

New York City mayor presents "doomsday" budget

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On April 15 New York City's billionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg unveiled plans to ruthlessly slash city services and jobs in order to fill a projected \$3.8 billion gap in the city's \$45 billion budget. The cuts were presented in two tiers. The first, cutting \$620 million in services and 4,800 jobs, was characterized as inevitable. The second, described as the "doomsday" budget, adds an additional \$1 billion to the service cuts along with 10,231 more layoffs. The "doomsday" plan was presented as what would be necessary in the event that the city fails to obtain all of the \$2.7 billion in state aid it is requesting, as well as \$600 million in concessions from the city's unions.

The cuts classed as inevitable will in themselves be devastating to already struggling working class and middle class families.

Hardest hit will be the public schools, losing \$178.7 million and 2,395 jobs. Classrooms will be directly affected, with the loss of 800 full-time aides, as well as 1001 part-time aides who monitor hallways, yards and bathrooms. Also on the chopping block are the jobs of 327 paraprofessionals who work with children experiencing poor attendance, low academic performance or behavioral problems, as well as 300 cafeteria workers. Seventy-seven substance abuse prevention counselors are being laid off, and \$6 million will be lopped off the budget for custodial services. Summer school will no longer be open to the many students who have passed the previous grade, but still need help.

To add insult to injury, a fund that gives teachers \$200 a year to reimburse them for supplies they purchase for their students is being eliminated. Union representatives estimate that teachers spend an average of \$500 a year out of their own pockets buying books and other basic supplies which the schools lack.

Also hard hit will be the four health and social welfare departments—Children's Services, Social Services, Homeless Services, and Health and Mental Hygiene—shedding a combined 776 jobs saving \$102.8 million. One third of the cleaning staff at homeless shelters

are to be laid off, leading to even more deplorable conditions, while 53 percent of the funds are to be cut from programs that help those placed in permanent housing from returning to the shelters.

The city will cut reimbursement rates another 5 percent for foster parents. Cuts of 15 percent previously implemented have already caused Brookwood Child Care, which oversees 400 foster home placements in the poor Crown Heights neighborhood of Brooklyn, to announce the termination of its well-regarded program. Another 600 beds in group foster homes will be eliminated under the Bloomberg budget.

Children will also be especially hard hit by the \$25.9 million in cuts to the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. Twelve of the 30 city-funded children's health clinics located in housing projects, each treating thousands of children a year, are slated for closure. Those deprived of care at the clinics will inevitably be shunted to the already overcrowded hospital emergency rooms. In addition, \$3.3 million will be cut from substance abuse and mental health programs.

The city will also see trash piling up on its streets, due to a reduction in pickups from twice to once a week in the boroughs of Queens and Staten Island, as well as from three times a week to twice weekly in parts of Brooklyn. Recycling pickups, now scheduled weekly, will be cut back to every two weeks. Four centers where residents can dump trash that is too big to be left for curbside pickup are to be closed. In all, 202 sanitation workers will be laid off, with 75 other jobs lost through attrition.

Cuts in the Parks and Recreation Department include eliminating over 1,000 seasonal workers who mow and water lawns, along with 155 playground attendants. All but emergency tree pruning will be eliminated, as will city subsidies to operate the Prospect Park and Queens Zoos, which are especially popular with schoolchildren. After Bloomberg's budget press conference, Parks Commissioner Adrian Benape acknowledged, "The conditions of the parks and playgrounds would certainly decline. There would be more litter, more graffiti, more nonworking drinking

fountains.”

The \$26.5 million cut from the Fire Department incorporates the closing of six fire houses and two engine companies announced the prior week, plus the additional cut of 33 fire marshals. Another 194 civilian jobs will also be eliminated.

In the Department of Transportation, pink slips will go out to 83 workers, mostly at city parking lots and at the Staten Island ferry, which would see its already crowded rush-hour service reduced by 25 percent. In addition, Bloomberg is seeking state approval to reduce or eliminate legally mandated city subsidies to the Metropolitan Transit Authority. Any reductions would put further pressure on subway and bus fares, which are already being raised effective May 4 from \$1.50 to \$2.00 a ride.

Arts groups, which have already been devastated in previous rounds of budget cuts, will see their funding reduced a further 24 to 35 percent. The Department of Aging will close two senior centers, as well as eliminate a program that provides 7,500 elderly citizens frozen meals for the weekend, when the centers are closed.

Draconian as they are, these cuts pale in comparison to the “doomsday” budget plan. Sweeping cuts under this proposal include the total elimination of after-school programs, the padlocking of all 31 outdoor swimming pools and 21 out of 27 recreation centers, and the shuttering of another 35 to 40 firehouses, along with a 20 percent reduction in manning of 54 engine companies.

Especially cruel would be the elimination of the city’s Emergency Food Assistance Program, which provided 14.7 million pounds of food to the city’s 1,200 food pantries and soup kitchens. As it is, 300,000 people had to be turned away hungry last year for want of food supplies, as demand has skyrocketed by 45 percent over the last two years while donations have dropped.

Another 1,426 school aides would go, along with 701 school nurses, with nurses’ office hours reduced to half days. Subsidized bus and subway fares for the elderly and the disabled would vanish, as would 21 outreach teams and eight drop-in centers for homeless people who do not use the city’s shelters.

Branch library hours, already less than five full days a week, would be cut another half day. The remaining 18 children’s health clinics would close, as would 15 more senior centers and outpatient pharmacies at all diagnostic and treatment centers. Another 846 uniformed sanitation workers would be laid off, while streetlights in city parks would be turned off at night.

Either of the two plans would have a drastic impact on millions of ordinary New Yorkers. But media baron Bloomberg and his wealthy cronies, who do not ride the

subways or send their children to public school, will not be affected—except insofar as the value of their investment portfolio rises from the improvement in the city’s “business climate.” As a city teacher told one reporter, “[Bloomberg] has a pool in his backyard, what does he care?”

A particularly hypocritical moment of the mayor’s press presentation came when he displayed a slide containing quotes of three unnamed union officials in opposition to contract concessions, followed by his expression of anger at the selfishness of those who do not see that “we are all going to have to make sacrifices together.”

Budget analysts project much greater deficits of \$5.4 billion and \$5.8 billion in fiscal years beginning in July 2005 and July 2006. Bloomberg indirectly alluded to the bleak future in store when, after promising better times when the economy turned around, he said there was no way of knowing whether that would happen in 2004, 2005 or even 2006.

What neither Bloomberg nor the mainstream media reports refer to, however, are the huge tax breaks given to big business throughout the 1990s, supposedly as an incentive to keep them from moving out of the city. A study by the Center for an Urban Future examined 80 such deals, costing the city \$2 billion. It found that within a few years of receiving these incentives, 39 companies had either carried out a major layoff or merged, with a similar job loss. One example is the \$28.5 million given in 1997 to the stock brokerage house Merrill Lynch, supposedly to retain 3,888 jobs and to create 2,000 more. While no large block of jobs was ever added, the firm cut 1,800 jobs in 2000 followed by another 1,000 in 2001.

Another giveaway was the elimination of the transfer tax on stock trades. Bloomberg has rejected out of hand calls to reinstate the tax, which advocates claim would raise \$800 million a year, pleading, improbably, that Wall Street brokers would leave the city and execute their trades elsewhere.



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