

Hochul replaces Cuomo as New York governor

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New York State Lieutenant Governor Kathy Hochul takes the oath of office as governor on August 24, succeeding three-term Governor Andrew Cuomo. Cuomo was forced to resign after a lengthy #MeToo-style campaign, culminating in a report issued by state Attorney General Letitia James earlier this month, accusing him of sexual harassment.

Hochul, largely unknown outside of Buffalo, in the western part of the state, was selected by Cuomo as his running mate in his first reelection campaign in 2014. Prior to that, she had served only one term as a member of the House of Representatives in Washington D.C., as well as a term as Erie County clerk. After seven years in the largely ceremonial post of lieutenant governor, she is now being built up by Democratic Party circles and the corporate media as the first female governor of New York.

Apparently Hochul's other main credential in 2014 was that she was from the western part of the state, enabling Cuomo to balance the ticket between New York City and upstate. This is in the time-honored fashion of capitalist politics, which portrays the fundamental dividing lines as those of race, gender, geography and anything else that can be used to divert attention from the overriding issue of class. With her ascension to the gubernatorial post, Hochul becomes the first chief executive from upstate New York in almost a century.

Before she had even taken over as governor, Hochul was the subject of countless news reports, in print and online, on the general theme of—to quote an article in *The Hill* by Steve Israel, former head of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee—“Do not underestimate Kathy Hochul.”

Hochul quickly announced that she planned to run for her own full term for governor in the election scheduled for 2022. *The Hill* reported that a poll showed Hochul leading among potential candidates for a Democratic

primary next year. She was reported to have raised \$60,000 in campaign contributions since the Attorney General's report and also held an in-person fundraiser in Buffalo on August 18, with top tickets priced at between \$2,500 and \$5,000.

Virtually every media outlet is also breathlessly speculating on which “downstate” politician Hochul will choose to fill the slot of lieutenant governor. She has already promised to select someone from the New York City area. The focus—inevitably, considering the Democrats' embrace of identity politics—is on African Americans and Hispanics. Among those who have eagerly come forward and volunteered for the job are Jamaal Bailey, a state senator from the Bronx; Brian Benjamin, a state senator from Harlem; and Rodneyse Bichotte, the chair of the Democratic Party in Brooklyn and a close associate of Eric Adams, the prohibitive favorite in the upcoming mayoral election in November.

As part of the political hype, the new governor is being praised for her supposedly friendlier, collegial style, in contrast to Cuomo, well known for his abrasiveness and strong-arm tactics. Hochul visited New York City last Tuesday, meeting with Mayor Bill de Blasio to discuss the COVID pandemic, the reopening of city schools, scheduled for September, and “public safety.”

While the photos of de Blasio and Hochul were designed to contrast their relationship to the long-running feud between Cuomo and the mayor, the topics discussed underlined the right-wing agenda of the Democrats. The issue of gun violence and public safety is being used to shift attention from the economic and social misery deepened by the pandemic. And every single leading Democratic politician, including de Blasio and Hochul, is in favor of the reopening of the schools, despite the fact that the Delta variant guarantees growing illness, hospitalizations and deaths, particularly among young people.

Hochul's political background, despite a relatively thin resume, reveals her thoroughly right-wing orientation. In 2007, for example, as Erie County clerk, she opposed then-Governor Eliot Spitzer's proposal to grant drivers' licenses to undocumented immigrants. Her claim that this would increase the danger of terrorism brought her to national attention. She then won a seat in Congress after the Republican incumbent resigned in a sex scandal. The National Rifle Association gave her its "A" rating, re-endorsing her in 2012 when she supported loosening restrictions on gun sales.

Her full support for big business is further illustrated by her role, after being defeated for reelection, as vice president of government relations at M&T Bank. Furthermore, her husband, a former federal prosecutor, is general counsel and senior vice president at Delaware North, a major gambling and hospitality firm headquartered in Buffalo, taking in over \$1 million over the past three years.

According to the *Daily Beast*, the New York State Thruway Authority and the Office of Parks and Recreation between them have almost \$50 million worth of contracts with Delaware North that will expire during Hochul's tenure. As governor, she will also control the state's Gaming Commission, which has the authority to approve sales of state betting facilities.

The new governor takes office amidst growing crisis on many fronts, including the pandemic and the trigger effect it has had on the economy, with immigrants and poorer sections of the working class facing especially dire conditions.

While the rate of COVID-19 infection remains highest in the Southeast, especially Florida, Mississippi and Louisiana, cases in New York state have skyrocketed as well, driven by the Delta variant. The seven-day average of new infections statewide has multiplied ten-fold since early June, and continues to increase, along with signs of a growing number of breakthrough infections among the vaccinated.

Although the media has touted data showing economic recovery in recent months, service industries dependent on tourism and entertainment remain either shuttered or shakily reopened. Hundreds of thousands of workers have lost their livelihoods, with the heaviest burden falling upon undocumented immigrants as well as lower-paid workers overall. Four months ago, the state announced a \$2.1 billion program to aid undocumented workers who had lost their jobs because of the pandemic, but the program has yet to reach more than a small number and is

facing growing opposition in Albany.

Most renters, who have been unable to pay for their housing during the health emergency, have so far been shielded from eviction, but time is running out on the eviction moratorium, threatening to add many thousands to the already record numbers of homeless, concentrated in but by no means confined to New York City.

The Democrats have staked their fortunes as a party of Wall Street on the techniques of identity politics. The campaign against Cuomo, as has typically been the case, was conducted largely in the media, despite the fact that a lengthy report was prepared by the office of the attorney general. Cuomo claimed the report was biased. Most of the charges, except for one accusation of groping, amounted to claims that he had made female aides "uncomfortable."

Adding to the pressure on Cuomo to resign was the fact that his replacement would be a woman. The upper-middle-class base of the Democrats was rewarded not only with the scalp of Andrew Cuomo, but also by the fact that his replacement is the state's first female governor. This was the mechanism through which the diversion of identity politics was used, while leaving untouched the policies that have led to unprecedented inequality in the state and buying a little time while further attacks on the working class are prepared.

The role of the pseudo-left, primarily the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), should be noted in this regard. The DSA now has two New York state senators and five state assembly members elected with its endorsement. All of these so-called progressives celebrated the campaign against Cuomo, a campaign that virtually ignored his role in the nursing home deaths and their cover-up in the first year of the pandemic, concentrating instead on gender politics. They have all also lined up in an effort to lobby or pressure the incoming governor, insisting that Hochul and the capitalist party both she and they represent can be pushed to the left.



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