

Millionaire Democrats face off in New York gubernatorial debate

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The two candidates in the race for the Democratic Party nomination for governor of New York state held their one and only public debate August 29, only two weeks before the election. Neither candidate offered anything but invective and demagoguery, with each claiming, falsely, to represent the interests of working class.

Andrew Cuomo is the two-term incumbent. Cynthia Nixon is an actor best known for her role in the popular television series *Sex and the City*. In heavily Democratic New York state, the primary victor is almost certain to win the November 6 general election.

During the campaign, Nixon has attempted to stake out a “left” position on a number of issues, lately adopting the label of “democratic socialist,” and being endorsed by the New York City chapter of the pseudo-left Democratic Socialists of America (DSA).

Nixon has cited the surprise victory of DSA member Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in a Democratic congressional primary in the New York City borough of Queens as a portent of what could happen in her own race against Cuomo. However, polls have reported a comfortable two-to-one lead for Cuomo throughout the race. He also has vastly greater campaign funds (\$24.4 million at last report) than does Nixon, as well as the support of nearly all organized interest groups, including most of the trade unions.

Cuomo is certainly ripe for a challenge from the left, since he has staked out a consistently right-wing record on budget and social policy in the course of two terms of office in Albany. The son of the late former governor Mario Cuomo has won praise from Republicans, and even the far-right Tea Party faction, for attacks on social services and the pay and benefits of state workers, and for instituting a property tax cap that carried favor with the upper middle class. The latter measure put additional strain on the state’s already grossly underfunded public school system.

During most of his two terms, Cuomo has cynically maneuvered with Republicans in the state legislature to give him a political cover for the implementation of right-wing policies. This involved splitting the Democratic majority in the state senate, with a small “breakaway” group of right-wing Democrats throwing their support to the Republican minority, allowing them to control the upper house of the legislature, with Cuomo’s tacit support.

More recently, as working class anger over deteriorating living conditions has grown, Cuomo has made a feint leftward, embracing various measures related to the rights of gays, women and racial minorities, without changing his basic course on class issues such as public services, school funding and taxes. He has won the support of some of the unions through minor concessions.

Cynthia Nixon has been unable and unwilling to articulate even the most minimal critique of Cuomo’s record, and this was on display at the August 29 debate, where she could only raise charges of incompetence and corruption, rather than Cuomo’s subordination of state government to the multi-millionaires and Wall Street.

Cuomo replied in kind, pointing out that the wealthy actress had incorporated herself for tax purposes, in order to blunt any suggestion that she might represent a more radical alternative.

Acrimonious exchanges on such topics took up the bulk of the “debate.”

When the two candidates did touch on problems facing the bulk of the state’s residents, neither proposed anything but vague promises that have no prospect of being implemented by a government entirely controlled by the wealthy elite.

Thus Nixon advocated the creation of a single-payer medical insurance system for the state, citing a recent study that it would be economically viable in the long run, but made no serious proposal on how it could be

implemented, given the adamant hostility of the giant insurance companies, drug manufacturers and banks. Cuomo simply evaded the issue by saying it was the responsibility of the federal government.

Perhaps the most revealing portion of the debate came when Cuomo expressed his vehement opposition to a proposal by Nixon to grant public workers the right to strike, which is prohibited in the state, under penalty of fines and imprisonment. He said, “I think it’s a terrible idea,” expressing the ruling class’ fear of impending working class rebellion heralded by the wave of public school teachers’ strikes that began last spring and is continuing into the fall.

What is most noteworthy is that the New York AFL-CIO and various public sector and service unions, including Local 32BJ of the Service Employees International Union, SEIU’s 1199 United Healthcare Workers East, the Civil Service Employees Association, and the Public Employees Federation, are supporting Cuomo, and after the debate some made fawning statements in support of the no-strike laws.

They want strikes to be illegal so they can be absolved of any any responsibility to lead a genuine fight for their members. The head of CSEA said, “It is incredibly naïve for Cynthia Nixon to propose that all public sector workers be able to strike.”

One Teamsters local president, Greg Floyd, is quoted by Bloomberg Law saying, “That’s a fair trade off that was made over 40 years ago. Once you go on strike you don’t get paid. Even if you’re not fined, you’re losing a day’s pay and you never know how long these things will go on.” A representative of the New York State United Teachers said the law “has worked effectively to ensure labor peace by respecting workers’ rights.” And, “we are not seeking a change at this time.”

Nixon’s call for repeal of the public worker anti-strike laws is a transparent and vain effort to weaken the overwhelming support for Cuomo among the union bureaucracy. She discovered, however, that the last thing union leaders want is the legal right to strike.

Nixon attacked Cuomo for the critical lack of affordable housing, persistently high levels of homelessness (over 60,000 in New York City alone), and the abominable conditions (e.g., lead contamination, loss of heat and hot water, generally crumbling infrastructure) faced by tenants in the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA). She accused him of being beholden to New York City real estate interests, from whom he has reportedly received \$733,000 in campaign donations

during the first half of 2018 alone.

However, her solution for housing affordability was to enact universal rent control, a proposal which has no chance of adoption, and would not alleviate the desperate housing shortage. Cuomo laid blame for the conditions at NYCHA on the city, even though there have been decades of budget cuts from all levels of government.

The two Democrats engaged in a meaningless back-and-forth over responsibility for the severely deteriorated state of the New York City subway system, which is crumbling due to decades of neglect, known as “deferred maintenance,” and underfunding from budget cuts. Cuomo sought to shift the blame to the city, even though the system is part of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), a state agency. Nixon made no concrete proposal regarding how the immense funds necessary to repair the subways would be found.

The catastrophic state of the whole regional transportation system—which is causing growing delays and significant inconvenience for millions of travelers coupled with ever rising fares, as well as a series of fatal accidents—is the result of the failure of capitalism, at every level, to properly fund infrastructure, while at the same time, the obscene accumulation of wealth by the financial and corporate elites continues unabated.

Neither Cuomo nor Nixon meaningfully addressed the vast and growing level of wealth inequality, which underlies all the problems facing the working class—from medical care, to education, housing, transportation, and the rest. Nor could they have done so, both being supporters of capitalism. Both candidates have endorsed the pathetically inadequate campaign for the \$15 minimum wage, which, even if implemented, would still leave low-wage workers with lower real income than they had decades ago.

Nixon’s campaign, like those of Ocasio-Cortez and Bernie Sanders, is an attempt to peddle illusions that the Democratic Party can be turned into an instrument of serious social reform, diverting workers and young people seeking a genuine socialist alternative to capitalism back into a political blind alley.



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