

New Yorkers speak on Zohran Mamdani and the housing crisis

Our reporters
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With New York City's mayoral election season now in full swing, Zohran Mamdani, the Democratic Socialists of America member and nominee for the Democratic Party, maintains a solid lead over his rivals in the polls. Mamdani's support in the electorate is in large part based on anger over the staggering social crisis unfolding in New York, particularly related to the soaring cost of living.

The growing unaffordability of housing is one of the factors, if not the main factor, contributing to this crisis. Mamdani's own campaign site sums it up: "Last summer, for the first time in 15 years, New Yorkers were allowed to apply for a lottery to get help paying their rent. The lottery was open for just one week. More than 630,000 people applied to get on the waitlist for a program that currently approves only about 250 people a month. New York City now has the highest level of homelessness since the Great Depression. More than half of all households are rent-burdened."

For decades, the Democratic Party in New York and nationally has collaborated with Republicans in a bipartisan effort to cut funding for housing and other social programs and redirect income to the top, sending social inequality in cities like New York to unprecedented levels.

In New York's primary election in June, the Democratic Party establishment was plunged into crisis as its preferred candidate, Andrew Cuomo, was soundly defeated, despite a vast war chest of dark money and a filthy campaign attempting to smear Mamdani as an antisemite for expressing opposition to the genocide in Gaza. The Democratic Party and the corporate interests they represent remain deeply divided over Mamdani.

Yet for all the consternation of sections of Wall Street, Mamdani's proposals, even if fully implemented, would do nothing to fundamentally change a housing racket predicated upon enriching the big real estate developers and landlords. Nor would it meaningfully alleviate the immense housing crisis for the working class that has been deepening for decades.

Mamdani's signature housing initiative is to freeze the rent for the city's approximately one million rent-stabilized apartments, expanding on three years of freezes under former mayor Bill de Blasio. It's notable that during de Blasio's term, the limited freezes did little to curb the vast housing speculation and profiteering. The rent burden remained exceedingly high,

especially for low-income tenants. Overall, rents continued to soar, and homelessness reached record levels.

In addition to the rent freezes, Mamdani plans to construct 200,000 new housing units over the next 10 years, which also roughly aligns with de Blasio's "accomplishments," though the former mayor skewed the numbers by including "preserved" units. Even if 200,000 genuinely affordable units are added over a decade, this represents a small fraction of the enormous gap that currently exists.

Meanwhile, the Trump administration is intent on dismantling what remains of federal funding for housing. The president has proposed slashing Section 8 vouchers by 50 percent and imposing draconian time limits on recipients. Immigrants are being scapegoated for the housing crisis, and the homeless are being swept off the streets by masked federal agents. Trump's strategy is to deal with the escalating social tensions through dictatorship.

The lie at the core of Mamdani's campaign is that Trump can be opposed and the social crisis alleviated via the Democratic Party, without addressing the fundamental cause, the profit system. His platform of modest social reforms is bitterly opposed by the establishment, not because of its supposed radical character, but because they fear it will raise expectations in the working class that can't be contained within the two-party system.

The WSWs discussed Mamdani's campaign and the housing crisis with New York City residents at Atlantic Terminal, a shopping mall and mass transit hub in Brooklyn.

A single mother with two children living on disability told the WSWs, "I am living in public housing. I live in the NYCHA [New York City Housing Authority] Albany Project in Crown Heights. It took me two years on the waiting list to get in. I live on a disability check. I get \$980 a month, and I pay \$400 a month for a two-bedroom apartment. This is for three people, myself and two daughters."

Around 500,000 residents live in NYCHA developments, which charge rent based on a percentage of income. However, the very low incomes of many residents make it difficult to pay even the relatively modest rents. As of last year, NYCHA residents accrued around \$500 million in unpaid rent, a significant increase from previous years.

