The DSA in power: An evaluation of 8 months of Zohran Mamdani as mayor of New York

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Two events over the past several days embody the character of the New York City government of Mayor Zohran Mamdani, a member of the Democratic Socialists of America.

First, Mamdani made a point of shaking hands with the disgraced former Mayor Rudy Giuliani at the 9/11 memorial event Friday morning. Giuliani, the arch Trump conspirator and fascist provocateur, had spent the previous days denouncing Mamdani in the vilest Islamophobic terms and demanding the current mayor not attend the memorial.

The handshake with Giuliani symbolizes Mamdani's political accommodation with the far right, solidified during two meetings with Trump at the White House. The second meeting occurred just days before Trump launched the criminal war in Iran, which, alongside the mass destruction of civilian infrastructure and the slaughter of thousands, including schoolchildren, sent the cost of energy skyrocketing.

The "war on terror," supported by both parties in response to the September 11 terrorist attacks, was used to justify the long-planned wars in the Middle East and to erect the mass surveillance state, ultimately directed at suppressing the working class. Mamdani avoided any criticism of the crimes carried out in the name of 9/11, as they are off limits as far as the ruling class is concerned.

Two days earlier, Mamdani stood alongside two of his top NYPD officials, billionaire Commissioner Jessica Tisch and Deputy Commissioner for Intelligence and Counterterrorism Rebecca Weiner, at a press conference on security plans for the anniversary. Weiner stressed that the threat of terrorism has geographically decentralized and diversified ideologically since 2001, including "a proliferation of threats coming from conspiracy theories, grievances, nihilistic violence, far left, far right, antigovernment, all of those things."

Weiner's attribution of terrorism threats to the "far left" is extremely ominous given that she was personally responsible for coordinating the NYPD's intelligence activities during the police attack on the student anti-genocide encampment at Columbia University, where she is also a professor. The ruling class is intensely concerned by the growth of left-wing and anti-war sentiment and determined to use all resources at its disposal to suppress it—above all, the massive surveillance and spying apparatus erected under the auspices of the "war on terror."

These two exemplify Mamdani's role as administrator of the capitalist state, which has developed since his election.

It is now more than eight months since Mamdani was inaugurated as mayor of New York, and it is necessary to draw a balance sheet. Such an evaluation is critical to prepare for the period ahead, which will include many shocks as the unprecedented political and social crisis continues to deepen in the United States.

An administration assembled to reassure the ruling class

Over 1 million people voted for Mamdani, and tens of thousands actively volunteered for his campaign, driven by anger over social conditions and extraordinary inequality. Last year, Wall Street bonuses reached a record $49.2 billion, and the median asking rent for a one-bedroom apartment in the city now exceeds $4,000 a month. At the same time, Mamdani's own Mayor's Office of Equity and Racial Justice reported in April that 5.04 million New Yorkers—61.8 percent of city residents—lack the resources to meet the cost of living.

Mamdani addressed this "affordability" crisis in his campaign, promising free childcare, free buses and frozen rents, and presenting himself as the antidote to both the hated regime of Donald Trump and the despised, pro-corporate, pro-war Democratic Party establishment. His election reflected a widespread desire to fight back against an oligarchy responsible for intensifying war, dismantling democratic rights and soaring inequality.

The first answer Mamdani gave to those who elected him was written not in a program but in a list of appointments.

From the outset, Mamdani staffed his administration with figures intended to convince the political establishment and big business in New York that the DSA is not a threat to their core interests. Retaining police commissioner Jessica Tisch was the most prominent example, meeting a demand of the corporate executives and of the Zionist organizations that had campaigned for her.

Tisch underscored what her retention meant in May, when she marched in the Israel Day parade her own mayor was boycotting—the parade at which the sanctioned Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich made a surprise appearance. "It's the mayor's decision not to march," Tisch said, "and it's my decision to march proudly."

Mamdani's first deputy mayor is longtime party operative Dean Fuleihan, who "knows where all the bodies are buried," in the approving words of Kathryn Wylde, president of the Partnership for New York City, the city's most prominent business association. Mamdani also appointed several former Biden administration officials to top posts and last month established a business advisory council consisting of corporate executives from finance, real estate, healthcare and retail.

These appointments underscored that whatever the left rhetoric Mamdani deploys, his administration represents a fundamental continuity with his predecessors, not a break. He is trying to manage the capitalist state rather than challenge it.

This continuity is expressed most clearly with respect to the NYPD, which Mamdani has gone out of his way to show deference to. After two separate police killings in the last two weeks, Mamdani rushed to issue statements defending the officers involved. On August 31, officers shot and killed Pamela Cisneros, a 49-year-old woman in mental health crisis, in Times Square. Four days later they shot and killed Chaun Bottom, 41, who had climbed the suspension cables of the Brooklyn Bridge. "I want to thank the NYPD officers who stepped in and prevented a horrific attack from becoming even worse," the mayor declared of the first.

