Cuts hit hospitals, homeless services

New York mayor announces layoffs

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30 May 1998

New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani announced the layoff of 600 hospital workers May 18, only days after the Department of Homeless Services declared that it was cutting 1,000 jobs over the next one or two years. The layoffs in the hospital system take place immediately.

These cuts are being made under conditions of a Wall Street boom that has enabled the city to register a budget surplus of $1.5 billion. They come at a time of growing hardship for millions of working class and poor people in New York and deteriorating and overburdened city services.

The jobs cut in the homeless agency involve shelter workers who serve food, clean dishes, wash laundry, as well as those who counsel and nurse the homeless. This will reduce the staffing of the agency by approximately one-half, and is a move toward privatization. An associate commissioner for the department admitted this when, in justifying the cuts, he said, "We are moving from being an agency that actually runs homeless shelters to an agency that essentially manages nonprofit contracts and oversees how they provide services. Our function has changed and it requires a very different staffing level."

The city administration has been seeking to privatize the shelters and other services for the homeless since the 1980s. The process has accelerated in the last few years. In 1994 the agency ran 34 shelters with 3,000 workers. Now it runs 15 shelters with 2,170 workers. The current operating budget for the department calls for a reduction of $20 million, to about $370 million.

In defending his move to cut jobs in the public hospitals, Giuliani has claimed that the system is overstaffed. This statement is disputed by hospital workers who report that the institutions are severely understaffed and that many employees are forced to do overtime.

Located in one of the poorest neighborhoods of New York City, Harlem Hospital, where most of the layoffs are taking place, has just 357 beds, having lost half its beds in the last 5 years.

The mayor has repeatedly expressed his desire to privatize the public hospitals, the largest in the country, and the layoffs are clearly a move in that direction. He has already attempted to sell two public hospitals--Coney Island and Elmhurst. In the current fiscal year he has cut public funding to the Health and Hospital Corporation (HHC), which runs the public hospitals, from $228 million to less than $60 million. The number of public hospital employees has been reduced from 47,000 in 1994 to 35,500 today, mostly through the offer of severance packages.

Due to loss of income from Medicaid and Medicare patients and competition from private hospitals, HHC faces a $259 million deficit for the next year, making it virtually certain that more cuts are coming.

The 600-job reduction is part of a previously planned cut of 905 public hospital jobs, originally scheduled for May 1. That deadline was postponed due to a deal the hospital unions made with Giuliani. The city administration agreed to relocate laid-off hospital workers in other city jobs. In exchange the unions dropped a lawsuit against the layoffs charging that city workers were being illegally replaced by welfare recipients. The lawsuit was a cynical maneuver on the part of the trade union bureaucracy. Indeed, the city unions had supported the city administration's plan to allow welfare recipients to work at city jobs. Most of the city unions supported Giuliani's successful reelection bid last year.

New York City's experiment with what it calls the Work Experience Program (WEP) is the biggest in the

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country, with over 200,000 people having participated so far. Meanwhile, the number of city jobs has declined. Giuliani pulled out the 1,000 WEP employees working in the hospital system as a tactical response to the unions' lawsuit, a move that deepened the crisis in the public hospitals.

The 600 hospital workers being laid off are all members of Local 420 of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), which covers 11,000 nurse's aides, dietary aides and maintenance workers.

The president of that local, James Butler, balked at the agreement calling off the lawsuit when he discovered that virtually all the laid-off hospital workers would be reassigned to city jobs outside his local's jurisdiction.

The World Socialist Web Site interviewed Ms. M. Alexander, a Harlem Hospital registered nurse for five years.

"Nobody knows what is going on. I have not received a pink slip yet, but I may be receiving one shortly. I work in the critical care department, which is itself in critical shape. We are severely understaffed, and there are rumors that there will be more layoffs in July. With only five years on the job I have very low seniority, and will very likely receive a pink slip.

"Due to the shortage of personnel, I am forced to work a lot of overtime. A lot of nurses are leaving, and finding jobs elsewhere because they are afraid of what is happening to this hospital. This place is in bad shape, and we need a lot of help, but instead they are eliminating employees. I don't know the future, but it seems to me that they just want to shut this hospital down.

"All the community wants is healthcare, and the workers want their jobs, but the city and the unions are playing a game of chess. They are engaged in a power struggle that does the worker no good. We are caught in the middle, and unless things change we are going to lose."

Victoria Latey, a Harlem Hospital worker with six years in housekeeping, said, "I don't like these layoffs. These people have families they have to support.

"We are overworked. We are doing the jobs of two to three people and things are getting worse. Maybe they are trying to get rid of this hospital. If they do, the people who live in this community will have no place to go. People will die. This area is one of the worst in terms of the number of people that suffer from asthma. It will take a lot more time for people to get to Lincoln, which is the closest city hospital.

"It is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain proper sanitary conditions for everyone in this hospital. Housekeeping is a very important part of the hospital's functioning. I clean the rooms of patients who have TB, AIDS and contagious diseases. In some cases we are required to wear protective masks. If housekeeping goes down, everyone in the hospital is at risk.

"All the employees here are very stressed about our job futures. I know coworkers who are losing their sleep and developing health problems because of what is going on. Speaking for myself, I don't want to lose my job, end up on welfare and come back here working for a welfare check."

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