

Behind New York's Cuomo-de Blasio feud

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Recent weeks have seen nonstop media coverage of the war of words between New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio and state Governor Andrew Cuomo. Both are Democrats, but de Blasio styles himself a “progressive,” whose successful campaign for mayor in 2013 highlighted growing inequality—the “Tale of Two Cities.” Cuomo, on the other hand, has governed as an unabashed representative of Wall Street.

Tensions between the mayor and the governor, now in his second term, have periodically surfaced since de Blasio took office 18 months ago. The latest and loudest eruption took place on June 30, when de Blasio summoned reporters to City Hall for an interview in which, after months of more diplomatic comments, he blasted Cuomo publicly.

De Blasio’s complaints were set off primarily by the latest state legislative session, which ended with the passage of an annual budget in late June. “I started a year and a half ago with a hope for a very strong partnership,” he told the journalists. “I have been disappointed at every turn.” He added that Cuomo “engaged in his own sense of strategies, his own political machinations, and what we’ve often seen is, if someone disagrees with him openly, some kind of revenge or vendetta follows.”

De Blasio’s criticism followed by one week the report of a comment from an anonymous state official that the mayor was “bumbling and incompetent.” Cuomo later refused to deny that he was the official who made the remark. After the mayor’s public criticism, Cuomo patronizingly “sympathized” with his fellow Democrat. “I understand why he’s frustrated,” he said. “I get frustrated, but we have a situation in Albany where you don’t always get everything you want. That’s called life.”

The first thing to understand about this internecine warfare is that it has next to nothing to do with policy, and absolutely nothing to do with principle.

One of de Blasio’s main complaints, for example, dealt with the extension of the highly lucrative 421-a tax incentive program for real estate developers, who are given big tax breaks in exchange for including a small number of allegedly “affordable” housing units in new luxury developments.

The mayor’s proposal for a slight increase in the number of affordable units was resisted by Cuomo. The increase was so puny, however, that it was welcomed by the Real Estate Board of New York and, as acknowledged by *Crain’s New York Business*, would have made a negligible difference in dealing with the dire housing shortage for working people. Cuomo took advantage of de Blasio’s position by hypocritically denouncing it as “a giveaway to developers.”

The other major disappointment for de Blasio was the legislature’s refusal to extend mayoral control of the city’s public school system for longer than one year, in contrast to the six year control granted to former mayor Michael Bloomberg. This was no doubt a way for Cuomo, who is a vociferous supporter of charter schools and an ally of their hedge fund backers, to put the mayor on a kind of probation as the attack on public education deepens.

De Blasio, however, has done nothing to improve the city’s schools. As the political representative of a section of the corporate establishment, he is incapable of putting forth the slightest program to meet the needs of the working class in the fields of jobs, education, health care or housing. In fact, he has been an open advocate of programs that cater to the city’s elite. He has proposed steps toward the privatization of the city’s public housing and is also in the process of increasing the police force, while doing virtually nothing to address the brutal conditions in the notorious Rikers Island prison complex.

Many areas of the city’s governance are dependent on approval by the state legislature. Even if de Blasio

had secured every piece of his legislative program, however, it would have made no essential difference for the millions of workers who struggle with soaring housing and health care costs while wages and decent-paying jobs have not recovered to levels before the 2008 financial collapse.

While the big business media sometimes portrays the dispute between Cuomo and de Blasio as a deep political chasm, it also ascribes it to personality clashes, to the usual bad blood between New York State governors and New York City mayors, or perhaps to the higher political ambitions of both men.

These “explanations” are superficial and misleading. The two leading New York Democrats are governing at a time of deepening economic and social crisis, and that is where the source of their quarrels can be found.

There are tactical divisions among the Democrats, but only over how prominently to play the “progressive” card with which de Blasio and such figures as Bernie Sanders are associated.

They are all worried about their future. New York, as dependent on Wall Street for its economic health as ever, is threatened by the global crisis. It is not a question of whether but when the latest real estate and stock market bubbles burst and drastically worsen the social conditions that are already so serious for millions.

De Blasio has nothing to show for his time in office beyond empty promises and a few cosmetic changes. His attack on Cuomo is largely an attempt to deflect attention from the eroding façade of his own posture as a social reformer.

Cuomo, for his part, is a Machiavellian scoundrel who has made little secret of his presidential ambitions, and has to some extent used de Blasio as a “liberal” foil to demonstrate just how responsible the governor himself is to the needs of American capitalism as a whole. Early in de Blasio’s term Cuomo made that clear by rejecting the mayor’s timid effort to raise taxes on the ultra-rich by a minuscule amount in order to fund pre-kindergarten programs.

But Cuomo, like Hillary Clinton, is also adjusting his rhetoric and making small noises in response to the growing signs of popular anger. The latest example of this was the governor’s signing of an executive order last week designating New York State Attorney General Eric Schneiderman as a special prosecutor in

cases of police killings of unarmed victims, or where there is some question as to whether the victims were armed and dangerous.

This week will mark exactly one year since Eric Garner’s murder through a police chokehold on Staten Island. It has taken Cuomo that long to come up with this highly limited measure. The special prosecutor is expected to look into at most six to ten cases a year, only a small fraction of the cases of police violence and abuse directed against youth and the poorest sections of the working class. Nor does the appointment of a prosecutor guarantee even an indictment, much less a conviction.

Cuomo and de Blasio use slightly different methods to arrive at the same goal: the defense of American big business and the ruling establishment in New York in particular. Their jockeying for position and mutual finger pointing only demonstrates the bankruptcy of the system and its political representatives, and the importance of breaking from the Democrats and building a new political leadership based on a socialist program.



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