

New York mayoral race reflects growing social tensions

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New York's mayoral election, pitting Democrat Mark Green against Republican Michael Bloomberg, is highlighting the underlying class divisions and social crisis in the city.

The contest for a successor to Republican Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, who is barred from a third term in office under the city's term limits law, will be decided on November 6. The election campaign has been characterized by confusion and uncertainty within the city's political establishment. Matters have become even more tangled since the terror attack on the World Trade Center.

The primary election to select the Democratic and Republican candidates had been set for September 11, the day of the attack. That vote was called off and the primary was postponed for two weeks. It took more than a month for Green to finally secure the Democratic nomination, which he did in a runoff against Bronx Borough President Fernando Ferrer. As a result, the Democratic mayoral candidate was determined only a few weeks before election day.

Bloomberg is the billionaire founder and chairman of Bloomberg, L.P., the financial media giant. He has portrayed himself as a "moderate" in the Giuliani mold, and claimed that his business background and immense wealth insure that he will be able to create jobs and not have to answer to "special interests."

Bloomberg has thus far spent \$41 million of his own fortune on the campaign, a record for a mayoral race. He has blanketed the city with glossy advertising, nonstop television spots and radio ads. He has spent four times as much as his Democratic opponent. His attempt to purchase the election, while not unprecedented in US politics, has no parallel in New York City history.

Mark Green is a veteran Democratic Party

officeholder and politician. He has been the city's public advocate for the past eight years, and before that was the consumer affairs commissioner. A former associate of consumer and environmental activist Ralph Nader, Green has worked assiduously to follow the example of Bill Clinton in positioning himself as a "new Democrat," a friend of business who understands that any reformist ideas he may have once embraced are no longer relevant.

Before the World Trade Center attack, it was generally expected that the victor in the Democratic primary would win the November vote, despite the lack of enthusiasm among voters for any of the Democratic aspirants. With the unmistakable signs of the first recession in a decade on the horizon, sizable sections of the financial and corporate establishment, although appreciative of all that Giuliani has done to defend their interests, had apparently concluded in the weeks before September 11 that a tactical shift was in order. They were leaning toward a candidate who would continue with the current policies of enriching big business, but would also, unlike Giuliani, pretend to represent the more vulnerable sections of the working class.

September 11 introduced greater uncertainty into the political equation. It does not, at this point, appear to have changed the likely outcome of the vote, but it has altered the political agenda set by the ruling elite and its media spokesmen.

Under the mantra that "everything has changed," they have, without spelling out details, stressed a program of economic austerity, along with a renewed focus on building up police powers. The needs of the working class are to be shunted aside in the name of rebuilding the downtown financial district. The fight against terrorism has taken center stage, and demands for improvements in social conditions and public services

will have to wait. Green has emphatically embraced the new line, and been rewarded with endorsements from the *New York Times* and other spokesmen of ruling circles.

The collapse of the World Trade Center was a huge shock, but in very different ways, for the city's working population as well as its ruling elite. For workers it signified, in addition to the grief and suffering of the families of the victims, the disappearance of 100,000 jobs, amid indications that hundreds of thousands of others are at increased risk. For many small businessmen, the September 11 tragedy raised the prospect of bankruptcy.

For Wall Street and the rest of big business, profits, not jobs, are the main concern. They quickly concluded that the economic impact of the attack, on top of the downturn that had already begun, necessitated austerity policies and sweeping cutbacks in public services.

For several weeks, sections of the business establishment flirted with the idea of finding a way to give Giuliani a third term, or extending his current one. In the end, there was insufficient support in ruling circles for such a provocative and unprecedented abandonment of traditional political procedures and forms of rule. Instead the stress was placed on ensuring that, whether Bloomberg or Green became the next mayor, the needs of big business would be attended to.

Although the Democrat is favored at this point, his victory is not guaranteed. Giuliani has finally given Bloomberg his endorsement, but it is being interpreted as a "low-key" effort. Nevertheless, any number of developments could make the election extremely close. There is a strong possibility that Green's vote will be held down by a greater than expected abstention, especially among minority workers, many of whom cast ballots for Ferrer in the primary and the runoff. The Bronx borough president, a product of the county machine who never had the reputation of being on the "left" of the party—he cast himself as a pro-capital punishment Democrat a few years ago—this time around claimed to speak for "the other New York."

Whoever is elected next week is going to face a growing economic crisis and an increasingly restive working class. There is disquiet in the city over the bipartisan war drive following the September 11 attacks, as well as the threat of new acts of terrorism. Unemployment is soaring, the city's tourism and

related industries are suffering drastic declines, and there is unmistakable evidence that the slump that began before September 11 is deepening.

Giuliani has already frozen \$1 billion in city outlays, asking municipal agencies to look for spending cuts of 15 percent. Many of the thousands forced off the welfare rolls and into low-paying jobs over the past several years now face unemployment with no safety net. Workers who struggled during the Wall Street boom to maintain minimal living standards while a small layer at the top grew fabulously wealthy will be in no mood to accept new sacrifices in the months ahead.



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