New York City public libraries face continued assault under de Blasio administration

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The administration of New York City's Democratic Party mayor Bill de Blasio will deny the city's branch libraries desperately needed funds to maintain services and repair decaying infrastructure. De Blasio will also cut over $10 million in operating costs, from $323 million last year to $313 million this year, a reduction of $65 million from 2008. The city will give only $902 million for capital expenditures as opposed to the $1.4 billion that libraries have requested.

New York City has three public library systems: one each for the boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens, and a third, the New York Public Library, which serves the boroughs of Manhattan, Staten Island and the Bronx. The three systems have a combined total of over 217 branches. Each is an enormous system that provides services to millions of people. The Queens Public Library system is the largest in the United States.

A recent report issued by the Center for an Urban Future (CUF) highlights the crisis facing New York City's public libraries. It notes that branch libraries are open an average of only 45 hours a week. Out of the country's ten largest cities, New York ranks seventh when it comes to service hours. New York falls behind San Antonio, where libraries are open 57 hours a week, Los Angeles at 53 hours, San Diego 51 and Chicago 49 hours per week.

San Jose, California and Houston, Texas are the only two large American cities that offer fewer public library services than New York City.

The 45-hour figure also trails behind communities in the rest of the New York City metropolitan area: in Nassau and Suffolk counties to the east of the city, libraries are open 64 hours a week. To the north, in Rockland County, libraries are open 60 hours, and in Westchester, libraries are open 54 hours a week.

On top of this, according to the CUF report, only three percent of New York City's libraries are open seven days a week, an urgent need when hundreds of thousands of the city's workers must work weekends. As the CUF's research director, David Giles, observed, "When libraries have to close early in the evening and on weekends, fewer working families are able to take advantage of their resources.''

De Blasio's $10 million cut can only mean the continuing erosion of desperately needed basic library services.

Perhaps even more significant is the fact that scores of public library buildings are in a state of disrepair. Last month, the three library systems issued a joint report that identified the debilitating consequences of the failure to fund maintenance and improvements to libraries' physical infrastructure, including unused space, cooling and heating problems, severe water damage, overcrowding and lack of access for handicapped patrons.

The average age of a branch library in New York City is 61 years old, and over half of the library buildings are more than 50 years old. It is hardly surprising that the city's libraries have severe maintenance issues.

The three library systems are seeking an investment from the city of $1.4 billion over the next ten years. Of that figure $812 million is needed to repair damaged infrastructure and a further $278 million is necessary for new construction. Bringing branches up to speed with 21st century technology would clearly require a greater investment than the $902 million that City Hall and the corporate media are now trumpeting.

In one instance, Velma Morton, the general manager of the East Harlem branch library, told the WSWS: "This library was closed recently for an upgrade but the third floor has not been fixed. It is not usable and has been closed for years. We have to heat the third floor in winter and cool it in summer. This has to be paid for. But it is not usable for the community, for more computer space and other uses. Cuts to funding mean cuts to staff and we can

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get quite understaffed here. We don't have a public restroom. There is no elevator for disabled children. We ask these children what kind of book they would like and then have to bring it down from the children's library on the second floor."

Over two dozen branch libraries in Manhattan and the Bronx have warehouse rooms that could be used for patrons if they had the finances to modernize the infrastructure in these spaces. Eleven branches in Manhattan have custodial apartments on their top floors averaging 1,000 square feet, and over a dozen have empty basements and third floors that are not in use.

Angela Montefinise, a spokeswoman for the New York Public Library, noted that the city's three public library systems had 37 million visitors in the last year. This means that the city's libraries have been frequented more than all of the city's professional sports venues, performing arts spaces, museums, gardens and zoos combined.

From 2006 to 2014 the city budgeted $464 million to build new baseball stadiums for the New York Yankees and the Mets, and $156 million for the Barclays Center in Brooklyn, home of the Brooklyn Nets basketball team. A total of $620 million, mostly from taxpayer funds, was thus made available for these three profit-making sports arenas, a sum one-third larger than the $453 million the city committed for capital improvements to the 207 branch libraries in the same period.

The assault on New York City libraries has been ongoing for years. In 2014 Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo proposed cuts of up to $4 million in funding. This followed Mayor Michael Bloomberg's proposed budget cuts, most notably $100 million in 2011, which threatened the three systems with severe reductions in hours and mass staff layoffs. During the last seven years of Bloomberg's administration, budget cuts of over 20 percent in library spending meant the loss of over 1,000 staff.

Public libraries in the US, associated in the 19th century with other democratic struggles such as that against slavery and the establishment of universal public education, are also closely connected to the growth of the working class and its struggle for basic social rights.

In an 1809 letter Thomas Jefferson argued that public libraries were a necessity in a democratic republic. His sentiments were echoed later by some of the more advanced spokesmen for American capitalism when it still played a progressive role. Such sentiments are not to be found in today's Democratic or Republican parties, as they continue their assault on the basic democratic rights of the working class.

The WSWS reporters spoke to a number of patrons of the East Harlem branch library, which has served the neighborhood since 1904.

Edwin Rivera told us: "I'm currently homeless. I worked as a chef for many years. My food stamps were cut recently by nine dollars. That's a lot. Right now I can't even afford the newspaper. Every morning they kick us out of the shelter at 9:00 am. So I come to this library to read everything and anything I can get my hands on. It's wrong what's happening to libraries. They need help. This library doesn't even have a restroom."

When asked about the broader political issues in New York, Rivera responded: " I don't think de Blasio's going to do anything to help. And where's all the money going? It's going to wars."

Pamella Citro also uses the East Harlem branch regularly. "I take computer classes here," she said. "These classes are filled with people every day. But so many of the computers are old and broken. Sometimes when I'm in these classes I will hear people say to each other: Is yours not working too? These cuts to funding are foolish. Do they not want kids to go to libraries? I have been very disappointed in Obama. The Democratic Party is the same as the Republicans. They are all about money. Trillions of dollars are going towards war when that kind of money could be used to improve our libraries."

Shayeeda Leecock remarked, "In general I don't like what's going on right now. The police get paid vacations for killing people. It's wrong that they're cutting off people's water in Detroit. I don't have health insurance. But that should be a right for me. Just like water should be a right for people. It's completely wrong that libraries aren't being funded. I bring my daughter to libraries for books I can't afford. She deserves an education."

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