

Improved quality of life for whom?

The New York Times endorses Mayor Bloomberg for re-election

Clare Hurley
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The *New York Times* has given New York City's Republican mayor, Michael R. Bloomberg, a fulsome endorsement for reelection, crediting him with "pulling New York out of its hole."

Predicting that "he may be remembered as one of the greatest mayors in New York history" the *Times* says he has reduced the murder rate to its lowest level in 40 years, improved standardized test scores for 4th graders, humanely dealt with the homeless, found sensible new waste disposal solutions, and upgraded the city's public hospitals, all of this within an "atmosphere of racial harmony."

The only flaw in this protean figure, the *Times* concedes, is that Mayor Bloomberg essentially bought City Hall. He has secured his office, and intends to keep it, through massive campaign spending, outstripping his Democratic challenger, former Bronx Borough President Fernando Ferrer by more than ten to one.

Using his vast personal fortune of \$5 billion, Bloomberg is able to bypass campaign spending regulations that affect candidates who receive public money to finance their campaigns. He spent \$75 million in 2001, and has so far spent \$62 million on this race. His campaign spending has reached the amazing rate of \$34,000 an hour.

He has flooded the airwaves with \$20 million worth of ads, to the point that the cost of television advertising has been driven up, making it virtually impossible, the *Times* admits, for any other voice to be heard.

The *Times*, and the sector of wealthy, erstwhile liberals for whom it speaks may lament this unfortunately undemocratic aspect of Bloomberg's mayoralty, but they have no trouble accommodating themselves to it.

Indeed Bloomberg's flaw is really the flip side of his virtue. He runs the city admirably on behalf of Wall Street, and the super-wealthy elite, a constituency whose

desires he knows so intimately. He is, after all, one of them, ranked as the 85th richest person in the world and New York is the city with the highest concentration of billionaire—34 in 2005—and millionaire residents.

For this social layer—which includes the owners and editors of the *New York Times*—life has never been better; they can afford it. For vast majority of the city's population, however, it's a different story.

As a result of this concentration of great wealth, New York City boasts the highest cost of living in the United States and a growing stock of multi-million dollar housing. The average selling price for a Manhattan apartment recently topped \$1.3 million, with co-ops and brownstones in Mayor Bloomberg's home neighborhood on the Upper East Side selling for 20 to 30 times that. These dizzying prices at the top have made affordable housing for working people all the more scarce.

With luxury available for the privileged few, New York is notably the city with the greatest income polarity in the nation. The *Times* reported in September that "The top fifth of earners in Manhattan now make 52 times what the lowest fifth make—\$365,826 compared with \$7,047—which is roughly comparable to the income disparity in Namibia," according to its own analysis of 2000 census data. "Put another way, for every dollar made by households in the top fifth of Manhattan earners, households in the bottom fifth made about 2 cents."

The expansion of the economy following the 2001 recession, which has benefited Bloomberg and his fellow billionaires handsomely, has come at the expense of working poor residents, whose number has increased. Poverty in the city has risen to a rate of 21.8 percent, showing its fourth consecutive increase. It is nearly twice that of the nation as a whole.

Unemployment in New York is the worst among the

nation's top 25 cities. Half of the city's workers lack any pension, and about 10 percent of the workforce earns \$7 or less. Two thirds of New Yorkers can't afford to own a home, and the number of homeless has risen to 40,000, doubling since as 10 years ago.

The *New York Times* editorial happily tells us that thanks to Bloomberg the old idea that the city is ungovernable is as quaint as old-fashioned New York clichés—"like the idea that Broadway is populated by colorful Runyonesque guys and dolls, or that cab drivers are all wise guys from Brooklyn."

Yet the paper's editors avoid looking too closely at the methods that characterize this governance. Under Bloomberg, it is such rights as the freedom from random search and seizure, and freedom of speech and assembly that have become anachronisms. The idea that the city is the capital of free expression in America is being sent the way of the "Runyonesque guys and dolls."

Bloomberg displayed his contempt for these First and Fourth Amendment protections before an audience at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in 2004 when he declared that freedom of speech and assembly were not rights, but rather privileges, which if "abused" could be revoked.

Like President Bush, he has shown contempt for constitutional rights, using the "war on terror" as a pretext to increase police state measures, with helmeted, machinegun-toting police now a routine presence on the city's streets and in the public transit system.

The random searches of subway riders instituted in the wake of the London subway bombings in July 2005, has been challenged by the New York Civil Liberties Union as a violation of the Fourth Amendment. The intrusive, and quite likely illegal searches have had no proven effect on deterring terrorism. Sixty-six percent of New Yorkers think they are simply conducted to "make them feel safer."

In the final analysis, the immense buildup of police powers is the Bloomberg administration's response to the vast and mounting social inequality that characterizes the city.

Despite the fact that his administration has avoided such high-profile incidents of police brutality as the Amadou Diallo murder and the stationhouse torture of Abner Louima which brought racial tension to explosive levels under Giuliani, "the number of complaints to the Civilian Complaint Review Board during the Bloomberg years has actually been higher than it was under Giuliani. It continues to rise. In the first six months of 2004 the

number of complaints grew about 15 percent as compared to 2003...Young black men are still more likely to file complaints than any other group." (www.gothamgazette.com/article/20050228/200/1335)

In addition to repressive policing in the city's neighborhoods, the Bloomberg administration has systematically suppressed public expressions of dissent - preventing anti-war and other protest groups from assembling in public places. During the Republican National Convention in August 2004, the New York Police Department swept up close to 2,000 protestors along with innocent bystanders in mass arrests, holding them without charges on a dilapidated pier dubbed "Guantánamo on the Hudson."

And, more recently, police broke up a Union Square rally addressed by Cindy Sheehan, the mother of a soldier killed in Iraq who led a highly visible anti-war protest across the country against the Bush administration.

Far from the eminently pleasant city that the *Times* describes, for the majority of its residents, the Bloomberg administration has brought no improvement in living standards. The contracts negotiated in 2004 by DC37, the municipal workers union representing 120,000 city employees, granted a mere 5 percent increase over three years, two of them retroactive, which fails to meet even the rise in living costs. The average annual salary for these workers stands at \$30,000, several thousand short of what the Mayor is spending every hour to hold onto his office.

In endorsing Bloomberg, what the *New York Times* editorial board is celebrating is the advent in New York City of a near-classic form of plutocracy—a city run by the rich, for the rich—a state of affairs that is quite alright with the segment of wealthy New Yorkers for whom speaks.



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