New York City mayor attacks the civil rights of the homeless

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Last week, in a major breach of civil liberties, the Democratic mayor of New York City, former police captain Eric Adams, issued a directive to police and other city agencies to hospitalize people deemed to be mentally ill, whether or not they are willing to be hospitalized. Although officers will receive training, the directive extends the powers of the police to take actions that can—and will—begin to remove people involuntarily to mental health facilities.

Adams said at City Hall, "The common misunderstanding persists that we cannot provide involuntary assistance unless the person is violent. Going forward, we will make every effort to assist those who are suffering from mental illness."

Adams claimed that he had the authority to issue the directive under state legislation passed in April that extends the right of the authorities to order treatment for mentally ill individuals. Police officers are now empowered to act, a significant departure from accepted practice since for decades the decision to bring a person involuntarily to a mental health facility has been limited by law to physicians or family members.

Civil liberties advocates were quick to condemn Adams's policy. Donna Lieberman, executive director of the New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU), said, "The federal and state constitutions impose strict limits on the government's ability to detain people experiencing mental illness—limits that the mayor's proposed expansion is likely to violate."

The directive, as well as the new mandates by the Democratic-controlled state government, is not aimed at improving the treatment of mental health problems or helping those in need. The immediate goal of Adams's directive is to remove as much of the homeless population as possible from plain sight, particularly in the richest borough, Manhattan. It should be noted that not once in the discussions by Adams or the media on the supposed concern for the health of the homeless has the spread of COVID-19 been mentioned.

In fact, the demonization of mentally ill and homeless people, who live on the street or in the subway system, has been a central project of the corporate media for months. The media has highlighted the statistically insignificant number of violent crimes by homeless people, often those who appear to be mentally ill, in what the *New York Post*, the city's Murdoch rag, calls a "crime-ravaged subway system." This has been accompanied by a nonstop media frenzy on shootings and other violent crime in poor neighborhoods, without an ounce of social analysis into the causes of these crimes.

As Jacquelyn Simone, policy director for the Coalition for the Homeless, told the media, "Homeless people are more likely to be the victims of crimes than the perpetrators, but Mayor Adams has continually scapegoated homeless people and others with mental illness as violent."

In its annual survey published in June, the city found that 3,439 people live on the streets and the subways of New York. But according to its *State of the Homeless 2022* report in March, the Coalition for the Homeless notes that the city's estimate "is a vast undercount, and no accurate census of this population has ever been achieved."

These figures do not include the some 60,000 who live in the city's inadequate shelter system and tens of thousands of others who double-up with relatives or sleep on friends' couches. Recently, over 110,000 public school students were estimated to be homeless.

The mentally ill homeless people hospitalized under Adams's plan will likely have short stays and incomplete treatment. In its *Fact Check on Homeless and Mental Health Care* (February 2022), the Coalition for the Homeless noted, "Since May 2020, 9,231 unique individuals have accepted transportation to shelters, safe havens, stabilization beds, or drop-in centers … but only a third (3,105 unique individuals) accepted the placement once transported, and just 8.6 percent of those transported remained in their placements as of mid-February 2022."

Again, the Coalition's *State of the Homeless 2022* report noted the "serious deterioration in access to mental health" in the city. For example, 600 psychiatric hospital beds diverted to COVID-19 treatment have never been replaced. The report observes, "As of 2019 and averaged across all inpatient facilities, one in five psychiatric inpatients was readmitted within 30 days, and nearly one in three was readmitted within 90 days." While this statistic applies to the whole New York City population, figures are unquestionably worse for the homeless.

Additionally, the city's public health care infrastructure, shaky to begin with, has been so ravaged by the COVID

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pandemic and recently by an increase in other respiratory diseases, particularly among children, that treatment of patients in many cases will be minimal.

These conditions reflect the vast social inequality in New York City, in which wealth, public and private, is diverted to the needs of its very richest layers. The city is now the most expensive in the world to live in, according to the Economic Intelligence Unit of T*he Economist* magazine. It has risen from 6th place in 2021 to first place as part of a global 8 percent average cost-of-living increase. The average rent for an apartment in New York is $4,000 monthly, well beyond the means of most of the population.

The Democratic Party operatives in the Adams administration conclude that the results of these levels of inequality, starkly visible everywhere in the city, but especially in Manhattan, where luxury high-rises spring up by the minute, must be addressed by police action without regard to the rights of the poor.

Armed and unarmed guards have been placed at some subway turnstiles to prevent people, especially working class youth, from riding without paying a fare. According to the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), arrests for fare-beating have increased by 97 percent this year compared to last.

In October, Adams and Governor Kathy Hochul, who has ultimate control of the subways operated by the MTA, announced a bizarrely named program, “Cops, Cameras, Care,” that will pay for 10,000 more hours of NYPD overtime for cops to patrol the subways and to equip each of the MTA’s roughly 6,500 subway cars with two surveillance cameras. The initiative will fund a grand total of 25 psychiatric hospital beds for the city.

Adams is reviving the notorious “broken windows” policing launched by former mayor and current fascist Trump supporter Rudolf Giuliani in the 1990s. This focus on so-called “quality-of-life” issues like drinking in public led to the stop-and-frisk tactics that were later found to be unconstitutional, but not before tens of thousands of people, predominantly minority or immigrant youth, had been jailed at such hellholes as Rikers Island. Hundreds of thousands of these youth had their names and Social Security numbers stored in a police database.

Adams has also launched new Neighborhood Safety Teams within the NYPD, which are similar to the plainclothes units involved in the brutal treatment of whole working class communities, including police killings. These were disbanded in 2020, but Adams has reinstituted them, allegedly to get guns off the streets.

All these initiatives, including the blatant violation of the democratic rights of the homeless under his new directive, are meant to be used on the city’s enormous working class.

He has inaugurated a program of austerity in the city. He has refused to fill city jobs that have been depleted since the pandemic, ordered across-the board cuts of 3 percent to city departments and made enormous budget cuts to the already depleted public schools. Hundreds of educators have been “excessed” and scores of programs destroyed.

The vast expenditures for the war in Ukraine have made social programs and anything but the most cut-rate public education untenable.

This is combined with the volatile situation Adams and the Democratic Party from Biden on down has created by its continuing policy of mass infection during the pandemic. Cases of COVID-19 are rising again in the city, particularly in the schools. In the last two months, at least three children in the city have died of COVID-19.

These conditions are common to workers around the United States and the world, and New York workers are increasingly becoming a part of the broad pattern of social dissent, especially as annual inflation has eaten into incomes. Part-time faculty at The New School University have been on strike for two weeks for better pay and benefits, and HarperCollins workers have been on strike since November 10 for a new contract. Workers at the Brooklyn Museum have also threatened to strike.

A global movement of educators that includes university workers in Britain, Ontario education workers and tens of thousands of graduate students at the University of California have so far run up against the obstacle of the trade unions but threaten to expand.

Invariably, they will spread to large sections of the working class in New York City. Already over 70,000 educators in the school system are working without a contract. This layer of workers has been battered by the Democrats’ COVID-19 policies and is prepared to fight.

The success of the Will Lehman campaign for the presidency in United Auto Workers Union (UAW), which won nearly 5 percent of the vote despite voter suppression by the union bureaucracy—much more in some New York City locals, including striking workers at The New School—is a harbinger of things to come.

The working class in the city must be prepared to fight the policies of the Adams administration first and foremost through a thoroughgoing break with the Democratic Party and by building rank-and-file and neighborhood committees that will defend the entire working class from assaults on democratic rights now being implemented by Adams as well as those being planned.

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