

In mid-winter, New York politicians act to drive the homeless off the trains

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In mid-February, New York City Mayor Eric Adams and New York Governor Kathy Hochul, both Democrats, announced an aggressive plan to get the homeless off the New York City region's trains.

Linking homelessness to crime, the "Subway Safety Plan" calls first and foremost for an increase of police officers in the system. Adams, a former police captain, and Hochul have already deployed 1,000 more cops to the trains this year. Under the new plan, teams of police will increase enforcement of violations such as sleeping in trains.

The public unveiling of the plan highlighted the supposed expansion of services for the homeless, putting a friendly face on what is largely a police crackdown. This includes a small number of teams from other city agencies to provide "outreach" to the homeless and plans for streamlining the notoriously onerous intake process for shelters by creating an unspecified number of new drop-in centers. The plan also promises to increase the number of beds available under the city's "safe haven" and "stabilization" programs, which offer slightly more privacy and security than standard shelters, by a combined 490 beds.

For the sake of appearances, the plan makes vague references to increasing psychiatric beds without adding any specifics on care for the mentally ill. Among single adults sleeping on the street or in public spaces like the subway, psychiatric disorder rates are high. The Coalition for the Homeless estimates that approximately two-thirds of this segment of the population suffers from mental illness or addiction.

However, the reality that the plan is at core a police action to forcibly drive the homeless out of the transit system and onto the street is revealed by much more than the grossly inadequate number of new beds for the

tens of thousands homeless on any given night.

The mayor's proposed budget for the new fiscal year, which starts July 1, 2022, calls for a cut of \$615 million from homeless services, including permanently axing 131 unfilled positions and spending less money for adult shelters. The proposed cuts amount to about a fifth of the budget from the Department of Homeless Services (DHS), from \$2.8 billion currently to \$2.15 billion.

A significant piece of the budget cut is due to the end of pandemic-related federal funding, amounting to \$500 million allocated to the agency. All told, the DHS is proposing a reduction in staff from 2,374 to 1,993 in fiscal year 2023.

The proposed job and budget cuts come as the federal and state eviction moratoriums have been lifted, placing more people at immediate risk of homelessness. All sections of the Democratic Party are proceeding as if the pandemic is a distant memory, despite record infections and a horrific death toll from the current wave.

The fraudulent nature of the promises by Adams and Hochul to provide shelter to the homeless can be seen by the results of a program already underway, which similarly offered shelter placements to people taking up refuge in the subways. Under the "End of the Line" initiative analyzed by the Coalition for the Homeless, in January 2022, just 241 people accepted shelter referrals. Of that, only 94 accepted the placement once they arrived. Only 29 remained in the shelter by mid-February, or 12 percent of those initially accepting the service.

About 47,000 people stay in homeless shelters each night in the largest US city, more than 14,000 of them children. This figure only scratches the surface of the problem. A report issued in November by Advocates

for Children found that 101,000 students in New York City lived in unstable or temporary housing situations during the past school year.

The homelessness crisis is unfolding under conditions where housing costs are again skyrocketing. In the borough of Manhattan, the median price for a one-bedroom apartment has increased 25 percent, and a two-bedroom apartment has gone up 27 percent from last year.

Several advocates for the homeless have criticized the Subway Safety Plan and the Adams administration's proposed budget. Shelly Nortz, the deputy director of the Coalition for the Homeless, said in a press release, "repeating the failed outreach-based policing strategies of the past will not end the suffering of homeless people bedding down on the subway. Criminalizing homelessness and mental illness is not the answer." Peter Malvan of the Safety Net Project said in a statement, "forcing people off the trains into the freezing cold does not help the homeless. Policing does not get people safely housed."

However, Tony Utano, the president of the Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100, with a membership of about 38,000 New York City bus and subway workers, not only endorsed the plan but has been working closely with the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) to develop it. There will be a so-called safety summit with the union, the NYPD and the MTA. The union will also be represented as part of an "Enhanced Outreach Taskforce," which will meet weekly with 12 New York City agencies and the MTA.

Indeed, the TWU, along with most unions in the city, enthusiastically endorsed Adams for mayor. He took office on January 1 of this year. Not surprisingly, Utano has said nothing about the budget cuts that the mayor has called for. Adams' \$98.5 billion budget contains a reduction of 10,000 workers through attrition and not filling vacancies. He is also cutting spending for most agencies by 3 percent.

In addition to the transit union, the mayor's law and order approach has received enthusiastic support from the wealthy corporate heads.

When Adams issued a "Blueprint to End Gun Violence" earlier this year, he received an open letter of support from business leaders calling it a plan "to make New York safe again," borrowing the slogan from the fascistic Donald Trump. The letter was signed by such

luminaries as Knicks basketball team owner James Dolan, JP Morgan Chase CEO Jamie Dimon and former New York Mets baseball team owner Jeff Wilpon.

The recent MTA board meetings have been dominated by increased use of the police and the need for more law and order. They only recognize the pandemic to the degree that it results in the loss of fare-paying passengers and the financial crisis that results from it. They focus on increasing ridership while ignoring the aerosol nature of the communicable disease in buses and trains packed with people.

The official death toll of more than 33,000 persons in New York City, including more than 175 transit workers, is totally being ignored for the sake of maximizing profits, which is the same reason behind the current drive against the homeless on the trains.



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