New York's Talking Transition: A phony forum of change

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29 November 2013

The two-week-long "civic engagement" project in New York dubbed Talking Transition closed shop this past Saturday. The multi-million-dollar effort, funded by George Soros's Open Society Foundations, the Ford and Rockefeller Brothers foundations, and seven other similar agencies, was billed as a platform for ordinary New Yorkers to influence mayor-elect Bill de Blasio's transition to office on January 1.

At the center of the project was a 15,000-square-foot temporary structure, swanky as far as tents go, featuring a large conference space, dozens of survey-compiling tablet computers, a video booth for recording messages to the new mayor, and an abundance of suggestion stickers for posting throughout the lobby. The transparent covering of the tent was meant to symbolize an open process of governance. Dozens of staff buzzed around inside, encouraging visitors to jot down their ideas and directing them to the free refreshments on offer. Talking Transition teams also took to the road, asking New Yorkers to tap onto iPads their answers to multiple-choice questions as to what issues were most important to them.

The events schedule was crammed with panel discussions hosted by advocacy groups and community organizations. Open Society Foundations provided small grants to fund their participation, on the condition that they demonstrate an ability to draw a few hundred supporters to attend. Each organization angled to influence—or secure positions within—the new de Blasio administration, hosting panels such as "The Community Organization in Communities of Color," "Labor Standing up for Labor," and "Education for a 21st Century Economy."

In short, large amounts of money were invested by billionaire "philanthropists" to convince New Yorkers that the replacement of their fellow billionaire, Mayor Michael Bloomberg, with the Democratic Party hack de Blasio represents a momentous change in the city's political life.

Christopher Stone, the president of Open Society Foundations, touched on the motivation behind the initiative in an interview with *New York* magazine. "This particular transition, after twenty years without a Democratic mayor, in a city that's often described as a Democratic city, is a really testing moment, not just for an individual mayor but for the party," he said. "There are a lot of constituencies that feel they haven't had the reception they might have wanted from the Bloomberg administration or the Giuliani administration. They are hoping that they will have it here."

Open Society Foundations is the philanthropic vehicle of well-known liberal hedge fund billionaire and investor George Soros. Its accomplishments include working with the CIA and USAID to engineer the so-called "color revolutions" in the former Soviet republics of Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan during the early 2000s.

Couched in the language of democracy and openness, these "revolutions" were orchestrated to open up the economies of these countries to US and Western European capital and shift their political alignment from Moscow to the West. Open Society Foundations has remained active, both abroad and in the US, primarily advocating measures aimed at stabilizing capitalism in the midst of escalating inequality and polarization.

The mayoral election in New York reflected the deepening political crisis in the US. Less than 25 percent of registered voters cast ballots for mayor in November, an historic low for the city. This mass abstention was primarily the product of a lack of confidence in either party to address the basic needs of the population. De Blasio's rhetoric aside, the reality of unprecedented and growing social inequality reinforced the widespread understanding that politicians of both parties represent the tiny ruling elite.

New York City is home to 8,000 individuals whose

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assets exceed $30 million, surrounded by 1.7 million living below the official poverty line, with at least an equal number among the "near poor." It's a city where over 1.1 million workers labor for less than $13 an hour, and 62 billionaires control a combined $280 billion. Under these conditions, the decision by Open Society Foundations, the Ford Foundation, Rockefeller Brothers Fund and others elements of the ruling establishment to launch the Talking Transition initiative reflects a fear within ruling circles that such levels of inequality are untenable and must lead sooner rather than later to a social explosion.

By soliciting suggestions from residents and providing a forum for discussion, this professional operation attempted to construct the illusion that the "voice of the people" would be heard by the new mayor, that a political transformation is already underway.

While not directly involved in Talking Transition, mayor-elect de Blasio fully embraced the event and its goals. "I think a lot of times the best solutions are grass roots solutions," he said during a visit to the tent. "Some of the power of Talking Transition is that it opens the gates of city government, lets everyone come in with their ideas, their insights. And yeah, it will be a lot of data, but I think we're going to find some very powerful ideas in it."

It is not the insights and ideas of the working class that de Blasio is looking for. Talking Transition provided a platform for the incoming mayor to mobilize a constituency of left-liberals. The *Nation* magazine, typifying this layer, hailed the event as a "great participatory policy making conference." The *Nation* 's editor, Katrina vanden Heuvel, seconded that notion with an appearance at the Talking Transition tent.

Alongside the *Nation* and other liberal circles are such pseudo-left groups as the International Socialist Organization, which hailed de Blasio as "a Democratic candidate [who] actually did something to earn a union endorsement." The ISO and similar organizations advance the perspective of pressuring de Blasio and other Democrats.

Various "lefts" and union bureaucrats have already won positions of influence in the incoming administration. De Blasio, during his tour of the tent, took the opportunity to name his 60-member transition team, which includes the president of the Ford Foundation as well as others involved in funding Talking Transition. The team also assembles long-time New York City and Washington, DC political operatives who worked alongside de Blasio in the Dinkins and Clinton administrations.

Both Talking Transition and de Blasio's team draw heavily on the support of the union bureaucracy in New York. George Gresham, president of 1199 SEIU, the largest union in New York City, with 200,000 health care workers, is playing a prominent role on de Blasio's transition team. Local 1199 SEIU announced it is following up on Talking Transition with a mass ad campaign aimed at promoting illusions in de Blasio.

Other unions also took an active role in the events of the past two weeks. Building services union SEIU Local 32BJ co-hosted events. Bureaucrats from the New York City Central Labor Council and Communication Workers of America, among others, participated in panel discussions.

Three hundred thousand municipal employees in New York have been working without a contract for years. Using "feel your pain" and "equality of sacrifice" rhetoric, adopted from the administration of Bill Clinton, in which de Blasio served, the incoming mayor is preparing to impose further attacks on the working class. On the one hand, the mayor will express support and sympathy. On the other hand, he will use the unions to obtain huge concessions from the city's workforce and to push through massive cuts to public services.

Working people are overwhelmingly hostile to further attacks demanded by the city's corporate and financial elite. Talking Transition is part of a political operation aimed at strangling this opposition and subordinating emerging struggles to the alliance between the unions and the Democratic Party.

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