

Democrats prepare to select a New York mayoral candidate

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Major party candidates for the November 5 mayoral election in New York City are to be chosen in party primaries scheduled for September 10. If no candidate receives at least 40 percent of the primary vote a runoff between the two with the most votes will take place October 1.

Whatever the outcome of the primaries, this year will mark the end of Michael Bloomberg's 12 years in office. After engineering the overturn of term limits legislation in order to run for and narrowly win a third term in 2009, Bloomberg leaves office widely despised among workers throughout the city. The billionaire, now listed as the seventh wealthiest individual in the US, has a net worth of \$27 billion. This compares to \$5 billion before he first ran for mayor in 2001. Bloomberg's own expanding fortune perfectly reflects the enormous polarization and growing inequality that has characterized his three terms as mayor.

For the ruling rich in New York—the 46,000 individuals who as of the last tax filings reported income of at least \$1 million per year—along with their upper middle class retainers and associates, life has never been better. For the vast majority, however, the millions of workers and the unemployed, the working poor, students and youth, the reality is very different.

Social inequality is a byword for New York City. A new high-rise residential boom is taking place in midtown and lower Manhattan, with massive towers sprouting literally from one week to the next. Billionaires snap up penthouse properties for tens of millions of dollars, while the homeless shelter population continues to set new records.

Hospitals in Brooklyn, supposedly non-profit institutions, are shutting their doors because they are losing money, not because their services are no longer needed. The public school system is being systematically attacked, as spending is cut, standardized testing is used to demonize teachers, and charter schools siphon off students and resources and leave behind a self-fulfilling prophecy of “failing schools.”

Nearly half of the city's population is characterized as poor or “near-poor,” as measured by the government's own

pathetic yardstick of 150 percent of the poverty income threshold. Beyond the precincts of the ultra-rich and a handful of better-off neighborhoods in Brooklyn and Queens, there is a city that is enraged by the arrogance of Bloomberg and equally disgusted with the Democrats. In the 2009 mayoral election, the turnout was a scandalous 29 percent of registered voters. The September primaries are not expected to attract more than 15 percent, at most.

The candidates to succeed Bloomberg include seven Democrats and three Republicans. While the media have made much of the likelihood that the Democrats may win a New York City mayoral election for the first time since 1989, there are no fundamental differences between any of the candidates. The attacks on jobs, pensions, health care and other social gains of the working class will continue whoever wins the mayoral election in November, despite the tactical and rhetorical distinctions between them.

Joseph Lhota, a former top official in the administration of Rudolph Giuliani in the 1990s and more recently the chairman of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, is expected to win the Republican nomination. He will be the underdog in the general election, however, lacking the prominence and campaigning flair of Giuliani or the vast fortune of Bloomberg, who spent hundreds of millions of dollars, little more than pocket change for him, to win his three terms as mayor.

The main Democratic candidates include Christine Quinn, the current speaker of the City Council; Bill de Blasio, currently the public advocate; William Thompson, a former comptroller and also president of the city's Board of Education; John Liu, the current comptroller; and Anthony Weiner, the former congressman who was forced to resign two years ago in a “sexting” scandal.

While all of these candidates have made half-hearted and fraudulent efforts to tap the disgust with Bloomberg and the social conditions in New York, they have lengthy records that demonstrate their real class loyalties. Most of them have held high office while Bloomberg was mayor. They have presided over the social polarization that has come to define

New York in recent decades and has lately reached unheard of proportions. Quinn, de Blasio and Thompson are given the best chances to make the likely runoff.

Quinn worked closely and harmoniously with Bloomberg for the better part of a decade. Until fairly recently she gave support to the hated stop-and-frisk policies of the mayor and his police commissioner Raymond Kelly, recently ruled unconstitutional by a federal judge. Quinn also played a key role in obtaining City Council approval for the overturning of term limits in 2009.

The City Council speaker has received the endorsement of all three major newspapers, from the “liberal” *New York Times* to Rupert Murdoch’s *Post*. She is clearly favored by those sections of the financial and political establishment who have prized the incumbent mayor for what they consider his able defense of the interests of the super-rich. Quinn has also been advertised as an icon of identity politics, a candidate who would become both the city’s first female and first gay mayor.

After leading in the polls for some months and despite her media endorsements, however, Quinn has apparently paid a price for her association with Bloomberg. She has been overtaken in the latest surveys by Public Advocate de Blasio. Sensing the depth of anger in the city, de Blasio has staked out a position on the “left” of the Democratic Party spectrum. He has suddenly discovered that New York is a “tale of two cities,” and denounces various policies associated with Bloomberg, including inequality, the lack of affordable housing and attacks on the public schools.

De Blasio says little on what he would do about these conditions, however. His record shows that he is a loyal servant of big business. He served in the second Clinton administration in the 1990s, the same one that dismantled welfare programs for the poor. He then went on to the position of campaign manager for Hillary Clinton in her successful campaign for Senator from New York state in 2000.

As for Thompson, the only African-American candidate in the race, he came within several percentage points of unseating Bloomberg in 2009, despite having run what was universally seen as a lackluster campaign. Thompson is a product of old-fashioned machine politics. His father, now 88 years old, was a local and state officeholder and later a judge. Thompson’s stance on the notorious stop-and-frisk policy has been muted in comparison to some of the other candidates.

The current campaign shows how the two-party system is used by the ruling class to keep the majority of the population politically disenfranchised. Tactical maneuvers and disputes between the candidates and the parties are employed to frame the issues and ensure that the only real

debate that takes place is over how best to defend the capitalist status quo.

A crucial role in this disenfranchisement is played, as in the past, by the trade unions. The main city unions have split their endorsements in the Democratic primary, with the teachers and transit workers officials backing Thompson, the hospital workers endorsing de Blasio and the AFSCME city employees giving their support to Liu. The unions are unanimous, however, in their determination to keep the working class chained to the Democratic representatives of Wall Street. As the assaults on pensions, jobs, schools and health care multiply, the bureaucrats tighten their alliance with the Democrats.

When 9,000 school bus workers went on strike against the destruction of job security and thousands of their jobs last winter, the unions showed exactly what the alliance with the Democrats meant. Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1181 closed down the strike after one month, with the complete support of all the major unions, whose leaders feared that the bus workers struggle would spread to their own members, who have been working for between two and four years without contracts.

One of the main arguments made by the Democrats, with the unions quietly backing them behind the scenes, is that only a Democratic “friend of labor” can negotiate deals for new contracts that make city employees pay for the huge budget deficit without at the same time triggering massive strikes and a social explosion.

Of course the huge fortunes of Bloomberg and the rest of the corporate chieftains and hedge fund managers could deal with the city’s deficit many times over. The real crisis in New York, which could erupt at any moment with the puncturing of the current stock market and luxury housing bubbles, is an even more explosive reflection of the crisis that is devastating cities around the country. Workers will face inevitable battles against the next mayor of New York, and the urgent task is that of preparing a leadership and program for this political fight.



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