Kafkaesque conditions facing homeless families in New York City

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Franz Kafka, the famous Czech writer of the early 20th century, inspired the term "Kafkaesque," defined on the novelist's Wikipedia page as describing a situation "in which bureaucracies overpower people, often in a surreal, nightmarish milieu which evokes feelings of senselessness, disorientation, and helplessness…the term has transcended the literary realm to apply to real-life occurrences and situations that are incomprehensibly complex, bizarre, or illogical."

"Kafkaesque" is assuredly applicable to the situation facing many homeless families desperately trying to register for aid in New York City's shelter system. The *New York Times*, the main voice of the ruling class, was forced to acknowledge as much this week, in a report on conditions at the Prevention Assistance and Temporary Housing (PATH) intake center in the Bronx for homeless families with children.

Under a 1999 law, families whose applications for assistance are still being processed as of 10 p.m. on any evening are supposed to be bused to emergency shelters for the night before returning the next morning to continue the process. Because of the immense and growing demand for emergency assistance, however, not to mention the typically slow-moving and callous bureaucracy, families with small children have often had to wait until 3 or 4 a.m. before being put aboard yellow school buses. They are then bused back, however, only two hours later, in order to be seen at the PATH center to continue the lengthy process.

This means, the *Times* reports, that families must load their luggage, baby strollers and children "into the intake center, onto the bus, into the temporary shelter, back onto the bus and back to the PATH center." Sometimes they get an hour or two of sleep, and sometimes even less.

Larissa Galindo, 19 the mother of a 1-year-old daughter, is one example. Ms. Galindo, the report explains, works at a supermarket in Harlem, but, like so many others, does not earn enough at her low-wage job to find an apartment she can afford.

The aim of the 1999 law was to put a stop to the practice of homeless families sleeping on desks or the floors of the intake center. In addition to the awful conditions for the families themselves, this was bad "optics," and served to call attention to the callousness and bureaucratic chaos of the homeless services system. New York, unlike most other cities, guarantees shelter. Under conditions of persistent unemployment and poverty, the law has starkly revealed the capitalist crisis and its human costs.

A major backer of the 1999 legislation was the city's Legal Aid Society. The city agreed, no doubt with a view to the black eye it was getting from the photos of children and mothers sleeping on chairs and floors. But one public relations disaster has been replaced by another—although it is more difficult to document lack of sleep than sleeping on tables.

A prominent member of the Legal Aid Society back in 1999 was Steven Banks. Mr. Banks is now the commissioner of the city's Human Resources Administration/Department of Social Services in the administration of Democratic mayor Bill de Blasio. He is responsible for the conditions in the intake centers in the Bronx and throughout the city.

"It was to end the practice of using a welfare office as a de facto shelter with families with children sleeping on the floor for days on end," Banks said to the *Times*. "That was the intent of the law, and that's the practice that it has eliminated. But it didn't eliminate the lack of affordable housing. It didn't eliminate poverty. It didn't eliminate domestic violence."

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Banks, a representative of the supposedly "ultra-liberal" de Blasio administration, is admitting that he and his boss are not able to do anything about these conditions. Since they represent Wall Street, they can only preside over this misery, administering the system on behalf of the billionaires and the whole corporate establishment.

In the first few years of the 21st century, the homeless shelters in New York housed about 25,000 on any given night. By 2009, after billionaire Michael Bloomberg had presided for eight years, the shelter population had reached 37,000, including about 10,000 families with children. In Bloomberg's last year in office, the total surpassed 50,000.

When de Blasio began his term, it was above 53,000. Today it stands at a record 59,373 in the city's shelters, including 12,913 families. That does not count 5,000 more in special facilities for youth and for victims of domestic violence, nor does it include thousands living on the streets, especially in the warmer months.

The fundamental cause of the deepening homeless crisis is the lack of decent-paying jobs, combined with the even more dramatic decline of affordable housing. The official unemployment rate in New York is about 6 percent, down from more than 10 percent in 2010, after the 2008 financial crash. But many have given up looking for work, especially when the only jobs offered do not pay enough to support a family. Up to half of the city's population pays more than 30 percent of its income to put a roof over its heads. Hundreds of thousands pay 50 percent or more.

De Blasio and Banks say they cannot find the resources to provide shelter for the tens of thousands who desperately need it. As for a city-funded massive home-building program to provide affordable living conditions for all, that is not even part of the vocabulary of the "progressive" de Blasio, who came into office denouncing inequality in much the same way that Bernie Sanders did in his recent quest for the Democratic presidential nomination.

The support for de Blasio back in 2013, as for Sanders this year, reflected growing anger within the working class, but the aim of both campaigns was to keep the anger bottled up within the framework of Democratic Party politics.

What these bitter experiences show above all is the need to break from both parties of Wall Street and build a new party based on the working class and on a socialist program, including jobs, education, housing and health care for all.

As the WSWS explained and accurately predicted before the 2013 mayoral election, "the attacks on affordable housing are bipartisan and homelessness is the product of the profit system and not merely one or another of its political representatives. The mega-wealthy Bloomberg symbolizes a system that rests on both parties…The mayor, who cannot run for a fourth term, is running into criticism in the media while his would-be successors, including local Democrats like City Council President Christine Quinn and Public Advocate Bill de Blasio, pretend that they would follow different policies. In fact, the devastating housing conditions facing a growing number of working class and middle class families are the product of the 'free market' represented by every single one of these politicians."

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