

Reconstruction Ruling Benefits Bush Pals

**By Jan Schakowsky**

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As the death toll across the Gulf Coast rises, one of the largest reconstruction efforts in American history begins. An estimated 400,000 jobs have been lost, and 1 million Americans have been displaced from their homes. Workers who have found the courage to return to their devastated communities suffered another blow last week when President Bush suspended the Davis-Bacon Act.

Davis-Bacon ensures that workers who perform similar jobs for government contractors are paid the local prevailing wage. In New Orleans, where a quarter of the residents lived in poverty before Hurricane Katrina, that wage was \$8.49 an hour for service workers and slightly above \$10 an hour for most construction workers: not an excessive wage by any stretch. In fact, if the minimum wage had kept up with inflation, it would be \$8.88 today.

The lower wages resulting from Bush's action will increase contractors' profits but harm workers who need to rebuild their financial security. Any savings gained by paying substandard wages will not be reinvested to fund the reconstruction efforts or given back to the taxpayers. Instead, it will go to the cronies of the Bush administration who have already received no-bid contracts in the aftermath of the hurricane.

While residents of the Gulf Coast are returning home looking for work, the same cast of characters who were rewarded with contracts in Iraq -- Halliburton, Fluor and Bechtel -- are busy setting up shop. Under the Bush administration, disaster has been consistently (and rapidly) followed by profiteering.

For many, Katrina exposed what life is like for the 37 million Americans who live in poverty and gives new meaning to the president's "ownership society." If you owned a car, had a full tank of gas and enough money for a hotel room, you were able to escape the hurricane. Those without the means to escape were left behind, trying to survive the storm and its aftermath.

Hurricane Katrina forced the country to confront poverty, but it also has made us think about the role that government should play in providing economic opportunity, protecting our communities and keeping our country strong. We can promote an ownership society in which you're on your own. Or we can demand government that promotes a shared community in which we care for each other and are stronger for doing so.

We saw the results of a "sink or swim" approach to government in the aftermath of Katrina. Katrina evacuees who are willing and able to work should be hired to help lead reconstruction efforts in the Gulf region. At a bare minimum, those workers should be given the same wage protections that have been in place for the last 75 years.

Our government, which failed to adequately prepare for and respond to the hurricane, should now give them a helping hand in rebuilding their homes and their lives. Bush's suspension of Davis-Bacon is just another example of his "take from the poor, give to the rich" philosophy, which apparently applies even in times of grave crisis.