

The Democratic victory in New York and the crisis of liberalism

Bill Van Auken
7 November 2013

Tuesday's off-year election saw the Democratic Party win the mayoral election in New York City for the first time in nearly a quarter of a century, following the two-term administration of the Republican former prosecutor and right-wing demagogue Rudy Giuliani and the three-term rule of billionaire Michael Bloomberg.

The 50-point lead for Democrat Bill de Blasio over Republican Joe Lhota no doubt provided a pale and distorted reflection of the immense popular anger over the growth of social inequality in the city, which boasts the largest concentration of billionaires on the planet, while fully one-fifth of the population barely survives on \$9,000 or less a year.

How pale and distorted a reflection of America's capitalist two-party system provides of such sentiments can be seen in the record low turnout at the polls. Just 24 percent of registered voters cast ballots in the election, meaning that de Blasio's "landslide," breathlessly proclaimed by the media, consisted of the votes of just 16 percent of those registered and a considerably slimmer margin when compared with the city's entire voting age population.

While many media pundits have attributed this mass boycott to pre-election polls predicting an overwhelming margin of victory for the Democratic candidate, there is something more fundamental at work.

Millions of working people in New York City, as throughout the US, are bitterly disillusioned with, if not actively hostile toward, both major political parties. This is the result in large measure of the experience of nearly five years of the Obama administration, which came into office with promises of "hope" and "change you can believe in."

Instead, at home the administration executed the

multi-trillion-dollar bailout of Wall Street together with deepening unemployment and austerity for the working class. The jobless Obama "recovery" has delivered 93 percent of income growth to the top one percent, while the vast majority has suffered a continuing decline in living standards. Meanwhile, it has vastly escalated domestic and worldwide spying, while conducting criminal operations abroad from drone assassinations to wars of aggression in Libya and Syria.

While de Blasio sought to tap into resentments over social inequality, the overriding fact of American social life, those who are suffering its effects had every reason to mistrust his "tale of two cities" rhetoric.

De Blasio is a Democratic Party hack, a functionary in the Clinton administration who went on to manage the successful campaign of Hillary Clinton for the US Senate in New York and to seek several minor city offices as rungs in the ladder of his political career.

No sooner than he had won the Democratic primary in September, de Blasio executed a familiar pivot, pitching his candidacy now not to the working class and poor of New York, but to the financial predators of Wall Street. In the end he took in more than three times as much in campaign cash and enjoyed considerably more support from the big banks and finance houses than Lhota, a former investment banker who campaigned against de Blasio's call for an insignificant rise in city taxes on New York's richest. De Blasio hobnobbed with and got money from the executives of Goldman Sachs and the top hedge funds as well as others who deserve to be in prison for their actions that provoked the financial meltdown of 2008.

Within this socioeconomic milieu, there were calculations that putting a Democrat who postures as a populist into Gracie Mansion would have definite political uses, particularly under conditions in which

the city is projecting a \$2 billion budget deficit, even as it faces contract negotiations with unions representing some 300,000 municipal workers, most of whom have been without new agreements for more than four years. De Blasio, no doubt the thinking went, would be better positioned to pitch “equal sacrifice” than Lhota.

As these reactionary and cynical political machinations become ever more exposed before the population, one political layer feels an urgent need to breathe new life into rapidly disintegrating illusions in the Democratic Party and liberalism. Thus, pseudo-left organizations that orbit the Democratic Party and the trade union apparatus dedicated themselves during this year’s election to lending a phony left gloss to de Blasio and the bourgeois electoral process as a whole.

In the case of the New York mayoral election, the International Socialist Organization celebrated de Blasio’s victory in the Democratic mayoral primary, proclaiming him “a dramatic improvement from past Democratic mayoral candidates.” Vastly exaggerating popular illusions in de Blasio, the ISO counseled its own members and other pseudo-left elements that “our role should not be to dash these hopes (as if we could) but to try to channel them into a grassroots movement for change.” Instead of campaigning for de Blasio, it urged “activists” to “demand that *he* campaign for us.”

Everything here is designed to funnel discontent back into the safe channel of Democratic Party politics and head off a break with the capitalist two-party system by the working class.

Similarly, in Minneapolis and Seattle, the Socialist Alternative group ran candidates for City Council based on minimal municipal reform programs and appeals to both sections of the Democratic Party establishment and the trade union bureaucracy.

These efforts are tailored at obscuring the essential reality of political life in the United States: that the domination of society and monopolization of wealth by a tiny oligarchy precludes any genuine democracy. The politics of the ruling establishment as a whole, including its so-called liberal representatives, are dedicated to defending the dominance of this social layer and suppressing any genuine opposition from below. The pseudo-left, with its continuous promotion of various forms of identity politics, is dedicated to obscuring the fundamental conflict between the working class and this ruling layer. Reflecting the

social interests of a privileged layer of the middle class, it is determined to divert and quash this struggle.

As with Obama in 2008, events will soon expose the class content of de Blasio’s politics. The yawning social divide in New York City, and throughout the country, is not sustainable. It must give rise to an eruption of class struggle. When that happens the true character of the two big business parties and all of its politicians—as well their petty-bourgeois pseudo-left adjuncts—will become clear to millions.

The decisive questions for this coming struggle are the development of an independent political movement of the working class in opposition to capitalism and the building of a revolutionary leadership to arm this movement with a conscious socialist and revolutionary program. This means building the Socialist Equality Party.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact