

Democrat postures as populist to win New York City mayoral primary

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Bill de Blasio, New York City's current Public Advocate, was the front-runner by a wide margin in Tuesday's Democratic Party primary to select its candidate for mayor in November's election to succeed Michael Bloomberg. While De Blasio was credited with 40.2 percent of the vote in unofficial returns, it will be several days before final results show whether he achieved the 40 percent needed to avoid a runoff election on October 1 against William Thompson, who came in second in the voting.

City Council president Christine Quinn, despite endorsements by the *New York Times*, *Daily News* and *New York Post*, finished a poor third with only 15 percent of the total.

About 650,000 registered Democrats voted, barely 20 percent of those eligible, and little more than 10 percent of the voting-age population in the city. On the Republican side the number of voters was far smaller, barely 50,000. Joseph Lhota, former head of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority and a top official under Rudolph Giuliani in the 1990s, secured the Republican nomination by a fairly narrow margin against billionaire grocery chain owner John Catsimatidis.

The two-party system, heavily funded by the wealthy and shaped by the big-business media, is designed and guaranteed to produce candidates who represent and defend the profit system. Nevertheless this year's primary results, coming after three consecutive terms for billionaire Bloomberg, are not without significance.

Five years after the spectacular financial collapse ushered in the deepest US and global slump since the 1930s, the financial and cultural capital of the US is a social powder keg. It is one of the most unequal cities in the world, and the persistent unemployment, growing poverty and decline of social conditions have leading

capitalist pundits and spokesmen worried about political and social stability.

In the absence of any genuine alternative, de Blasio made a partly successful attempt to tap the anger building up among millions of working people. With his campaign theme depicting New York as a "tale of two cities," he staked out a cynical position as the most liberal of the Democrats, calling for small tax increases on the wealthy to fund pre-kindergarten education and denouncing Bloomberg's policies, including the hated "stop-and-frisk" police harassment of working class and minority youth.

No sooner did de Blasio become known for his attacks on Bloomberg than he shot into the lead in pre-election surveys, after polling a distant fourth. This was only a pale and distorted reflection of the pent-up anger in the working class.

De Blasio was aided by the perceived contrast between him and the current mayor, whose recent comments have called to mind the sound bites of billionaire real estate know-nothing Donald Trump. Leaving office after 12 years, Bloomberg has allowed his pose of tolerant chief executive to slip and more openly revealed his contempt for the vast majority of the city's population.

In a lengthy interview with *New York* magazine, Bloomberg called the de Blasio campaign "racist" for a television ad highlighting his biracial family, a comment so provocative that his interviewer expressed amazement. Bloomberg repeatedly bragged about his "golfing buddies" who just "happen to" run the city's economy. Sounding a bit like the last Russian Tsar focused on the love his subjects felt for him, the mayor pointed with pride to the fact that truck drivers would occasionally shout words of encouragement to him on the street.

The next mayor, whether Democrat or Republican, will escalate the attacks on workers' living standards and social conditions, even if they imposed them with somewhat more "empathetic" language than that used by Bloomberg.

De Blasio hardly needs to be reminded of this. The *New York Times* reported—waiting until the day after the voting to do so—that the likely Democratic candidate has already assured such figures as Rob Speyer, the head of the Real Estate Board of New York, and Steven Rattner, who spearheaded the Obama administration's wage-cutting attacks on auto workers, that he would be a reliable defender of the "1 percent." Speyer and Rattner represent that influential section of the corporate establishment in New York that is equally close to both the Obama White House and to Bloomberg.

A recent article on the *Business Insider* website spelled out just how much de Blasio's campaign rhetoric is worth. The candidate has called for raising the city's top income tax rate from 3.876 percent to 4.41 percent on incomes over \$500,000. First, such a change must be approved by the state, and Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo would likely oppose it, not to mention the Republicans who control the New York State Senate. Second, even if it did become law, a typical family with an annual income of \$700,000 would pay an additional \$897, or 0.13% of their income, in taxes. This is de Blasio's plan to "tax the rich"!

While the trade union bureaucracy split their endorsements, the major hospital workers union, Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1199, endorsed de Blasio. After his primary victory, 1199 President George Gresham praised de Blasio as the only "authentic progressive leader talking about inequality" and pledged that the union would go all out to elect him.

Having been marginalized under the Bloomberg administration, the trade union apparatus is anxious to elect a Democratic mayor, who, they anticipate would more likely utilize their services in the further destruction of the jobs and living standards of teachers, transit, hospital and other municipal workers.

Meanwhile, Republican candidate Lhota warned in his victory speech on primary election night that De Blasio's rhetoric was "nothing more than class

warfare." "It's the kind of thinking that brought our city to the brink of bankruptcy and rampant civic decay," he added.

Although Republicans are outnumbered by Democrats by a 6-1 margin in New York, Lhota hopes to repeat what Bloomberg and Rudolph Giuliani did before him, winning enough support from the billionaires to intimidate the Democratic politicians, mobilize upper middle-class voters and discourage enough workers to turn the election into a race that is close enough for him to win.

Lhota and his backers are not worried about "class warfare" from the Democrats. Their warning, addressed to the ruling elite, is that de Blasio is playing with fire, that workers may take the promise of change seriously. The finance chairman of Lhota's campaign, James Tisch of the Loews Corporation, said he had heard from many wealthy Democrats who were worried about any hint of populism in the mayoral race.

The Democrat, meanwhile, will continue to warn that a change in political tactics is required lest a social explosion take place. De Blasio, like all his fellow Democrats, will work day and night to channel the growing discontent back into support for the same party that is leading the attacks on the working class through the Obama administration.



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