

New York City mayor de Blasio tries to burnish his “progressive” credentials

Fred Mazelis
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Bill de Blasio, now in his sixth year as mayor of New York, is trying to burnish his “progressive” credentials.

This has been highlighted by a series of press conferences since the New Year, leading up to his annual “State of the City” address, delivered on January 10. At the same time, the *Washington Post* opened its op-ed page to the mayor of America’s largest city and finance capital to argue, in the words summed up by his headline, that “Democrats can deliver on big, progressive ideas.”

De Blasio used the op-ed to inject himself into the current tactical debate over whether Democrats should adopt a more “moderate” tone in preparations for the next presidential election. Casting himself in the role of Franklin D. Roosevelt, he wrote that he won his first race for mayor because he “put forward a clear, populist message: New York City was a tale of two cities, with unacceptable levels of inequality that had to change. The voters agreed.” As mayor, he continued, he had delivered on his promises with a series of reforms to policing and programs like universal pre-kindergarten.

De Blasio’s hour-long State of the City speech touted his recent announcements, including proposals to expand the city’s ferry service to the borough of Staten Island and the edge of Brooklyn, a program to connect uninsured New Yorkers to primary doctors, and legislation requiring paid vacation for most workers in the private sector.

The mayor pointed to these and other measures to claim that New York under his leadership had set a historic example of progressive reform. “This country has spent decades taking from working people and giving to the 1 percent,” he declared. “This city has spent the last five years doing it the other way around. We give back to working people the prosperity they have earned.”

“[T]here’s plenty of money in the world. Plenty of money in this city,” the mayor said, flanked by screens with graphs of productivity outpacing compensation. “It’s just in the wrong hands!”

Comfortable middle-class liberals, seeking to pat themselves on the back for their supposed generosity toward the poor, may welcome de Blasio’s demagoguery. Among the working-class majority, however, the mayor’s description of the last five years will provoke disbelief or bitter laughter.

He railed against inequality in his campaign five years ago, but what has he done about it? Has he looked at the Manhattan skyline lately? The ugly additions—luxury residential towers that in some cases incorporate a small number of less astronomically priced, “affordable” apartments—are a visible sign that the “unacceptable levels of inequality” that helped de Blasio win office in 2013 have not declined in the slightest. Occasional honeyed phrases from the mayor aim only to camouflage the deepening gulf between the super-rich and the upper middle class on the one hand, and the working class on the

other.

By the city’s own admission, the number of homeless in the municipal shelter system continues to hit new records. When de Blasio was coasting to reelection in 2017, the shelter population totaled 60,000. He had promised to reduce it by the pathetically small number of 2,500 by the end of his second term.

The Democratic Party mayor even then refused to promise much, because he never had a program to solve the housing crisis. In fact, the homeless numbers have been going in the opposite direction! The latest figure, according to the Coalition for the Homeless, was 63,630 in November 2018, which includes 15,580 families and 23,065 children, fully three-quarters of those in the shelters—a reflection of the inability of many with full-time jobs to find a place to live. The many thousands living on the streets are not part of these numbers.

In the face of this deepening crisis, the city pledges some 300,000 affordable units, either through new construction or renovation of existing buildings, by 2026. A recent report by the City Comptroller’s office, however, said that there were currently 580,000 households in the city who spend more than 50 percent of their income for housing. Even if the proposed units were completed on schedule, hundreds of thousands of others will be no longer be affordable, as rents continue to rise and are no longer covered by the city’s rent stabilization program.

Nor does the 580,000 figure include the more than 400,000 people who live in the public housing projects run by the NYC Housing Authority (NYCHA), who by law cannot be charged more than 30 percent in rent. The NYCHA tenants are in some ways the worst off of all, in buildings that have a backlog of years in needed repairs. Conditions in public housing are so scandalous that there is talk of a federal takeover, while de Blasio has proposed the partial privatization of some complexes, with the sale of air rights for the construction of “market-rate” housing on open spaces inside the developments.

The desperation of millions of New Yorkers was indirectly revealed in a special feature in the *New York Times* recently. The three-page article profiled 10 families who, after years of filing applications and making numerous phone calls, beat 1-out-of-592 odds to win city-sponsored lotteries for an affordable apartment. The article, written in a style of delirious celebration, read almost like satire. The affordable housing lotteries are no more a solution to the housing crisis than state lotteries are the solution to poverty.

