

New York Mayor Bloomberg defends the Obamas' night on the town

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Mayor Bloomberg's defense of the Obamas' Saturday night on the town has exposed once again the class divide in America. This social chasm is nowhere starker than in New York, where billionaires and multimillionaires like Bloomberg live in a very different world than that of the poor and working families struggling to keep their heads above water.

Barack and Michelle Obama's trip from Washington to New York Saturday for a dinner and a Broadway show drew fire from the Republican Party and Rupert Murdoch's Fox News and *New York Post* over the cost of the outing, which was paid for with public funds. The White House has refused to provide an estimate of the total amount spent on the Obamas' "date," but with the use of an Air Force plane and the small army of Secret Service agents and police deployed to escort them, it certainly ran into tens—if not hundreds—of thousands of dollars.

The Republican National Committee issued a hypocritical statement on the Obamas' New York outing, criticizing them for "jetting off" to New York "at taxpayer expense" as "GM is preparing to file bankruptcy and families across America continue to pay their bills."

Of course these same Republicans routinely dismissed complaints about George W. Bush's frequent trips to his ranch in Texas. As for their supposed concern for "families across America" struggling to pay bills, the Republican Party is a full partner in the Obama administration's policy of bailing out Wall Street by making working people pay for the economic crisis. Its opposition has focused on the limited stimulus funding provided as window dressing for the bailout.

At a press conference in Queens Monday, Bloomberg

dismissed the Republican criticism, declaring it "so off base" that it did not merit a reply.

He gave one anyway, arguing that public funding for the Obamas' date was justified in part, "Because the president doesn't get paid that much—he's on a budget too."

The president's annual salary amounts to \$400,000—approximately eight times the median household income in New York City. On top of that, he receives free housing, an expense account worth \$50,000, and an entertainment budget of \$19,000.

At a second news conference Monday, Bloomberg was asked why he thought over \$400,000 in income was not "that much."

He responded, "This president works very hard and he's not going to get rich." The mayor added that "Obama is worth a lot more than we pay him."

Last year, the Obamas reported taking in \$2,656,902. Only the top 1 percent of American households can approach such an income. Yet for Bloomberg, the richest man in New York City and the 17th richest in the world, with an estimated worth of \$16 billion, this is a pittance, and the Obamas merit his sympathy for receiving so little in compensation for their work.

Bloomberg represents not just himself, but an entire social layer of parasites on Wall Street who have regularly awarded themselves tens of millions of dollars in Christmas bonuses, even as their crooked and often criminal forms of financial speculation have dragged the rest of the economy over the cliff.

The billionaire mayor has never hidden his sympathy for this social layer, of which he himself is a product. "We love the rich," he declared recently, while campaigning against a so-called "millionaires' tax" that would impose a negligible increase on the wealthiest New Yorkers in order to close a massive

state budget deficit. Such a tax, Bloomberg warned, would send New York's richest fleeing their Fifth Avenue penthouses and Upper East Side townhouses for some low-tax haven.

As one moves down the social ladder, however, such sympathy quickly evaporates. One need only recall the New York City transit strike of 2005, when workers whose starting pay is less than a tenth of Obama's salary, walked out to oppose the imposition of concessions that would drag them down further. Bloomberg denounced them as overpaid, "selfish," and "thugs."

In response to the present crisis confronting the city, Bloomberg has sought to place the full burden on working people, ordering nearly 4,000 municipal jobs cut, slashing funds for vital social programs and raising the sales tax. He ruled out any additional tax on New York City's billionaires and multimillionaires, claiming, "People that have more money buy a lot more things, and they spend more of it."

As for those facing the greatest social odds, New York City's tens of thousands of homeless, the Bloomberg administration has exhibited a ruthlessness that would have shocked Charles Dickens. It has recently initiated a policy of charging rent from homeless families sleeping in city shelters. Most of these families are headed by single mothers working part-time and minimum wage jobs, which provide insufficient income to afford an apartment in this, one of the most expensive cities in the country. Bloomberg, who owns six luxury homes in New York, London, Bermuda and Vail, Colorado, has demanded that they fork over half of their pay or face being thrown into the street.

When Bloomberg states that "Obama is worth a lot more than we pay him," the "we" he is speaking for is not the nation as a whole, but the financial aristocracy that rules New York City and the entire country. Wall Street sees Obama as its president, and for good reason. The multi-trillion-dollar bailout that his administration has engineered for the biggest banks and finance houses is bringing Wall Street compensation back up to levels that meet or exceed the heights reached before the onset of the financial crisis. He has placed his administration's entire economic policy in the hands of Wall Street errand boys like Timothy Geithner.

Even more importantly, this social layer hopes that

Obama, who as the first African-American president has been promoted as the embodiment of an ill-defined "change," can stave off social tensions fueled by rapidly rising unemployment and falling living standards. But the staggering levels of inequality that exist in New York City—and indeed around the country—are unsustainable. Combined with the arrogance and indifference of the likes of Bloomberg—who resemble nothing so much as the aristocracy of pre-revolutionary France—they make a social explosion inevitable.



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