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He has maintained the "broken windows" policing strategy introduced in New York City by Rudy Giuliani to enforce laws against low-level crime aggressively, along with the vast NYPD surveillance apparatus and the hated Strategic Response Group, the unaccountable unit often used to assault protesters—a unit Mamdani pledged during the campaign to disband and has instead left intact.

Austerity and the confrontation with the working class

Mamdani is proving he will abide by the law-and-order requirements of the capitalist class as it prepares to implement unprecedented austerity measures and as working-class struggle emerges.

His budget this year offered a preview of the austerity demands to come. Initially faced with a budget deficit of $12.6 billion, reduced by February to $7 billion, the bulk of the remaining shortfall was offset at the direct expense of the working class.

Mamdani went to Albany to win a two-year extension of the state's class-size law, cutting planned hiring from 6,000 teachers to 1,000 and saving the city some $543 million this year. A further $1.8 billion was found by re-amortizing the obligations owed to four of the city's five pension funds, deferring payments onto an 11-year schedule whose costs begin rising again in 2033.

His promises to increase taxes on millionaires and corporations hit a dead end. Instead, he worked out a meager substitute with Governor Kathy Hochul, a *pied-à-terre* tax meant to raise revenue from the second homes of ultra-wealthy non-residents. However, legal loopholes like wealthy owners moving properties into LLCs or trusts are expected to yield far less than the projected $500 million, a sum that, even if achieved, will do little to shore up the city's finances.

Over the past eight months, a direct confrontation with the working class has begun to emerge. Shortly after his inauguration, on January 12, nearly 15,000 nurses struck at three large hospital systems. Three days before the walkout began, Hochul had already signed an emergency order permitting out-of-state nurses to staff the struck hospitals: The scabbing operation was authorized in advance. Mamdani postured as an ally of workers, appearing on the picket line twice to call for a return to negotiations, urging "both sides" to reach a deal that "honors our nurses and keeps our hospitals open."

On February 5, the 25th day of the strike, he endorsed Hochul for re-election. Mamdani worked behind the scenes with NYSNA (New York State Nurses Association) President Nancy Hagans to shut down the strike, triggering a near-revolt against the union president by nurses at NewYork Presbyterian.

By the time of the next strike, the Long Island Rail Road (LIRR) walkout in May, Mamdani refused to be seen anywhere near the picket lines, fearful of consequences for city finances if a precedent was set for significant wage increases. He said only that he was "hopeful that both sides will be able to reach a fair deal." Mamdani and the rest of the political establishment also wanted to avoid encouraging militancy among subway and bus workers, whose contract expired the same midnight the LIRR walkout began. Mamdani meanwhile publicized the state's strikebreaking contingency plan, under which the MTA ran shuttle buses to partially replace LIRR service.

Over the summer, this confrontation with workers took on a more direct character. In August, Mamdani fired Haitian municipal workers—at least dozens by the city's own account, and possibly hundreds—after the Supreme Court cleared the way for the Trump administration's revocation of Temporary Protected Status.

Perhaps most significantly, Mamdani moved against a $10,000 bonus for school paraprofessionals, some of the lowest-paid public sector workers, with starting pay in the low $30,000s. The City Council had passed the bonus unanimously and it became law in August. Mamdani's administration went to court to overturn it, invoking New York's Taylor Law, a reactionary anti-worker bill that prevents public workers from striking.

"We will not allow the political process to replace the collective bargaining table," the administration declared. That is, whatever laws may exist cannot interfere with the ability of the trade union apparatus, working with the state, to sell the workers out. The mayor elected on a promise to defend immigrants and raise up the lowest paid invoked federal law to fire immigrant workers and an anti-strike statute to block the raise for the lowest paid.

Meanwhile, the roughly 90,000 city workers covered by DC 37's citywide contract face its expiration on November 6, and 40,000 transit workers have been without a contract since May. While the city does not directly employ transit workers, their agreements typically align with city labor contracts.

Workers are fighting not only for wage increases that offset the huge cost of living but also for improvements to safety and other working conditions. This was brought to the fore on September 3, when Moet McCullum, a 41-year-old mother of three with 11 months on the job, was struck and killed by a D train at the 161st Street–Yankee Stadium station while setting up flagging lights for overnight construction. The train operator reported seeing no warning lights. Over decades, the city, state and federal governments have refused to make the infrastructure investments needed to prevent such tragedies, which have become common.

Bolstering the trade union apparatus, the Democratic Party

A major part of Mamdani's strategy for containing workers' struggles is relying on the trade union bureaucracy. On Labor Day, he announced a new initiative, the Mayor's Office of Worker Power, to promote unionization, particularly in the private sector. The new office will be headed by Tony Perlstein, a former organizing director of the UAW, and supervised by Deputy Mayor for Economic Justice Julie Su, the former acting labor secretary under Joe Biden.

