

New York's Democratic mayor considers housing asylum seekers at Rikers Island

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As a part of the anti-immigrant fever gripping New York's political establishment, the administration of Democrat Mayor Eric Adams has floated the idea of using a 1,700-bed facility that was closed in June 2022 in the Rikers Island prison facility to house asylum seekers. The city's Department of Corrections had begun renovating the facility recently in hopes of alleviating pressure in the rest of the highly overcrowded prison.

The Adams administration is considering the idea as approximately 4,300 refugees have arrived in the last week in the city, about 700 a day, since the Biden administration allowed Title 42 pandemic restrictions on entry to the United States, primarily from the southern border, to expire on May 11.

Over 65,000 refugees have come to New York City in the last year and are under the care of the city. The city's homeless shelters now contain 41,500 of these refugees, over half of the 80,278 people there, the largest number on record.

Rikers is the biggest prison complex in the United States and one of the most brutal. It contains nearly 6,000 inmates, many awaiting trial and many unable to afford bail. Nineteen inmates died there in 2022, up from 16 in 2021.

Murad Awawdeh, executive director of the New York Immigration Coalition, told the media: "Rikers Island has a long track record of causing nothing but pain, suffering and death to those that have been forced to reside there. It is a stain on our city. ... Housing asylum seekers—who are pursuing their legal right to apply for asylum—on Rikers is simply immoral. The traumatizing effect of doing so, after people have fled violence and persecution in their home countries, will cause more injury to families who are already struggling."

The proposal is emblematic of the contempt and disregard that both Democratic and Republican politicians have shown for the thousands coming to the city and state seeking refuge from abominable conditions in Latin America, particularly Venezuela, as well as other parts of the world. Adams has also proposed housing inmates in another jail, the closed Downstate Correctional Facility in Fishkill, north of the city in the Hudson Valley. One local official was quoted as saying the facility is fine for the asylum seekers but needs a paint job.

Adams has sought to bus newly arrived refugees to hotels in

the counties north of the city, sparking the declaration of states of emergency by county officials. Republican county executives in Orange and Rockland counties have sought court injunctions to block the refugees. The far-right Republican County Executive of Dutchess County, William F.X. O'Neill, threatened to take civil action against any hotel or motel owner who lodged refugees.

Ed Day, the Republican County Executive of Rockland County, told a radio talk show host that he would deploy police if asylum seekers were brought in. "Within that cadre of people who are coming here," he said, "who are not vetted, we have child rapists, we have criminals, we have [members of the Salvadorian gang] MS-13." He threatened to "Grab [Adams] by the throat" to prevent the refugees from coming to the county.

Last week, a state legislator, Brian Mahr, a Republican from Orange County, played a central role in spreading the rumor that veterans had been evicted from homeless shelters in Orange County to make room for refugees. This canard was blared by the gutter press, especially the *New York Post*, and trumpeted on Fox News, but found to be false last week.

Complementing the undisguised racism of the Republicans in the state, the Democrats have led the fight against immigrants, consigning them to the worst accommodations and treating them as though they were less than human. Adams has sought to use 20 school gyms and been forced to open emergency shelters. The city has rented hundreds of rooms in the shuttered Roosevelt Hotel on East 45th Street and the Watson Hotel on West 57th Street, as well as other locations.

David Giffen, executive director of the Coalition for the Homeless, told the media "What's behind all of this [is] a failed housing system ... people who have lower incomes end up using the shelter system as the de facto housing system. And then the shelter system doesn't have enough beds so we're using the hotels as a de facto shelter system."

At a news conference in Harlem on Wednesday, however, Adams complained, "Instead of monies coming from people who are visiting us and spending in our tourism, in our Broadway plays, instead of them using those hotels, we're using those hotels" for the refugees.

This cuts to the heart of the matter: New York City, in the

view of the ruling class and its representatives in the Democratic Party, has no room for the poor and indigent. As in the rest of the United States, social relations are at a breaking point throughout the metropolitan area of 20 million people. Over half of New Yorkers cannot afford to live there. There are 104,000 homeless school children in the city. The working class has been forced back to work while a pandemic continues to kill, sicken, and disable. Inflation remains high, and more than 5 percent of New Yorkers have left since the pandemic began to find cheaper accommodations.

The city is dominated by the financial and real estate oligarchy. Luxury condos are constructed endlessly, with thousands sitting empty. The average rent for a one-bedroom apartment is \$4,000 a month. A “good deal” for the purchase of a Manhattan apartment is \$1 million.

In response to the massive indebtedness of the city and to the drive of American imperialism to confront Russia in its proxy war in Ukraine and prepare for war against China, the Democratic Party is now implementing wartime austerity. It has combined with the Republicans to prepare massive cuts to what remains of social programs at the federal level in response to the so-called debt ceiling crisis.

In New York state, Democratic Governor Kathy Hochul, who has remained largely silent on the matter of housing and care for migrants, has delivered an austerity budget notorious for containing not a single measure to alleviate the housing crisis.

The city budget Adams has proposed will be one of severe cutbacks. Meal plans for the elderly, pre-K programs, and public library funding are to be reduced, to name only a few cases. De facto wage cuts are planned for the 115,000 members of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) and the 47,000 transit workers, both of whom are working without a contract. Three hundred thousand city office workers, parks and maintenance workers, health care workers and others in the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, District Council 37 (DC37), have been forced into below-inflation “pay raises.” Many of these workers work at poverty wages.

The city unions, led by the UFT and DC37, have sought to do everything they can to facilitate the Democrats’ budget cuts. Last month, they played an insidious role in saving the city \$600 million annually by forcing retirees onto a cut-rate, privatized medical plan that will undermine the health of 250,000 retired city workers.

Under these conditions discontent, anger, and opposition is everywhere in the working class. In several strikes in the area—of nurses in January, of adjunct faculty at the New School, and other academic workers at nearby Rutgers University—the union bureaucracy has succeeded in forcing through below-inflation raises. But that has not stopped the movement of the working class. Currently, thousands of film and television writers in the city are on strike against the giant media corporations for attempting to turn them into casualized labor.

Thousands of UPS workers in the area will be facing contract expiration soon.

The Democratic Party has responded—and can only respond—to this desperate situation with anti-democratic and repressive laws. Adams has revoked the city’s right-to-shelter rules. Last year, the state revised its mental health code to allow police to force the mentally ill into hospitals against their will, and Adams is using it to remove as much of the homeless population as possible from public view. Knots of police officers crowd the subway platforms and armed guards stand ready to prevent the poor from attempting fare evasion in the subway system while vigilantes take it upon themselves to kill the most vulnerable of the homeless, as in the case of Jordan Neely.

Adams has made waves in the Democratic Party by publicly blaming President Biden, now officially running for his second term, for the crisis. “We have reached out to the White House on a number of occasions and stated clearly the things we need,” he said on Wednesday, adding, “FEMA has failed us,” noting the city only received \$30 million of the \$650 million it has requested in aid.

Adams has adopted an increasingly panicked tone about the migrant crisis. The influx of asylum seekers threatens to upend the austerity budget he has prepared. Earlier this month, he told a gala of the biggest realtors in the city, “Remove the \$4.6 billion problem we have in asylum seekers, and you will see one of the best administrations in budgeting taxpayer dollars in the history of this city.”

The arrival of large numbers of migrants to New York City is a great concern to the city’s 107 billionaires. Though they do not express it as openly as their political puppet Eric Adams, the migrant crisis exposes, yet again, the hatred they have for a working class that they have allowed to die in droves during the pandemic, and whose living standards they are systematically slashing.



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