

Hundreds of asylum seekers forced to sleep on New York City's sidewalks for days

Sandy English
4 August 2023

The rightwing Democratic mayor of New York City, Eric Adams, has allowed the housing of tens of thousands of migrants in the United States' largest city to deteriorate so rapidly that hundreds of them were forced to sleep on the sidewalk in front of the Roosevelt Hotel in Midtown Manhattan for over a week.

The 1,000-room hotel, closed for three years, has been reopened by the Adams administration and functions as an induction center for migrants arriving in the city. Hundreds of migrants last weekend were told that there was no space in the hotel and they would have to wait on the sidewalk until rooms opened up. As more and more arrived, they were forced to live and sleep rough in front of the hotel.

Volunteers gave them meals and water. Police and a COVID-testing agency, hired by the mayor, managed the refugees in one of the most crowded urban spaces in the United States. Migrants in the blistering heat were offered a chance to cool off in air-conditioned vans, where some of them eventually slept.

Adams appeared at the hotel on Thursday night and was heckled by passersby, who told him to solve the problem. Migrants were placed on buses later that evening.

Over 95,000 migrants have arrived in the city since May when the federal pandemic restrictions at the US borders were lifted. Most are asylum-seekers fleeing political persecution or economic or environmental disaster in their home countries, which range from those in Latin America to the Middle East and West Africa. Some 2,300 migrants arrived last month and approximately 200 continued to arrive each day, most from the US-Mexico border.

The city's shelter system is overwhelmed with over 56,000 migrants living there in addition to tens of thousands of other homeless families. The city has opened 194 ad hoc shelters in gyms, hotels, parking lots and warehouses. But none of these is enough. "There is no more room," Adams told a press conference earlier this week, adding, "It's not going to get better."

Refugees complained to the media that they were served frozen food and, during a sharp uptick in COVID-19 infections in the city, the Adams administration has not provided migrants with masks or any other mitigation measure in conditions in which migrants are crowded cheek-to-jowl.

The crisis is so overwhelming that the city has apparently floated the idea of housing migrants in tents in Central Park. "Everything is on the table," Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services Anne Williams-Isom told a press conference on Wednesday, including not only Central Park in Manhattan but Brooklyn's

Prospect Park. Williams-Isom added: "We think that the system is at a breaking point."

New York City is the only large municipality in the United States that has a right-to-shelter law, which obligates the city to provide shelter for anyone who is homeless. In May, the Adams administration petitioned a New York court to relax some of the right-to-shelter strictures. While the case is still pending, the National Lawyers Guild and the New York Coalition for the homeless announced on Thursday that they would take the city to court to enforce the law.

In a joint statement, the organizations said, "Last night, we petitioned the court to schedule an emergency conference requesting judicial intervention to protect the health and safety of our clients who face immense risk due to the City's failure to comply with the *Callahan* consent decree."

Callahan is the 1981 legal settlement made by the New York County Supreme Court that mandates the city to shelter those in need of housing—a necessary and democratic ruling. The conference was scheduled to take place on Friday.

Adams, unable to immediately flout the law has limited single adults to a 60-day stay in city-provided housing.

Last month, the city issued fliers in English and Spanish, to be distributed at the US-Mexico border that read, in part: "There is no guarantee we will be able to provide shelter and services to new arrivals. Please consider another city as you make your decision about where to settle in the U.S." National Guard troops at the border, who process asylum seekers, refused to hand them out, saying they had no orders from their superiors to do so.

Since the beginning of the crisis in May, Adams has sought to offload as many refugees as possible to upstate cities and towns, in some cases inspiring fascist-minded resistance from local officials. Last month, the *New York Times* revealed that the COVID-testing company hired for \$432 million to oversee the migrants, DocGo, not only had been awarded a contract by the city without a bidding process but that its staff repeatedly threatened migrants whom the company bused to Albany, New York state's capital.

The capitalist media has attributed Adams' allowing migrants to sleep on sidewalks as a cynical ploy to force the federal government into giving the city more aid. The Biden administration has promised a mere \$135 million in aid.

