

New York Mayor de Blasio's tale of two cities: Homeless routed out of encampments

Clare Hurley
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The high number and increasingly visible presence of the homeless on New York City's streets erupted into a crisis for the de Blasio administration last week. The resignation on Monday of Deputy Mayor Lilliam Barrios-Paoli, who for 20 months had been in charge of the mayor's strategy on homelessness, was followed by a briefing on Wednesday by Police Commissioner William J. Bratton announcing a shift to more-aggressive measures to rout the homeless out of an estimated 80 encampments around the city.

De Blasio campaigned for mayor in 2013 on the slogan that New York, with its stark levels of inequality, was a "tale of two cities," and yet during his almost two years in office, nothing significant has been done to redress the conditions of poverty and homelessness. As many as 60,000 people, including more than 14,000 homeless families with 24,000 homeless children, continue to sleep each night in the city's municipal shelter system, the highest levels since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

The city remains as unequal, if not more so, as it was under previous mayors Rudy Giuliani and Michael Bloomberg. Under these conditions, de Blasio's liberal facade is crumbling rapidly as he attempts to deflect growing popular anger by offering certain limited "progressive" adjustments while letting the real estate developers, Wall Street and the profit system go about its business unimpeded.

Raids of homeless encampments and "visits" by police officers, mental health workers and lawyers since mid-August have been dressed up as "humanitarian interventions" to help those who are in need of mental health care and substance abuse treatment. As part of the effort to cast this policy shift in a more humane light, the mayor paid a photo-op visit to one such encampment in the Bronx on Wednesday, a

visit the mayor described to the *New York Post* as eye-opening, saying, "There's nothing like seeing the real thing and understanding the human consequences."

Additionally, de Blasio has called attention to his \$22 million mental health initiative, NYC Safe, aimed at adding beds and providing more mental health services for the homeless, while admitting that it may not have an immediate effect on the number of homeless on the streets. In fact, \$5 million of these funds will go toward stepped-up security at shelters in response to the murder of a Bronx shelter director by a former resident in April.

While the mayor and his liberal supporters, including such organizations as the Coalition for the Homeless, have generally argued for more time for these inadequate measures to have an effect on what they describe as a "vexing," "bedeviling" and intractable problem, more-vocal critics among the City's business elites have been rallying around former mayor Rudy Giuliani in calling for a return to bolder implementation of the "broken windows" policing implemented by Bratton in his first term as Giuliani's police commissioner.

Behind de Blasio's current problems are the stark contradiction between his promises to combat inequality and the reality of the deepening crisis and the demands of the ruling elite that the mayor maintain "order" and keep the poor in their place.

There is not a shadow of a doubt whom de Blasio really answers to and whose interests he represents. New York City continues to be home to the greatest number of the world's wealthy, with 78 billionaires maintaining at least one of their multimillion-dollar residences in the city. There are thousands of multimillionaires who also seek real estate investment opportunities in New York. To service this elite, there

has been a boom in luxury housing. Fueled by high profits and tax incentives, builders have been erecting residential skyscrapers at a frenzied pace.

Upon taking office, De Blasio issued *Housing New York: A Five Borough, Ten Year Plan*, in which he announced, “We have a crisis of affordability on our hands.” Indeed, luxury megatowers such as One57, just south of Central Park, which offers 75 floors of multi-story apartments selling for \$40-\$100 million each, are scarcely occupied by their owner/investors. At One 57, apartments reportedly rent for \$150,000 a month.

Citing figures that understate the economic crisis that has devastated a majority of the City’s population, de Blasio’s plan acknowledges that “Wages for the City’s renters have stagnated over the last 20 years, increasing by less than 15 percent after adjusting for inflation. During the same period, the average monthly rent for an apartment in New York City increased by almost 40 percent.” The plan includes various calculations by which it determines what proportion of Area Median Income (AMI) is required to afford housing without becoming “rent-burdened” (spending 30 percent of income on rent) or severely rent-burdened (spending 50 percent of income on rent).

The plan concludes that “There are nearly *one million households* who earn less than 50 percent of Area Median Income (AMI), or just under \$42,000 for a family of four. There are only 425,000 housing units available with rents suitable for that income level” (emphasis added). In the face of such vast need, de Blasio then promises to build (or simply preserve) 200,000 so-called affordable units over 10 years!

De Blasio hopes to divert a rising tide of anger at the increasingly untenable conditions for the majority of the city’s residents, not only in terms of housing, but for jobs, health care, education, etc. But it is impossible to meet the minimum needs of the working class and working poor while governing on Wall Street’s behalf. As the crisis deepens, de Blasio’s pretensions will continue to be exposed.



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