

New York City Mayor Eric Adams employs racial identity politics to cover over the deepening social crisis

John Conrad
4 July 2023

A video recording of a heated exchange between New York City Mayor Eric Adams and Jeanie Dubnau, an 84-year-old housing rights activist and Assistant Professor of Microbiology, Biochemistry & Molecular Genetics at Rutgers University, has gone viral, viewed by millions of people over the last five days.

Dubnau confronted Adams at a “community conversation” town hall last Wednesday over the rent increases and ever-intensifying housing crisis in New York. Adams responded by comparing Dubnau to a plantation owner berating a slave. This response has been met with widespread opposition.

Last month, the New York City Rent Guidelines Board, the city agency that determines rent raises for around one million rent-stabilized apartments in New York, voted to raise rents on one-year leases by 3 percent and on two-year leases by 2.75 percent for the first year and 3.2 percent for the second year. This is the second year in a row that the board has raised stabilized rents. Last year, it voted for increases of 3.25 percent on one-year leases and 5 percent on two-year leases. These are the highest increases since 2013. The nine members of the Rent Guidelines Board are all handpicked by the mayor.

In Manhattan, rent for a small studio (single room dwelling) averages well over \$3,275 a month, and over \$5,173 for a two-bedroom apartment. Rent in the city’s four outer boroughs (Brooklyn, Bronx, Queens, Staten Island) is largely cheaper, but still significant. Average rent for one-bedroom apartment in the Bronx, the poorest city borough, is over \$2,125. Roughly two million people live in rent-stabilized apartments in New York. The increases will have a particularly devastating impact on hundreds of thousands of elderly and working-class families, greatly escalating the already tremendous social crisis engulfing the home of Wall Street.

It is within this context that Dubnau, a leading housing rights activist in New York since the 1960s and a survivor of the Nazi Holocaust, confronted Adams and other city officials at a “Talk with Eric” town hall event in the Washington Heights neighborhood of Manhattan. Adams, responding to the first question from an attendee about widespread housing insecurity in the city, directed blame toward state officials in Albany when Dubnau interjected, calling out, “But you raised the rents.”

Adams, clearly startled by the unexpected disruption of the heavily stage-managed event, responded in the all-to-familiar

fashion of bourgeois politicians, with evasions and lies. He first emphasized that he signed an individual agreement promising not to raise rents with the tenants in the three-family house he owns in Brooklyn. He followed this ridiculous response with a bald-faced lie, “I don’t control the [rent guidelines] board. I make appointments, they make the decisions. Everyone know *I don’t control the board.*”

Dubnau responded, shouting so that she could be heard by everyone in the large gymnasium, “That’s not true. The fact of the matter is it’s not all landlords, it’s big landlords [that primarily benefit]. It’s not tiny landlords, we’re not talking about that. We’re talking about the rent guidelines board and that you said you supported those rent increases.” She concluded, “Why in New York City, where the real estate is controlling you Mr. Mayor, why are we having these horrible rent increases this year and last year?”

Adams, who has been showered with hundreds of thousands of dollars from the real estate industry since running for office in 2021, voiced his support for the rent hikes last month. In a statement released in late June, Adams said, “I want to thank the members of the Rent Guidelines Board for their critically important and extremely difficult work protecting tenants from unsustainable rent increases, while also ensuring small property owners have the necessary resources to maintain their buildings and preserve high-quality, affordable homes for New Yorkers.” Adams has already received over \$100,000 from the real estate industry for his 2025 re-election campaign.

Dubnau, clearly annoyed with Adams’s blatant lying and evasion, and passionate about the crisis confronting millions of New Yorkers, gestured with her hands as she spoke, pointing at the mayor as she addressed him across the gymnasium. Adams, angered by the interruption of this attempt to give a face-lift to his right-wing administration, responded by equating Dubnau, who is white, with a slave owner.

“If you are going to ask a question don’t point at me or be disrespectful. I’m the mayor of this city. Treat me with the respect I deserve,” Adams thundered. He continued, “Don’t stand in front like you treating someone that’s on the plantation that you own. Give me the respect that I deserve. I’m a grown man. I walked into this room as a grown man and I’ll walk out as a grown man. I answered your question, next table.”

This exchange not only makes clear the utterly right-wing and reactionary nature of racial identity politics, but is a serious warning to the working class in New York and beyond of the rightward turn of a political establishment faced with growing discontent in the working class.