In fact, much deeper issues are involved. In the first place, there are few guarantees that migrant workers, like over half longer-term residents of the city, can afford to live there. The average cost of

rent is now over \$4,000 for a one-bedroom apartment and the vacancy rate for “affordable” housing stands at less than 1 percent. Asylum seekers are legally unable to seek employment for the first six months of their stay in the US, making it impossible for them to afford New York rents.

More fundamentally, the cost of feeding and sheltering migrants has upended the plans of the mayor to impose massive austerity in the city budget. The pittance offered by the Biden administration is little more than a demand to the city—that is, to the local Democratic Party politicians—to make massive budget cuts in the coming months and years. The gesture is reminiscent of the famous 1975 newspaper headline when the federal government under President Gerald Ford refused to bail out New York City during its bankruptcy crisis: “Ford to City: Drop Dead.”

Conditions are more dire than they were 48 years ago. Not only is New York City over \$100 billion in debt, but the war in Ukraine and the preparations for war with China—the main foreign policy goals of American imperialism—demand the smashing of the standard of living for the working class.

Austerity is non-negotiable in the eyes of the ruling class. Strikes must be illegalized, as the Democrats did with a potential railway strike last year, fully abetted by New York City’s Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Democratic rights are a luxury in conditions like these. The fact that the New York police and staff from DocGo attempted to prevent reporters from the *New York Times* and the *New York Post* from speaking with migrants in front of the Roosevelt Hotel this week is a small but telling sign of things to come.

Adams, a right-wing and unabashed shill of the bankers and real estate magnates, has been devoted to implementing austerity, but was unable to immediately put into it effect in the recent Fiscal Year 2024 budget which registered an increase in spending—in large part because the anger of the working class, particularly educators and other city workers as well as transit workers, is so intense. The United States is in the midst of the largest strike wave in decades and Democrats, mainly on the City Council, made an agreement with Adams to wait.

Although some critical programs were cut and city workers were given below-inflation “raises,” state agencies have noted that Adams will be forced to slash the budget by billions in the next year and the can was essentially kicked down the road, and, therefore, only preparing a larger social explosion in the next months and years.

From the point of view of human need, there is no shortage of clean, safe and unoccupied places for people to live in New York City, both for migrants and for longer-term residents. New York City has been in the middle of an unabated luxury condo building boom for years.

The city’s own Housing and Vacancy Survey, published last year, found that 10 percent of Manhattan apartments are vacant. There is moreover, because of remote work during the pandemic, an exceptionally high vacancy rate in commercial real estate. The funds to convert these, too, quickly into housing exist in the bank accounts of New York’s 107 billionaires and its many multimillionaires.

But no Democratic politician, including those of the Democratic

Socialists of America, in his or her wildest dreams would consider violating the holy of holies, big real estate and its investments, by housing workers in these spaces.

The plight of migrants, nevertheless, has caused no small concern in the ruling class, a section of which supports the import of cheap labor. More fundamentally, though, there is rising concern that Adams is not handling things well and that his treatment of refugees may ignite larger opposition within the already hostile working class in the city.

On Thursday, the *New York Times* published an op-ed by one of its editorial board members, Mara Gay, who compared Adams to the fascistic Republican governor of Texas, Greg Abbot, who routinely buses migrant out of this state—often to New York City.

Adams says, falsely and nervously: “I have taken extraordinary measures to shelter and care for asylum seekers.”

But he would rather expel the refugees from New York if he could, or, barring that, make life as miserable as possible. That is exactly what he is seeking to do, and in that he represents a definite political constituency in the ruling elite that wants to hasten austerity as much as possible.

In fact, extraordinary measures are necessary to resolve the housing crisis in the United States. Migrants and all the homeless must be housed immediately. But the Democratic Party cannot be pressured to resolve the housing problem.

Emergency aid to the homeless and to migrant workers must be part of a program of the working class, independent of the capitalist parties, to put all empty housing owned by the super-rich and big real estate firms to use as a first step to resolving the housing crisis.

Independent neighborhood committees in working class areas that include both migrant and native-born workers, and rank-and-file committees at workplaces must be built as the only organizations that can implement this program.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact