (2) Mardi Gras, (3) the National Post-Katrina Summit, (4) the 8/29 Anniversary Commemoration, and (5) the National Campus Sleep Out. These five events serve as the cornerstone of the campus movement to enact HR 4048.

(1) Louisiana Winter

Mississippi Freedom Summer inspired "Louisiana Winter." In a previous generation, college students from around the country traveled to Mississippi to register African American voters who were being denied this constitutional right. In that spirit of democracy, students are once again traveling to the Gulf Coast to participate in Louisiana Winter. In January of 2007, a group of almost 100 college students from 15 universities spent a week in New Orleans and Mississippi, where they passed out 10,000 fliers, held two rallies, conducted two town hall meetings, and gave multiple interviews to local, state, and international media.

Everywhere the Louisiana Winter students went, they were greeted warmly, whether it was in Gentilly, Pontchartrain Park, Lower Ninth Ward, Uptown, and St. Bernard Parish in New Orleans, or in Gulfport, Pass Christian, Long Beach, and Biloxi in Mississippi. Throughout the Gulf Coast, the GCCWP was seen as a potential solution by almost everyone the students met. In fact, support for the Gulf Coast Civic Works Project cut across political orientation, as conservatives saw it as a hand-up and not a handout, while liberals appreciated the fact that the government would play an active role in relieving the social suffering. Importantly, both conservatives and liberals felt that the federal government had not lived up to its responsibility to take care of its citizens.

As part of Louisiana Winter, students asked Gulf Coast residents for their ideas about what should be included in a federal bill. From these conversations, four key principles emerged, which were then used to guide the development of the Gulf Coast Civic Works Act (HR 4048). These principles included:

1. The civic work jobs should be in the areas of construction (e.g., plumbing, electrical, masonry, and air conditioning) and the arts. If workers do not have these skills, paid apprenticeships should be provided.
2. The process to obtain a civic works job should be simple. A streamlined process should be conducted at county employment service offices and/or at faith-based and community initiatives connected to the White House.
3. The civic work jobs should pay prevailing wages—no lower than \$15—so people can support themselves. The civic workers should have the right to join unions.
4. The local communities affected by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita should decide which structures would be given priority to rebuild.



Joe Nance doing a spoken word piece in front of Dr. Martin Luther King Charter School for Science and Technology in the Lower Ninth Ward as part of Louisiana Winter; image by Diana Diroy

In January of 2008, 19 students from San Jose State returned for Louisiana Winter 2. The students worked with LA ACORN in the Lower 9th Ward on rebuilding projects. They also participated in meetings with such organizations as the Louisiana Recovery Authority and the Workforce Investment Board in the Mayor's office. In addition, 59 students, staff, and faculty from 10 college campuses gathered at Loyola University in New Orleans to plan a national campus campaign strategy to pass the Gulf Coast Civic Works Project (HR 4048).

(2) Mardi Gras

Students and faculty have initiated a Mardi Gras celebration to promote the Gulf Coast Civic Works Act. On February 5th, 2008, students and faculty will gather at San Jose State University to celebrate Mardi Gras and rally in support of the HR 4048. Students and faculty

will "Celebrate for HR 4048" by processing around campus with the jazz band Bug Horn Rex. The celebration will include throwing of beads, small floats, New Orleans cuisine, films, speakers, and a student report out on Louisiana Winter. SJSU students have encouraged other campuses to follow their lead.

This year, Mardi Gras falls on Super Tuesday, where 22 states will hold caucuses or primary elections to choose their presidential candidates. What better day than Mardi Gras/Super Tuesday to highlight the importance of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. The GCCWP hopes to send a loud message to the nation and to the presidential candidates that there is solution to the crisis in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, and it is HR 4048, the Gulf Coast Civic Works Act.

(3) National Post-Katrina Summit

In April of 2007, the Gulf Coast Civic Works Project initiated the National Post-Katrina Summit, which is a nationwide, week-long effort to raise awareness about the Gulf Coast through documentary films, speakers, spoken word, blood drives, rallies, petition drives, solidarity dinners, reading the names of Katrina victims, and other events. The Post-Katrina Summit is an attempt to catapult New Orleans and the rest of the Gulf Coast back into the national consciousness.

In the first annual event, students and faculty from over forty colleges, including California State University Fullerton, CUNY Stony Brook, San José State, South Florida, Stanford, Tulane, University of California, University of Michigan, and Woodrow Wilson College, signed up to host a summit on their campuses. The first National Post-Katrina Summit was a huge success. For example, at the University of Michigan, the keynote speaker, Lt. General Russel Honore--the person who Mayor Ray Nagin credited with finally bringing in supplies to New Orleans--spoke to a large crowd. At California State University of Fullerton, a

second line march and processional across campus occurred, followed by the reading of the names of the over 1,800 Katrina victims. Plans for the 2nd National Post-Katrina Summit are currently underway.



Students signing GCCWP petitions at CSU Fullerton as part of the Post Katrina Summit. Image by Dr. Lezlee Hinesmon-Matthews

(4) Anniversary Commemoration of Hurricane Katrina

On August 29, five campuses held 2nd anniversary commemorations of Hurricane Katrina. At San Jose State, 300 students, Katrina evacuees, and community members participated in a march and rally. They met at San Jose's Municipal Stadium, which was built by the Works Progress Administration. By gathering at a public work project, the GCCWP reminded the nation on the second anniversary of Katrina that there is an effective solution for the problems of the Gulf Coast. The event, which included student speakers, evacuees, hip hop artists, and several clergy, was the lead or 2nd story on every major news channel in the San Francisco Bay Area.