Far from empowering workers, the office institutionalizes the trade union bureaucracy's role as a management agency, ensuring that class conflict is absorbed and neutralized through the unions rather than expressed through independent rank-and-file action. This is precisely the service Perlstein and Su have long performed for the ruling class.

As acting labor secretary, Su worked hand in glove with union officials to push through the sellout contract at Boeing and to suspend the 2024 dockworkers' strike with a wage deal and a contract extension. When UAW member and presidential candidate Will Lehman challenged the conduct of the UAW's first direct officer election, in which barely 9 percent of the membership voted, Su's Labor Department refused to investigate. A federal judge ruled the refusal "arbitrary and capricious."

The core political function of Mamdani and the DSA is to direct the seething anger of workers and youth into the safe channels of the Democratic Party, which they claim can be transformed. Yet in the first eight months of his administration, Mamdani has proven to be a prop for the very establishment he is supposedly transforming. He cemented an alliance with the pro-business Governor Hochul, endorsing her re-election in the middle of a strike whose strikebreaking she had authorized, and reaffirmed his support for House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries as future House Speaker.

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That reaffirmation came on August 24, one day after the *New York Times* reported that Jeffries had met privately with Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner to explore "common ground" on housing, immigration and the cost of living. "I continue to support Congressman Jeffries and his bid to become the leader," Mamdani said.

Underlying the entire perspective of the DSA is the lie that the Democratic Party and its masters on Wall Street can be pressured to the left, thereby redirecting some of the wealth from the fortunes of the elite to the masses of working people. Mamdani and the DSA take a view of capitalism and the American state as fundamentally stable. They deny that the crisis of capitalism is driving the reversal of social reforms over the past six decades. Instead, they present austerity, along with inequality and war, as merely the result of policy choices, divorced from underlying causes.

Under conditions where the United States has surpassed $40 trillion in debt—a threshold crossed in August, barely five months after the $39 trillion mark—the bond market is in historic turmoil, the dollar's status as reserve currency is in danger, and the AI bubble is on the verge of bursting, the ruling class is not offering up new social programs to alleviate the conditions for struggling workers. It is cutting food aid, slashing healthcare subsidies and redirecting funding to the military and police forces. The capitalist class is responding to the crisis with expanding war and dictatorship.

In return for his services, Mamdani is tolerated only up to a certain point. As far as the Democratic establishment and the ruling class are concerned, any impulse encouraging the independent political expression of the working class must be suppressed.

Conclusions that must be drawn

The social anger Mamdani rode into office has not been dissipated. In fact, it is increasing as the consequences of war, increased exploitation and the steps towards dictatorship reveal themselves. Nor is it confined to New York City. The same processes are producing strikes, mass demonstrations against genocide and austerity, and the collapse of confidence in every established institution across the United States and internationally.

The ruling class understands this far better than Mamdani and the DSA. Its preparations that Mamdani now administers—the surveillance apparatus, the militarized police, the austerity machinery, the absorption of the union bureaucracy into the state—are responses to what it knows is coming. The objective crisis is driving toward an eruption of working-class struggle that neither Mamdani nor the oligarchy can contain within the framework of the two-party system.

What has been posed in New York will be posed elsewhere. DSA and DSA-backed candidates have been winning Democratic Party primaries in many cities and are playing an increasingly direct role in the state apparatus. Each will confront the same contradiction, and each will resolve it as Mamdani has, because what is at issue is not the actions of an individual but the social character of a program and perspective.

Those are not the interests of the working class. The DSA articulates the outlook of privileged sections of the upper middle class, layers whose position rests on the very institutions Mamdani now administers or collaborates with: the Democratic Party, the trade union apparatus, the universities and foundations, the municipal bureaucracy. What they seek is not the expropriation of the oligarchy but a redistribution of positions within the existing order—a larger share and a seat at the table where austerity is decided. This is why every representative of this tendency who takes office arrives at the same destination, whatever his personal intentions.

The only politics adequate to this situation is one that organizes the working class as an independent, conscious force. This cannot be done through the Democratic Party, which is an instrument of the class enemy, nor through the trade-union bureaucracy, which functions to police the workers.

It requires building rank-and-file committees in workplaces and neighborhoods, through which workers can take the conduct of their own struggles out of the hands of bureaucrats and politicians, and uniting them across industries and national borders in the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

These struggles of the working class require political leadership, and that can only be provided by the construction of a workers' party that consciously fights for the expropriation of the banks, corporations and real-estate monopolies, the reorganization of production to meet social need rather than private profit, and the replacement of the capitalist state with a state of the working class. Building that party, and leading that fight on an international basis, is the program of the Socialist Equality Party.

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