

New York City demands rent from the homeless

A reporting team
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The New York City administration of Mayor Michael Bloomberg recently began charging rent to some of the 9,000 homeless families who are presently living in publicly run city shelters. About 2,000 families, including single mothers who have minimum wage or other low-paying jobs, are expected to be affected. They are being told that they must pay hundreds of dollars a month to stay in the shelters. The city claims that their homeless shelter “rent” will not exceed 50 percent of their income.

According to news reports over the past weekend, more than 500 families have already been informed of the new policy, which conjures up images of the poorhouses in Victorian England like the one where the family of Charles Dickens lived for some time during his youth.

The WSWS spoke to residents at the Clinton Family Inn in Manhattan, one of the shelters where families have been told to pay rent or get out.

Yvette, now living at the Clinton Family Inn, had been forced to leave a shelter in Harlem after they demanded back rent. “I had been there for three months and I had to go, due to the fact that they were judging my finances by my gross income. They told me to pay \$542 a month, but that comes out of \$700 that I keep after I pay \$600 for childcare.” Yvette had been sent to PATH (Projects for Assistance in Transition from Homelessness), which referred her to the Clinton shelter. She said that she didn’t know what she would do if the Clinton Family Inn made her pay rent.

Selma Ramsey also spoke to the WSWS: “I think it’s bizarre [to charge the homeless rent]. Being here is being down and out. You don’t have much. I can barely afford food.” Ms. Ramsey also spoke of her frustration over her inability to find any help for her

efforts to get out of the shelter system. “For four years I’ve applied for housing...and nothing.” Speaking of the rich and the city government, she said, “They don’t care about the hardships of people. Quite frankly, they just don’t care.”

Steven Banks of the Legal Aid Society criticized the new policy, calling it “poorly conceived, but even more alarmingly...poorly executed.” Banks pointed out that families were given no explanation of how the rent was calculated. Many families have been callously notified through warnings placed under their doors. “We’ve already had a case of a survivor of domestic violence who was actually locked out of her room,” Banks told the *New York Times*. One mother of a teenage son reported that the authorities were demanding \$1,099 a month in rent out of her \$1,700 income as a security guard, which clearly exceeds even the extraordinary 50 percent cap.

The city is basing its punitive new policy on a 1997 New York state law that was not enforced until last week. Apparently a 2007 state audit forced the city to pay back \$2.4 million in state housing aid because it had not collected rent money from the homeless. The change in policy stems from that action.

The Bloomberg administration defended the new rules. Robert V. Hess, the city’s commissioner of homeless services, said, “I think it’s hard to argue that families that can contribute to their shelter cost shouldn’t.” Bloomberg himself, the eighth richest man in the United States, with a fortune estimated at \$8 billion and a five-story townhouse off Fifth Ave. on the Upper East Side as well as residences in Bermuda, London, Vail, Westchester County and Park Ave., told the media with a straight face, “Everybody else is doing it, and we’re told we have to do it, so we’re going to do it.”

This ruthless attack on the homeless is only the latest in a series of Bloomberg policies designed to punish the poor. In late 2004, for instance, the city adopted the policy of denying federal housing vouchers to the homeless. These vouchers had allowed the working poor to pay their landlords no more than 30 percent of their income in rent, with the balance being paid by the federal government. Bloomberg decided that some families were entering the shelter system in order to obtain the vouchers. The authorities claimed that stopping the voucher supply would lead to a decrease in applications for emergency shelter.

Exactly the opposite happened. The number has steadily increased in the last four years. According to a report issued by the Coalition for the Homeless a few weeks ago, the number of new families entering the system in 2008 is greater than in any year since the 1980s. The 9,400 families currently in shelters represent more than 28,000 people, including 16,000 children.

The report makes clear that the sharp increase in the number of homeless is bound up with the economic crisis and growing unemployment, which has jumped by nearly four percent in the last year alone.

Just since last June, the number of homeless staying in city shelters has risen by 9 percent, and the number of families has risen by 12 percent. In 2008 nearly 110,000 New Yorkers slept in the shelters some time during the year—a 32 percent increase compared to six years ago.

The coalition further reports, “Over the past decade, the number of homeless families sleeping in New York City shelters and welfare hotels has nearly doubled. The average stay for homeless families in the municipal shelter system is currently 10 months.”

In addition to rising joblessness, housing cost, among the steepest in the US, is a major contributor to homelessness. Affordable apartments are fast disappearing. According to the report, between 2005 and 2008, the city lost nearly 55,000 apartments with rents below \$800/month and 80,000 more renting for less than \$1,000.

Patrick Markee, a spokesman for the Coalition for the Homeless, called the new policy of demanding rent from the homeless “impractical.”

“It’s going to make families stay in shelters longer because they’ll have fewer financial resources,” said

Markee.

As the Coalition’s own report demonstrates, however, Bloomberg’s policy is no aberration. It is part and parcel of the decades-long demonization of the poor. The 1997 state law was passed with the aid of the Democrats and on the heels of the Clinton Administration’s so-called welfare reform legislation that set limits on public assistance and forced many into minimum wage dead-end jobs. During this same period, “workfare” began forcing those on welfare to “earn” their pitiful stipend through minimum wage labor replacing municipal workers in such agencies as parks and public transit.

All of these measures were designed to divide the working class while the ruling elite conducted a one-sided class war that methodically impoverished broad layers of the population, while further enriching the wealthiest one percent.

The billionaire mayor, so willing to comply with this state-mandated attack on the poorest sections of the working class, showed no similar willingness to comply when the legislature recently considered raising taxes on the wealthiest sections of the population to help close the record budget deficit. “We love the rich people,” said Bloomberg, explaining that his fellow billionaires and multi-millionaires would pick up and leave the city if they were asked to pay anything more in taxes.

Bloomberg and the Democratic state administration in Albany have sought to deal with their growing budget gaps by cutting services, laying off workers, proposing to increase the city’s sales tax and imposing hikes on transit fares and various fees. All of these regressive measures are designed to place the weight of the crisis created by Wall Street’s financial speculation and criminality squarely on the backs of working people. With the move to collect rent from the homeless, this general policy has reached an unprecedented level of callousness and brutality.



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