

New York Mayor Giuliani announces crackdown on "quality of life" crimes

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New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani held a news conference on November 14 to announce a new crackdown on "quality of life" crimes.

The latest in a long series of such police campaigns since Giuliani took office nearly seven years ago, this one is distinguished by the city's plan to use a computer mapping system for precinct-by-precinct tracking of such offenses as panhandling, jaywalking, graffiti, public drinking and prostitution. Computerization has up until now been used only in connection with more serious crimes like robbery, rape and murder.

The mayor also listed homelessness among the offenses he was targeting—or, more precisely, the homeless. "You are not allowed to live on a street in a civilized city," Giuliani lectured the assembled media. "It is not good for you; it is not good for us." He did not bother to explain why in a "civilized city" there are as many as 100,000 people who have no place to live.

The November 14 news conference was something of a return to form for the Republican mayor, who has kept a relatively low public profile since he withdrew from the Senate race against Hillary Clinton some six months ago. Although he cited his battle against an early-stage case of prostate cancer as the reason for dropping out of the Senate campaign, there was little doubt that he had been placed on the defensive politically following the police killings of Amadou Diallo and later of Patrick Dorismond.

These two young men, one a West African immigrant and the other a native-born black, were the innocent victims of a policy of police targeting of black and Hispanic males in working class neighborhoods throughout the city. Their deaths sparked outrage and anger in the city and far beyond. The mayor refused to express sympathy for the families of the victims and in the case of Dorismond vilified the young man, releasing his juvenile police record to the press.

It appeared that some sections of big business, earlier

among the mayor's most enthusiastic supporters, were growing concerned that his provocative behavior would provoke an explosion among New York's working population and the poor. In the period immediately after he gave up his race for the Senate, Giuliani made a number of gestures, including one-on-one meetings with several Democratic Party officials and a few expressions of regret that he hadn't "reached out" more to the city's minority communities.

Apparently the fence-mending has now ended, at least as far as city workers and other sections of the population who are typically the objects of the mayor's wrath are concerned. Giuliani's characteristic style was very much on display in the past week. At the press conference he publicly scolded a reporter for his "pathetic, sophomoric silliness." At another meeting he told an angry math teacher that the man was acting "like a child." He got into screaming matches with teachers who complained that the city has yet to make a contract offer even though they are now working without an agreement. "You're all teachers!" he yelled. "You're supposed to be intellectuals rather than yellers and screamers. Think a little! Think a little!"

Perhaps Giuliani's sudden return to the attack has something to do with his personal political plans for the future. The mayor, who enraged Republicans by his refusal to back fellow Republican George Pataki when he first ran for governor in 1994, may be positioning himself for his own future run for governor or some other position. His right-wing New York City constituency combined with upstate and suburban Republicans could translate into a winning coalition in such a bid for office.

More significant in the timing of Giuliani's latest outbursts, however, is the current political crisis following the presidential election. The Republican mayor's demagoguery and bluster fits in with the bullying and appeal to extreme right-wing forces being made by the Bush

campaign and its supporters. It is also a means of diverting attention from the continued growth of social polarization in New York, where ordinary working people can no longer find affordable housing, the public schools and other public services are allowed to deteriorate, and workers must have two or more jobs in order to support their families.

New York Civil Liberties Union director Norman Siegel, a frequent critic of Giuliani, expressed skepticism about the latest initiative. “The real issue here is what tactics will the NYPD [New York Police Department] employ and whether these tactics will violate people's civil liberties, as they have done before,” said Siegel.

This is putting matters somewhat diplomatically. The police officers who killed Amadou Diallo were acquitted by an upstate jury less than a year ago, and this was followed almost immediately by the killing of Patrick Dorismond. Both of these murders were clearly less a matter of “rogue” cops than they were the direct product of the Giuliani administration's police-state tactics in working class and minority communities, including “stop-and-frisk” harassment based on nothing but the skin color of the individual. The precinct-by-precinct tracking of so-called nuisance crimes, setting informal quotas for police supervisors and rewarding those who make more arrests, is certain to lead to increased abuses and violence against the city's working population and the poor.

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