(5) National Campus Sleep Out

As stated previously, San Jose State students initiated the first campus sleep out in November 2007. The 2nd annual event, which was entitled the National Campus Sleep Out: A New Deal for the Gulf Coast,” was held on November 14, 2008. Students, faculty, and Katrina survivors gathered at Loyola University, Northeastern, Sara Lawrence, SJSU, University of North Carolina, and Wartburg College to participate in the event.

As with the other events, the goal was to highlight the crisis in the Gulf, and to focus on the solution--the Gulf Coast Civic Works Act. At SJSU, 150 students gathered to watch movies, hear speakers, listen to spoken word, with over 50 students sleeping out. Once again, the media focused on the students and evacuees, as two major stations covered the event live.

Earlier in the day, Derrick Evans from Mississippi Turkey Creek brought a FEMA trailer to the campus to share with the students and the Bay Area community the struggle of 150,000 Katrina survivors still living in toxic FEMA trailers. The GCCWP highlighted the fact that it had recently come to light that FEMA employees have been banned from entering these FEMA trailers due to the high levels of formaldehyde, a known respiratory irritant and carcinogen.



SJSU students promoting HR 4048 in front of a FEMA trailer as part of the National Campus Sleep Out; image by Scott Myers-Lipton

Coalition Partners

While the students took the lead in creating the project and pushing the idea for the bill forward, several regional and national organizations partnered with the students to work on the development and passage of the bill. Those organizations are the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), All Congregations Together (ACT), the Robert F. Kennedy Center for Human Rights, and ColorofChange. The Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) became involved with the Gulf Coast Civic Works Project starting in January 2007. Early on, Stephen Bradberry, the lead organizer for Louisiana ACORN, saw how the project could be used as an organizing tool and how it could help transform American policy away from Milton Friedman's laissez faire economic model and towards John Maynard Keynes model in government involvement in the economy. Mary Fontenot, executive director of All Congregations Together, has also worked with the GCCWP

from January 2007, providing advice and support on the ground in New Orleans.



Steven Bradberry of LA ACORN, Dr. Scott Myers-Lipton, and Louisiana Winter students at the ACORN National Office in New Orleans; Image by Scott Myers-Lipton

At the national level, the project has partnered with the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Center for Human Rights (RFK). Jeffrey Buchanan, Communication Director for RFK, has been critical in setting up and meeting with Congressional staff members, and he has taken a lead role in the Bring the Gulf to the Debates campaign. This latest campaign is focused on getting a question about HR 4048 into the national presidential debates. As this article goes to print, a question on HR 4048 is the number 1 question for the upcoming California Democratic debates and the number 3 question for the Republican debates on www.Politico.com. Lastly, James Rucker from ColorofChange has provided crucial support for the project from its very inception.

Any discussion of the Gulf Coast Civic Works Project would be incomplete without taking about Jonathan Rhoades, a law student at Chicago-Kent College of law. Jonathan was the lead author of HR 4048. Before working as a fellow at the U.S. House of Representatives

Democratic Caucus, Jonathan was an active member of the Student Hurricane Network, which is a coalition of law students from around the country working on legal issues facing Gulf Coast residents. In the summer of 2007, Jonathan was a fellow at the Democratic Caucus when he connected to the GCCWP. Over the next several months, he worked closely with the project in taking the ideas and principles of the GCCWP, and turning them into legal language of a federal bill. Of course, the Congress members made changes to the bill, but Jonathan's wording runs throughout HR 4048.

Successes

Clearly, the greatest success of the GCCWP up to January 2008 has been the introduction of the Gulf Coast Civic Works Act of 2007, which was introduced on November 1, 2007, by Representative Zoe Lofgren (D-CA), and co-sponsored by Representatives Gene Taylor (D-MS) and Charlie Melancon (D-LA). However, the GCCWP has also had several smaller victories. First, the students have led a campaign to get resolutions in support of the project passed in state legislatures. The first state to introduce such a piece of legislation was in Missouri in February 2007, as representative Jeanette Oxford took the lead in introducing it. However, the California State Assembly was the first Assembly to pass a resolution. Under the leadership of Speaker Pro Tempore Sally Lieber, Assembly Joint Resolution (AJR) 22 was introduced into the California Assembly in March 2007. AJR 22 calls upon the California Congressional delegation to support the passing of federal legislation based on the GCCWP. In May, students traveled to Sacramento to speak in favor of AJR 22 in front of the Assembly's Jobs, Economic Development, and Economy Committee. And then in September, before the fall recess, the Assembly passed AJR 22. A Senate vote will likely occur in the spring of 2008.

In addition, the California Democratic Party passed Resolution SD07.79 on July 15, 2007 urging "the Democratic National Committee and our congressional leaders to introduce and fight for passage of federal legislation based on the Gulf Coast Civic Works Project . . ." Lastly, the 2007 US Social Forum General Assembly in Atlanta, Georgia, passed a resolution calling on the federal government to create the Gulf Coast Civic Works Project. Amber McZeal, who was working with ColorofChange, was instrumental in building support for the GCCWP at the Social Forum.

Concluding Thoughts

The Gulf Coast Civic Works Project, along with its coalition partners, has come a long way in one and one-third years. A student movement is afoot. A bill is in Congress. A coalition has formed. And history just may well be changed in the Gulf Coast and America.