

New revelations of brutality and corruption

New York Democrats announce plans to shut Rikers Island prison in a decade

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Revelations of brutality and corruption at Rikers Island in New York City, the largest prison complex in the United States, have continued over the past few weeks, even as the city's mayor, Bill de Blasio, has agreed to a plan that will supposedly shutter the facility in a decade.

Yesterday, media published accounts of a letter from the city's Department of Investigation (DOI) to de Blasio charging Gregory Kuczinski, the deputy commissioner for the Investigation Division of the Department of Corrections (DOC), with wiretapping conversations between prisoners and officials from the DOI who were investigating conditions at Rikers. The DOI has demanded Kuczinski's resignation. In an interview on Sunday night, DOC Commissioner Joseph Ponte, de Blasio's prison "reform" appointee said, "Clearly there was no improper eavesdropping."

Late in April, the DOI issued another report, which showed that Ponte had spent 90 days in a Maine seaside town in 2016. Ponte used a DOC vehicle to drive there, a violation of city rules.

On April 3, a new report by an independent commission that had been mandated by a federal judge confirmed that little has changed in Rikers since a flurry of calls for reform in 2014. The report highlights the brutality of life for inmates at the prison:

"A cuffed Inmate sustained a lip injury requiring six sutures to close. ... [T]he [Department of Corrections] investigator failed to address clear evidence that officer participants colluded in writing their reports, all of which contained highly suspicious explanations for the injury.

"An Inmate was under escort by a Captain when the Captain very forcefully slammed the Inmate into a wall,

causing the Inmate's head to likewise hit the wall forcefully. The video provides ample evidence that this needlessly high degree of force was deliberate and not in any way provoked by the Inmate."

The report documented 305 strikes to inmates' heads by guards in the period from August to December 2016. It concluded that while some of these instances were justifiable, according to prison standards, "many were utilized to punish, discipline or retaliate against an inmate."

In addition, several suits and allegations have been made by inmates in the last few months, including:

In November, the family of inmate Rolando Perez claimed that he died because he was denied his anti-seizure medication after he was placed in solitary confinement for an altercation with another inmate.

In January, the mother of Eugene Castelle, who was arrested on charges of drug possession, demanded to know why her son was denied medical attention at Rikers shortly before his death there. One inmate told the *Daily News* that Castelle, "had taken a dose of methadone, using another prisoner's prescription, before he died."

Also in January, the DOC began an investigation into the loss of a sealed bag of biological evidence in the case of a female inmate who claimed that she was sexually abused by a Rikers guard.

Court papers filed in February allege that another jail guard, who is a pastor outside of the prison, was a serial sexual abuser of young male inmates.

Revelations of conditions at Rikers have been ongoing since a 2014 report issued by the office of the US Attorney for Southern New York (at the time headed by Preet Bharara) cited a "deep-seated culture

of violence” in the prison complex. This and exposés by the *New York Times*, as well as the suicide in 2015 of Kalief Browder—a youth arrested at the age of 16 who endured three years in the complex, often in solitary confinement, awaiting trial for the alleged crime of stealing a backpack—sparked outrage in New York and across the world.

Since then, 38 Rikers guards have been arrested for smuggling drugs and weapons into the prison or for sexual assault or brutality toward inmates. Others have been convicted of manslaughter and murder of inmates.

The violence and corruption has spurred calls to close Rikers, which has received the endorsement of the overwhelmingly Democratic City Council and of New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo, eager to show up de Blasio as a “progressive” in the Democratic Party. De Blasio, for his part, opposed closing the prison for years, saying that was impractical and too expensive.

On April 3, a commission sponsored by the City Council and led by Judge Jonathan Lippman issued a plan to shut Rikers in a decade-long process. Inmates would be moved into five smaller prisons located in each of the five boroughs of the city. Rikers, a 413-acre island that sits between the boroughs of Queens and the Bronx, some experts have noted, could be turned over to wealthy realtors for development, although others have suggested it could be used to expand runways at nearby LaGuardia Airport.

Shortly before the Lippman plan was released to the public, the Mayor relented in his opposition to closing the facility. De Blasio did not give specifics and stopped short of endorsing the Lippman plan, suggesting that it may take more than 10 years to close Rikers. He called his plan “a sober, forever decision.”

It is not clear that any current plan to close Rikers, either that of Lippman or that of the mayor (whose plan would likely include elements from the Lippman plan) will ever come to fruition.

The Lippman plan has already estimated the closure to have a cost of \$10 billion, and most of the 51 members of the City Council told the *Times* in a poll that they will not support the construction of new jails in their districts, although they support closing Rikers.

Even if Rikers were to be shut down, the violence, abuse and degradation of inmates would only be redistributed to other locations. (The state prison system, which is refusing to transfer prisoners to Rikers

in what is likely a factional move by Cuomo against de Blasio, is also rife with beatings and torture of inmates.)

The discussion on the issue of Rikers in the bourgeois media, and that emanating from a whole range of Democratic Party politicians from Cuomo and de Blasio on down, ignores the social conditions in New York City that underlie both the abuse and corruption at the prison and the prevalence of mass incarceration.

The overwhelming majority of the inmates come from the poorest layers of the working class in the city. They have been convicted of no crime but cannot afford the bail set for their release while they await trial.

The speaker of the City Council, Melissa Mark-Viverito, a former trade union functionary for Local 1199 of the Service Employees International Union, said more than she intended when she began an op-ed in the *Times* in March by noting that Rikers “is a stain on our great city’s reputation.”

What concerns her and the rest of the upper-middle-class coterie of city and state politicians is maintaining an appearance of reform, when in fact poverty, hunger, and homelessness grow relentlessly throughout the city, fueled by the widening chasm that separates the tiny layer of billionaire hedge-fund managers and Wall Street swindlers from the half of the city’s population who are poor or near-poor.



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