

Democrats oversee record level of extreme poverty in Philadelphia

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The Democratic National Convention will open Monday in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The four-day gathering, which will officially nominate Hillary Clinton as the Democratic presidential candidate, is being held in South Philadelphia at an indoor area far removed from the city's central district and the 35,000-50,000 protesters expected each day.

Demonstrators will be contained in "free speech zones" at the nearby Franklin D. Roosevelt Park, which has been surrounded by a six-foot fence to contain the crowds. So far 21 protest permits have been granted while four have been denied.

In preparation for the event the city has spent over \$43 million on security measures. The convention will also be guarded by a minimum of 3,000 Secret Service and Homeland Security personnel. The budget includes \$1.2 million for "lawsuit liability" insurance, often referred to as protest insurance, which will cover the city for up to \$5 million against any claims of officers' "errors and omissions while performing their professional duties" from July 15 to 30. Police Lieutenant John Stanford reported that a Philadelphia police team was sent to the Republican National Convention in Cleveland to observe and prepare for demonstrations in Philadelphia.

The last time Philadelphia hosted a national convention—for the Republicans in 2000—more than 400 protesters were arrested with less than five percent ultimately resulting in prosecutions. To fight this lingering reputation, and in an attempt to contrast the DNC with the Republican event in Cleveland, Philadelphia's new mayor, Jim Kenney, signed a bill decriminalizing nuisance offenses in the city, including disorderly conduct and failure to disperse. In an effort to avoid the bad publicity of mass arrests, unless such a crackdown is "necessary," the mayor has instructed police to hand out citations carrying extensive fines.

Meanwhile, the police have carried out a sweep of homeless people so DNC delegates touring the city's upscale restaurants and nightclubs do not have to step over the poor. Some \$61,000 has been allocated to open another

110 temporary beds at various homeless shelters during the convention. This measure, also implemented for the Pope's visit last September, is an attempt to hide away the nearly 15,000 homeless people currently living on the city streets.

"They [the police] woke me up this morning at 6:30 and said, 'You gotta go,'" Lloyd, a homeless Iraq War veteran living on the street downtown told the WSW. "I've been sleeping here for four months, and no one has ever asked me to leave before. The only income I get is from panhandling. Leaving here [during the convention] is really detrimental. It means going back to dumpster diving for food."

The DNC has chosen to present its "progressive" party platform in a city which epitomizes the anti-working class policies of the Democratic Party. Philadelphia, a city controlled uninterruptedly by a Democratic mayor and city council since 1952, is one of the poorest big cities in the United States, trailing only Milwaukee (2) and Detroit (1). The average income amounted to \$37,460 in 2014. Just over one in four residents are living below the government's poverty threshold, including 37 percent of children under 18.

Of the nation's ten most populous cities, Philadelphia also has the highest rate of deep poverty, which is defined as below half the poverty line. This equates to a family of four living on less than \$12,000 a year. The city's deep-poverty rate is nearly double that of the US as a whole, coming in at 12.2 percent or 185,000 residents, including 60,000 children.

Tens of thousands of manufacturing jobs, in food processing, oil refining and other industries, have been wiped out in Philadelphia and neighboring Camden, New Jersey while the Democrats have encouraged financial and real estate speculation. The metropolitan area was found to have the second-highest degree of inequality in America in 2010 when measured by average household income, homeownership rate, median housing value and percentage of residents who have a college degree, according to the Urban Institute.

Access to basic necessities such as running water are unsure for those who struggle with such extreme poverty and are forced to make decisions between paying bills and

buying food. This is reflected in the fact that nearly 40 percent of residents are behind on their water bills, and of those, over half have been for more than a year. While water shut-offs happen frequently in low income neighborhoods, there has been a more concerted effort lately to continue extracting money from these severely poverty-stricken neighborhoods by implementing complex payment plans, exacerbating their already dire situation.

These extreme poverty levels have led to a whole host of stresses and other health barriers for working class Philadelphians. The conditions, exacerbated over the last seven years by the Obama administration, have had life threatening, and in many cases life-ending, consequences for the working class in Philadelphia.

A recent study by the Virginia Commonwealth University shows that children born today in low income parts of North Philadelphia have an average life expectancy up to 20 years shorter than children born in more affluent areas such as Society Hill. In the poorest community, Fairhill, life expectancy is lower than in Syria and Iraq at 71 years. Life is still shorter for residents of North Strawberry Mansion where, on average, a child born there today could expect to live to only 68.

“I can understand that,” said a student at ITT Technical Institute. “I grew up in North Philly. People from my neighborhood were dying everyday. It was normal. You’d see a person one day, and the next day you didn’t see them anymore. Now I live up in Frankford, and it’s different.”

Government relief programs designed to relieve those suffering from the effects of deep poverty have drastically diminished over the last 20 plus years, with one report claiming that 75 percent of welfare applications were denied in 2014 in the state of Pennsylvania. This decline in assistance, even as need increases, is due in large part to the welfare “reform” policy enacted under Hillary Clinton’s husband, Bill Clinton, in the mid-1990s. Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) changed the system so that it became “block-granted,” meaning that states get a fixed amount of money from the federal government regardless of the economic crashes, such as in 2008. Additionally, states were given free reign to customize their programs, which often resulted in TANF money being used for other purposes.

The situation facing youth in the city is particularly dire, not only in their homes and neighborhoods, but also at their schools. The city’s school district has experienced relentless attacks on education over the last 15 years. Former mayor Michael Nutter, an African-American Democrat who was in office between 2008 and January 2016, was a full-throated backer of Obama’s reactionary “school reform” agenda, including scapegoating teachers for “failing schools,”

shutting public schools and expanding for-profit charter operations.

The push to charterize the school system has led to massive teacher layoffs and school closures without delivering on any of the education quality improvements Nutter promised. With the eighth-largest public school system in the United States, the School District of Philadelphia suffered a budget gap of \$304 million for the 2013-2014 school year, resulting the shutdown of 24 public schools, 10 percent of the total. This has put massive pressure on the remaining teachers and school systems and caused significant overcrowding, with reports of up to 60 students in a single classroom. For-profit EdisonLearning Inc. (formerly Edison Schools Inc.) has since taken over a large portion of the public school system. This initiative dates back to the state takeover in 2001 under Democratic Mayor John F. Street, and has been carried on through Nutter and current mayor Jim Kenney—all Democrats.

“They’re closing the public schools, the libraries, all of that,” said the same ITT Tech student. “And now, they’re building a new ‘Super Prison’ here. So, who are they going to put in there? We’ve got schools closing, kids not learning.”

The miserable social conditions facing the working class in Philadelphia are the direct outcome of the Democratic Party, which will try to present itself as the “inclusive” and “progressive” alternative to Trump during this week’s DNC. In reality, the Democrats combine race, gender and other identity politics with a relentless war on the working class in order to further the interests of Wall Street.



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