The official poverty figure remains stuck at about 20 percent at a time of peak profits and obscene displays of wealth. It is significantly higher in the city’s outer boroughs outside Manhattan. Thirty percent of the city’s children live in poverty. Taking real living costs and purchasing power into account, the more significant figure for “near

poor”—households with incomes up to 150 percent of the poverty threshold—is almost 45 percent.

In 2017, 75 percent of public schoolchildren qualified for free lunches. In that year, the Department of Education recognized reality by simply giving free lunches to all, regardless of income.

These figures only begin to depict social reality in New York City. There is also the continued and relentless gentrification, exacerbating the housing shortage for the working class; the decay of the city’s transit system, which has reached the level at which it is encouraging both a decline in use as well as fare evasion; and the continuous undermining of the public school system by charters and the loss of funding for necessary programs.

In the context of this social crisis, de Blasio’s recent announcements fall into the category of “micro-reforms,” a term that came into the use during the Clinton administration of the 1990s, a means of diverting attention from the enormous transfer of wealth from the working class to the ruling elite.

Even the most modest improvements for sections of the poor have been hedged in by qualifications and delays.

Last summer, for instance, the mayor announced a program called “Fair Fares,” which would provide discounted MetroCards, for use on the city’s subways and buses, to up to 800,000 people who fall at or below the federal poverty guidelines of a \$25,000 annual income for a family of four.

It turns out, however, that the program, which was late in starting, will initially cover only 30,000—those who already are working and who receive cash federal benefits. The number enrolled could rise to 130,000 by April of this year, only a small fraction of those who need it.

Another initiative, the “NYC Care” program, will offer what is being called a streamlined approach to medical care for the undocumented and the poor. Instead of having to rely on overcrowded hospital emergency rooms as their first resort for regular care, they will be connected to primary physicians.

The plan does not guarantee optimal care at all, however. It promises improved customer service, which will require more doctors, but the city’s hospital system ran a deficit of \$156 million in 2018 and, according to one report, faces a possible deficit of \$1.8 billion by 2022.

Another measure, touted by de Blasio at yet another press conference, called for the enactment of a city law mandating paid time off of up to two weeks annually for all workers in the private sector. The proposal, which could affect up to 500,000 workers in establishments such as restaurants, hotels and retail outlets, would not cover concerns employing fewer than five workers, or freelancers or contract employees. Details on enforcement are vague.

Even the beginning of a \$15 hourly minimum wage in the city, as of January 1, is far less than what has been advertised. The new minimum, covering businesses with 10 or more employees, follows similar measures in San Francisco and Seattle. It is likely to become a de facto maximum wage, a new floor that lower-paid workers will find it almost impossible to move beyond. The “Fight for \$15” campaign lasted about six years in the city, during which time the new hourly wage lost a significant portion of its spending power. It must also be compared to housing costs and other expenses in New York. For workers who work full-time, the new minimum will still leave them having to pay up to 50 percent of their income for housing, even in lower-rent districts.

What all of de Blasio’s much-vaunted programs have in common is

that they represent not the slightest threat to the wealth and power of Wall Street, the hedge funds and the super-rich. The ruling class is unworried by these puny efforts, considering them a cost of doing business while the super-profits and the speculative orgy continue.

De Blasio’s recent activity follows the midterm elections last November. The heavier voter turnout and big gains for the Democrats in the House of Representatives were an extremely distorted reflection of popular opposition to Trump’s right-wing policies. De Blasio’s talk of “the dawn of a new progressive era” is his way of ensuring that the anger of millions of workers is dissipated within the confines of the Democrats and the trade unions.

The new Democratic “progressivism” began with the election of Barack Obama back in 2008. Millions looked to the first African-American US president who claimed to advocate “change you can believe in,” and were rewarded instead with imperialist aggression and a deepening of the attacks on living standards and democratic rights.

With the election of de Blasio, a new “progressive” star was anointed. As the WWS pointed out at the time, only 24 percent of registered voters cast ballots in 2013, a reflection of five years of growing disgust with the reality of the Obama administration in Washington.

Today, after another interval, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and others are singing the same siren song, seeking to keep workers and youth bottled up within the Democratic Party. De Blasio, finding his “progressive” voice again, seeks to climb on the bandwagon and do his best to keep hope alive in the party of Wall Street, the FBI and the CIA.

The actual record shows that not a single genuine gain—whether in the fight for jobs, housing, health care or education—can be won except in political struggle against the entire political and economic system faithfully represented by the New York City mayor. De Blasio’s cynical pronouncements underscore the need for a conscious break with both parties of the capitalist ruling class, the need for new fighting organizations of the working class based on a socialist program, and the building of the Socialist Equality Party as the leadership for this struggle.



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