

New York City Council members award themselves a 32 percent pay raise

Isaac Finn and Sandy English
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New York City Mayor Bill De Blasio signed legislation last week that would raise the pay of each member of the City Council by 32 percent, bringing their annual salaries up from \$112,500 to \$148,500. The City Council members themselves had approved the raise by a vote of 40 to 7 earlier this month.

The Democratic Party-dominated council's decision to give itself a massive pay raise in a city riven by some of the most severe social inequality on the planet exposes the self-interested and morally corrupt character of this upper middle-class layer of elected officials. Although this is the first raise they have had in ten years, it nevertheless highlights the gulf between these big-business politicians and the struggles of most New Yorkers.

Following only one hearing of the bill, the Council disregarded recommendations from the Quadrennial Commission, appointed by the mayor, which suggested council members receive an annual salary of \$138,350, and awarded its members an annual salary of \$148,500.

The members also ignored the commission's other recommendations, increasing the City Council speaker's salary to \$164,500, the district attorney's salary to \$212,800, and the Comptroller's salary to \$209,050. The legislation also makes the increase retroactive to January 2016.

The bill also allows New York City Mayor de Blasio to increase his salary from \$225,000 to \$258,750. De Blasio stated prior to the vote that he would not accept a pay raise in his first term in office, but he gladly helped his fellow politicians to an income hike that most New Yorkers can only dream of.

Melissa Mark-Viverito, the Council Speaker, sought to justify the decision, stating, "The Quadrennial Commission report indicated specifically that because it's been so long since the implementation of a quad

commission that it was appropriate for this raise to be effective immediately."

A Quadrennial Commission is supposed to convene every four years. The last commission was convened in 2006, however, and that was the last time the councilmembers received a pay raise.

The councilmembers have also argued that the massive pay increase was necessary in order to compensate them for minor reforms recommended by the Quadrennial Commission, including limiting outside income for councilmembers and the elimination of committee chairmanship bonuses—frequently referred to as "lulus."

On average, councilmembers make \$8,000 in lulus per member, with some taking in as much as \$25,000. Both figures are well below the \$36,000 pay increase approved by the Council.

The legislation also classifies the councilmembers as full-time employees, limiting their income from outside jobs. However, this legislation will not affect the majority of councilmembers, since 39 of them, out of the 51 members of the City Council, have no outside employment.

Despite the fact that the majority of councilmembers are unaffected by this provision, Mark-Viverito made the ludicrous claim that "These reforms will increase transparency and fairness, reduce the potential for conflicts of interest and improve the process for considering future changes in compensation for local elected officials."

This body of elected officials complain about a salary of \$112,000 a year because it simply does not fit the standard for the upper middle class in New York City, the top 5 to 10 percent of income earners. The new salaries, in fact, would put these defenders of big business only in the top 12 percent of income earners in

the city, far behind top trade union bureaucrats, CEOs of many major nonprofits, and top-earning public university officials.

These salaries, of course, are a pittance compared to the income and assets of the wealthiest New Yorkers, who set the tone in the economic, political, and cultural life of the city. The councilmembers are relative small fry, but insist on a pay increase to bring them slightly more in line with the ruling elite.

Like the rest of the United States, New York City is dominated by a few billionaires—there are 78 who claim the city as their primary residence, the most in the world—and a larger number of mere multimillionaires. Currently there are 8,855 ultra-high-net-worth (UHNW) individuals—usually defined as those with net assets of more than 30 million—in New York, more than in any other US city.

The flip side of the Council's orientation toward the moneyed elite is its distance from the lives and struggles of the vast majority of New Yorkers.

Even before the legislation was enacted, an individual councilmember was being paid more than double the median household income in New York City, estimated at \$52,259 annually, a figure that has barely increased since the economic crisis in 2008.

In addition to this, slightly more than 20 percent of New York City residents live in poverty, while homelessness also remains at extreme levels, with an official count of 60,096 in the city's homeless shelters last December. A 2014 study also found that 46 percent of New Yorkers are poor or near poor.

It is worth noting that one of the most vociferous advocates of a pay raise was Democratic Councilman Ydanis Rodriguez. Rodriguez is fond of posing as an opponent of social inequality. In 2011 he was arrested by the NYPD as part of the Occupy Wall Street protests. Photographs of his bloodied face appeared in the media, and he was profiled in an essay on *Time* magazine's Person of the Year: Year of the Protester.

Rodriguez argued during the single hearing on the pay-raise bill that he deserved a salary of \$175,000 a year because he has a family and works more than 60 hours a week.

In spite of its frequent and flabby rhetoric on poverty, homelessness and low wages, the New York City Council has demonstrated more graphically than usual where its social interests really lie. Its members aspire

to belong to the ruling elite's top rung of lackeys, and they expect to be paid well for their efforts.



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