Adams is a right-wing capitalist politician. The former police captain, Republican and Brooklyn borough president was handpicked by the corporate and financial elite to brutally defend its interests in the financial center of world capitalism; dumping millions of dollars into his 2021 election campaign, in which he was the most openly right-wing of the leading candidates for the Democratic nomination, which is tantamount to election in New York City. Faced with an immense social, political and economic crisis, the ruling class is using Adams to drive Democratic Party politics further to the right in order to defend its interests in the face of potentially explosive social anger in the working class.

In the course of a year since being elected, Adams has viciously illustrated his role as Wall Street's top cop. The administration has initiated massive budget cuts for education, libraries and health care, which are having a devastating impact on workers and their families. Adams continued and more relentlessly implemented the criminal COVID-19 reopening policies of the ruling class, scrapping all public health measures and pushing for a full return to in-person work and schooling as the pandemic continues to rage. Tens of thousands of people in New York have died from COVID-19, many more are suffering from debilitating Long Covid, and millions, if not the entire population of the city, have been infected, as a result of this profits-over-lives policy.

Adams has increased funding for the New York Police Department and heightened police presence across the city to quash any hint of discontent. A defender of the infamous "stop-and-frisk" policy and a fervent proponent of "law-and-order," Adams and his administration have whipped up a police-state atmosphere. The administration endlessly denounces fictitious high crime rates and demonizes the thousands of homeless in New York, committing the homeless mentally ill to confinement against their will and overseeing police raids on homeless encampments in Manhattan. Gangs of heavily armed police roam the subway stations, harassing the homeless and working-class youth. This atmosphere of social devastation, repression and law-and-order hysteria created the conditions for the vigilante-style murder of a homeless street performer, Jordan Neely.

New York remains one of the most unequal cities in the US and the world. In 2022, more than 100 billionaires, the largest number of any city internationally, hoarding trillions of dollars in combined personal wealth and living like kings and queens, called the city home. On Billionaires' Row in Manhattan, luxury apartments, sitting hundreds of feet above the streets, are sold for tens of millions of dollars. Meanwhile, one in five New Yorker lives in poverty and nearly half of the city's households are considered poor. Workers are increasingly being priced out the city. A recent report by the Fund for the City of New York explains that a household income of \$100,000 is required for a decent standard of living in New York. While "only" 16 percent of New York City's people fall below the official poverty line, in reality 50 percent fall below the level of an adequate standard of

living. This is well over 1 million families.

Besieged on all sides by a crisis for which his administration has no progressive solution and an angry, millions-strong working class beginning to enter into struggle, Adams employs racial identity politics in an attempt to confuse and cover over the real class issues confronting the working class.

This latest episode is one in a string of racist statements made by Adams, the second black mayor of New York City, over the last two years, exposing the reactionary class interests served by identity politics. Unlike the "left" Democrats and upper-middle-class pseudo-left forces who make an effort to present a focus on "race" and identity as "progressive" and "left-wing," Adams openly utilizes identity politics in defense of the interests of the ruling class. This explains the uncomfortable, limited commentary in the Democratic Party-aligned press and silence from the pseudo-left on last week's exchange with Dubnau.

Above all, Adams's latest outburst must be seen as another significant warning of what is to come. Several days after his outburst, Adams doubled down on his comments during an interview on the 1010 WINS radio station:

"My mom made it clear, never allow someone to be disrespectful to you. That woman disrupted a meeting where all the participants were acting respectfully and cordially to get their issues heard. She disrupted that, and then she was degrading on how she communicated with me. I'm not going to allow civil service to be disrespected, and I'm not going to be disrespected as the mayor of this city."

If this is how Adams responds to relatively mild criticism from an 84-year-old housing activist, how will the administration respond as it comes into direct confrontation with transit workers, teachers, city workers, UPS workers and numerous other sections of the working class entering into struggle?

Adams's 2021 campaign received funding and endorsements from the trade union apparatus, including Transport Workers Union Local 100, which is now working to ram a sellout contract down New York transit workers' throats. In May, Adams gave a Trump-style Memorial Day speech in which he denounced "the hot rays of socialism and communism and destruction that's playing out across the globe." While denouncing socialism, he remained silent on the serious threat of fascism, expressing the deep concerns in the ruling class over the emerging mass struggles of the working class coming under a revolutionary socialist leadership.

This latest episode underscores, above all, the critical necessity for the working class to break completely with the right-wing Democratic Party in order to advance its struggles in a progressive direction. Only on the basis of an independent, international struggle for socialism can workers successfully oppose all the major problems confronting humanity.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact