

New York City Democrats ensure budget protects NYPD and guts social services

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On Monday, New York City’s “progressive” mayor Bill de Blasio and the Democratic Party-controlled City Council announced the final figures for the huge cutbacks in next year’s city budget. The justification for the latest set of austerity measures was the economic devastation caused by the uncontrolled spread of COVID-19, which has left the city with a spending deficit of \$9 billion for the 2021 fiscal year.

The budget was passed by the 51 members of the city’s Council, 48 of whom are Democrats, by a vote of 32 to 17. The new budget marks an escalation of the years-long cutbacks to social welfare and cultural services, overseen by local Democratic and Republican politicians alike.

To placate anti-police violence protesters, the budget includes a highly publicized \$1 billion “cut” to the New York Police Department (NYPD). Far from acceding to the calls to abolish or defund the NYPD that dominated the anti-police violence protests that rocked the city in June, however, the \$1 billion figure is a fabrication.

At least \$350 million in “savings” were proposed through the transfer School Safety Agents—poorly paid, unarmed security guards who work inside public-school buildings—and school crossing guards from their current status under the NYPD to the Department of Education. Documents released last Thursday show that even this accounting trick was a gimmick, with Safety Agents remaining under the jurisdiction of the NYPD.

Another \$350 million is to be cut from the police budget by reductions in overtime. The NYPD has not stated how these reductions will be enforced. In the past, city agencies that have been instructed to cut overtime have ended up paying it out in full regardless.

The only tangible cuts to the police budget are the cancellation of July 2020’s academy class, which will save \$55 million, and delaying a new delivery of fleet vehicles, which will save \$5 million. The cut of 1,200 new officers will only undo an increase to police numbers sanctioned by Mayor de Blasio in 2015. The NYPD will continue to maintain a force of 34,000 officers. Whether even these minimal cuts take place remains to be seen.

While the NYPD budget has barely been touched, New York City’s social services, already in a decrepit state from years of austerity, face further crippling cuts. These come at a time

when workers in New York City have filed 1.4 million new claims for unemployment benefits since the pandemic began in March.

The cuts include:

- **Social Services:** \$1.1 billion will be cut from the Department of Social Services, which supplies services such as emergency rental assistance, SNAP benefits and other food assistance to workers.

- **Housing:** The budget deal cut \$1.04 billion from the capital budget for the city Department of Housing Preservation and Development for fiscal years 2020 and 2021. The 40 percent reduction shrinks the agency’s funding this year and next from \$2.68 billion in the pre-COVID budget plan to \$1.64 billion in the current one. This will have a huge effect on the city’s homeless and temporarily housed, who number in the hundreds of thousands. A \$127 million federal grant for COVID-19 outbreaks in homeless shelters is being classified as a savings, as it will be used to offset regular operating costs.

- **Arts and Culture:** The Department of Cultural Affairs had its budget cut 11 percent, from \$212 million to \$189 million. This includes cuts to arts instruction in schools, museums and after-school programs, cultural initiatives for immigrants and theatre programs. The Brooklyn, New York, Queens and Central Research libraries will suffer budget cuts totaling almost \$5 million.

- **Education:** Following through on proposed cuts of \$827 million to education over the next four years, the new budget slashed \$773 million from the city’s Department of Education (DOE) budget for 2021. It is currently unclear how the additional \$350 million-dollar expense from the transfer of school safety officers to the DOE will affect school budgets. In anticipation of its loss of \$112 million, the City University of New York announced last week that it was laying off thousands of adjunct professors.

- **Transit:** \$65 million is being cut from the Fair Fares program, which subsidizes mass transit for low-income New Yorkers. This program serves over 190,000 of the city’s poorest workers, who rely on the transit system for their livelihoods. The city has also reiterated its refusal to provide additional funding to the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, which faces an acute financial crisis of its own.

• **Jobs:** The budget includes \$1 billion in labor savings; it is unclear exactly how this will be achieved. A major component will be job cuts. De Blasio has already warned that without further federal assistance at least 22,000 municipal employees will be fired on October 1. The city is now negotiating these cuts with the unions, on whom they will depend to suppress any opposition to layoffs among city workers.

• **Sanitation:** Over \$100 million will be cut from the Sanitation Department's budget. According to the Natural Resources Defense Council, this will undermine composting initiatives for organic waste and overburden garbage transfer stations, which are in the city's poorest neighborhoods.

Even with wholesale attacks to social programs and municipal jobs, questions are already being raised over whether the cuts will meaningfully alleviate the city's acute financial crisis.

The Democratic speaker of the City Council, Corey Johnson, defended the new budget as a "hard fought battle." Parodying his own betrayal of his constituents, he claimed it shows that the Council is focused "on achieving equity, particularly for low-income communities of color."

Furthermore, Johnson stated that the Council is "proud of the work we did to save the types of programs and initiatives we need to rebuild after COVID-19," acting as if the rapidly accelerating coronavirus is no longer a deadly threat to millions of New Yorkers.

Some voices from within the city's Democratic establishment voiced token opposition to the budget. Citing a failure to enforce a full NYPD hiring freeze and a commitment to school safety reform, New York City Public Advocate Jumaane D. Williams threatened to invoke a clause in the New York City charter that would prevent the execution of the budget. This is a hollow threat without legal standing, however. Soon after Williams announced his intention, New York University Law Professor Roderick Hills described the advocate's interpretation of the charter as "completely absurd."

Others around the Democratic Party who have criticized the budget have done so along purely racial lines. The campaign group Justice Committee said that de Blasio and Johnson's budget has "demonstrated that they don't value Black and Brown lives." While it is true that many black and Hispanic individuals and families will be devastated by the new cuts, it is the working class that is being targeted.

The duplicitous role of the Democratic Party-dominated City Council is exemplified by the fact that not one of its members has called for a wealth tax on the city's superrich or even drawn attention to the vast resources of the billionaires. According to Forbes, in New York state alone there are 118 billionaires, with a combined wealth of over \$521.5 billion. The claim that there is no money to fund vital programs for the poorest and most vulnerable sections of society is not only absurd, it is criminal.

The failure to even make such calls reflects the rightward

shift of the New York Democratic establishment in recent years. In 2013, during his mayoral campaign de Blasio called for a wealth tax to cover the costs of expanding child daycare in the city.

Earlier in the year, legislators in Queens and a state coalition of unions both made hollow calls for a wealth tax. Such calls, following years of complicity in cuts by these forces and the fact such proposals are made with the knowledge that they will be not even be considered by their bosses in the Democratic party hierarchy, are worse than cynical.

It is noteworthy that one of the most prominent New York City politicians on the national scene and a member of the pseudo-left Democratic Socialists of America, Democratic Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, said nothing about taxing the billionaires, but instead squabbled with de Blasio about how much is actually being cut from the NYPD budget.

New York state's debt stands at nearly \$92 billion and New York City's at over \$120 billion, by far the largest of any major American city. In early June, the New York Times editorial board warned of a return to the city's near-insolvency of the 1970s. Reflecting the mood of the city's ruling class, it called for more cuts. "Before yoking New Yorkers [i.e., the superrich] with even a fraction of this burden, the mayor needs to get serious about belt-tightening." As far as the ruling class and its political and media representatives are concerned, it is the city's working class who must be made to pay.

The most recent budget is yet another wholesale assault on the living standards and social rights of working people in New York City. It has been drawn up and forced through by the corporate-owned Democratic Party. Furthermore, despite overwhelming popular hostility to the NYPD, the Council's refusal to impose any substantive cuts in the police budget reflects its unwavering commitment to the protection of the wealth and power of the capitalist class.



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