Furthermore, decades of underfunding at all levels of government have led to decaying infrastructure and a wide range of problems, including mold, lack of reliable heat and hot water, broken elevators, and rodent infestations. NYCHA has an estimated \$60 billion in capital needs, with a mere 14 percent of that sum currently budgeted in its five-year plan.

“They want to bring private developers into NYCHA to build apartment buildings that rent at market rates to pay for NYCHA public housing that they have cut the federal funding for,” the disabled mother continued. “There are no private developments in the Albany Project yet, but there are a lot of vacant apartments there. It looks like they are not filling the apartments up because they want to turn the public housing around.”

A nurse who is trying to find housing in the city said, “I am looking for a one-bedroom apartment, but everything is \$2,800 or \$3,200 a month, and that is not in the best neighborhoods. I have been looking for two months, but I can still afford it. What will happen to people who cannot afford it?”

Rents city-wide have increased more than 18 percent in the last five years, according to data from Realtor.com. In working-class and low-income neighborhoods, this figure is significantly higher. In the Bronx, New York’s poorest borough, rents increased by 41.2 percent since 2020. The median asking rent in each of the five boroughs now exceeds \$3,000 per month.

The nurse explained, “I was a big Bernie Sanders supporter in 2016 and 2020. I was in the crowd of 29,000 people who greeted Bernie in New York City. But what has he done? Nothing.”

A public school teacher in the Williamsburg neighborhood said, “I voted for Mamdani in the primary. As a teacher, I understand how important it is to fund education. Mayor Adams has cut the funding for libraries, parks, and public schools while funding more charter schools.

“[Mamdani] wants to freeze rent, but they already have raised the rents on rent-controlled apartments for this year. The crisis of housing is just so blatant.”

Another worker, Shane, when asked what she thought was the greatest social problem in New York, responded, “Homelessness, housing. They are impossibly expensive. The MTA transit fares are ridiculous and getting worse. We need better service. Bus drivers need raises. They are cutting service. There are hospitals being closed, but there are a lot of mentally ill people in the street since COVID. If someone is picked up by ambulance, they may not get the care they need. They are not thinking of the working person. Costs will go up. The minimum wage should be at least \$24 or \$25 per hour.

“I don’t know about Mamdani, but we need to be taking the people in office out of office,” she said. “I don’t know if we can change the Democratic Party. Some people sitting in some seats need a new perspective.”

A young man working in a retail warehouse explained his support for Mamdani. “The housing crisis is artificially

manufactured,” he said. “There are thousands of empty apartments. A girl I know is paying eight grand a month for a one-bedroom apartment. That is insane. If Mamdani wins, I think it will open the door to more people who want change. I voted for Harris because there was no other alternative running. But look what it has gotten us into.”

A city worker for more than 20 years said, “My adult kids can’t afford housing. They stay with me even though they don’t want to live at home. It’s ridiculous. They don’t pay you. They earn very little and cannot pay for anything.

“But I believe it’s the younger generation who will stir things up for the better. The current system is not working. Who’s going to make sure it works for the younger generation in 50 years?”

A real estate owner told the WWSWS, “The housing market is falling apart. A two-bedroom is \$3,000 right now. How is the regular guy going to afford that? We are in big trouble. All the poor people will have to move out of New York City and move to Pennsylvania, Florida.

“The rich people got control of this country a long time ago. We haven’t been paying attention, you know? We stand aside and watch them attack Iraq. We watch them attack all these countries over there, for oil, kill everybody. Sooner or later, they are going to come and kill you, too. They say they come for us today; they come for you tomorrow?”

Asked about Mamdani’s plan to freeze rents, he said, “He has no control over that. The Democratic Party is already coming against him. That guy [House Minority Leader Hakeem] Jeffries is already talking against him. How can he be talking about their own party like that? Mamdani won fair and square.”

“I thought about socialism, and I see that is the only way to go right now,” he said. “We have no chance. The politicians are all corrupt. They all got their hands out.”



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