Mamdani keeps Rikers Island open until 2032 under pretense of closing the notorious jail “once and for all”

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24 November 2026

New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani unveiled a plan last week to close the notorious Rikers Island jail complex by the end of 2032. At the press conference announcing the plan, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) Mayor declared, “I am proud that New York City will close Rikers Island once and for all.” But the plan does more to keep Rikers open than it does to close it.

City law, passed by the City Council in October 2019, requires the city to end incarceration on Rikers by August 31, 2027. Mamdani’s plan, pending City Council approval, throws out that deadline and replaces it with December 31, 2032—six years from now, and three years after the end of his current term. In the meantime, the city will pour billions of dollars into four new borough-based jails, including a jail tower in Manhattan’s Chinatown that would be the tallest jail in the world. At the same time, the plan cites a projection of more than $1.2 billion a year in staffing savings once Rikers closes and promotes the long-term savings of a “more efficient” jail system.

Politicians have been promising to close Rikers for more than a decade. Mamdani’s press release states that his plan advances “an effort first championed in 1979.” In 2017, Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio endorsed a plan to shut Rikers by 2026 under an $8.7 billion plan for four new jails. De Blasio boasted that the commitment was “ironclad” and that no future administration could reverse it. The date soon slid to 2027. The WSWS warned at the time that the closure may not come and that shutting Rikers would only shift the abuse to other facilities while the poverty, homelessness and inequality that feed mass incarceration went untouched.

Mayor Eric Adams missed all eight legal deadlines to transfer Rikers land out of the Department of Correction (DOC) during his four years in office. Mamdani, who in April called the 2027 deadline “practically impossible to fulfill,” is now writing that failure into law. According to the *New York Times*, his “Close Rikers Strategic Plan” closely resembles the 51-page report de Blasio released in 2017.

Mamdani’s own record on the borough jails is revealing. As a candidate he criticized the Borough-Based Jails program as a continuation of mass incarceration, and in 2019 he opposed the City Council’s closure plan. In office, he has made himself its most enthusiastic champion.

Rikers, the largest single-site jail complex in the United States, has been synonymous with brutality for nearly a century. The city built the island up out of garbage, much of it hauled by incarcerated labor, and a Bronx court found conditions there “nearly unlivable” as early as 1939, according to the plan’s own history. In 2014, the US Attorney’s office in Manhattan reported a “deep-seated culture of violence” on the island. The following year, 22-year-old Kalief Browder committed suicide after spending three years on Rikers as a youth—some 700 days of them in solitary confinement—because his family could not pay $3,000 bail on a charge of stealing a backpack. Between August and December 2016 alone, an independent monitor documented 305 blows by guards to detainees’ heads.

In 2021 amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the WSWS described an “escalating crisis of inmate death, sickness, filth and barbaric violence” on the island. At least 16 people died in city custody that year, six of them by suicide, and the federal monitor called it the most dangerous year in his appointment. Lawmakers who toured the complex that September described overflowing toilets and floors covered in dead cockroaches, feces and rotting food. Public defenders testified that newly arrested people were being held for days and weeks in intake showers without beds or toilets, sleeping on floors covered in urine, vomit and feces.

More than 100 people have died on Rikers in the past decade.

The deaths have continued under Mamdani. Six people held on Rikers have died so far in 2026, according to the Vera Institute of Justice’s tracker, five of them inside the jail complex itself. The latest, 36-year-old Cesar Gabriel Medero Curet who was held pretrial, was found in his bed on November 10 having a medical emergency and pronounced dead minutes later. Barry Cozart, 39, held since November 2025 because he could not pay $30,000 bail, died in March of acute intoxication from methadone and gabapentin, according to the city’s Board of Correction. In May, two people died on the island within 24

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hours: Rajpattie Ramkellawan, 41 and Umais Khan, 40. Mamdani's 88-page plan does not mention a single one of these deaths.

The violence is so entrenched that the federal courts have effectively taken the jails out of City Hall's hands. In January, Federal Judge Laura Taylor Swain, who had found the city's pace of reform "unacceptably glacial," appointed Nicholas Deml, a former CIA officer and Vermont corrections commissioner, as "remediation manager" with sweeping powers over the DOC. In his first report in July, Deml wrote that the department "struggles to perform even the most basic correctional functions," including keeping people in custody safe from violence. The federal monitor reported in June that violence remains persistently high. Days after taking office, Mamdani renewed the Adams-era state of emergency on Rikers, which allows the DOC to ignore the Board of Correction's minimum standards and Local Law 42, the City Council's 2024 ban on solitary confinement.

About 6,700 people are held on Rikers today. When the City Council approved the borough jails in 2019, it promised to cut the jail population to 3,300. Mamdani's plan raises that target to 4,100, and the new system will hold about 4,500 beds once hospital-based units are counted.

Around 85 percent of the people held in city jails, including Rikers, have not been convicted of anything and are awaiting trial. Mamdani's plan itself concedes that over half of those held at Rikers pretrial could await trial at home if they "only had the financial ability to pay their bail." The Mamdani administration, in other words, acknowledges that thousands are jailed for being poor, and proposes to keep them on Rikers for six more years.

People are also being held longer: the average jail stay rose from 63 days in 2017 to 102 days in 2025. Part of the administration's answer to these court delays is more resources for the police, including expanded NYPD forensic and discovery units and an upgraded NYPD–district attorney arrest portal. Its funding for everything else is meager: $50 million for programs inside the jails, $30 million next fiscal year for supportive housing and similar programs, and $67.5 million to demolish decommissioned buildings.

The brutality of Rikers is not an aberration that can be fixed by a new building or a new timetable. Replacing one island of misery with four modern high-rise jails does not end mass incarceration. It modernizes it, while delivering billions in contracts to construction firms. The price tag for the new jails has soared to about $16 billion from $8.7 billion, according to the *Times*. Under the plan, the Brooklyn jail is to open in 2029, the Bronx and Queens jails in 2031, and the Manhattan jail in 2032. The Manhattan facility at 125 White Street in Chinatown alone costs $3.76 billion. Chinatown residents have opposed the project for years and proposed instead that the site be used for affordable housing amid skyrocketing rents. Mamdani, who campaigned on housing, has pressed ahead with the jail.

The Rikers announcement follows a pattern that has defined Mamdani's first year in office: a modest administrative change is repackaged as a bold executive achievement. Last week, Mamdani also announced he was "disbanding" the NYPD's Strategic Response Group (SRG), the unit notorious for brutalizing protesters. As the WSWS wrote, "The plan does not disband the SRG. It renames it." Its crowd-control functions are being handed to a new Patrol Support Division and a 30-officer armed "First Amendment Support Team." Billionaire-heiress and Zionist NYPD Commissioner Jessica Tisch bluntly stated ,"nothing would change about the way that the NYPD responds to crowd control conditions."

In an article, titled, "How New York's billionaire top cop and socialist mayor are making it work," the *Wall Street Journal* said Saturday that Tisch and Mamdani "have managed to form a partnership that has underpinned his first 11 months in office, helping to keep crime rates low and assuage...the leaders of the city's business and Jewish communities."

Workers must draw the necessary conclusions. The people held on Rikers are drawn overwhelmingly from the poorest layers of the city, driven into crisis by poverty, homelessness, untreated mental illness and addiction. But new prisons are being constructed, and the repressive institutions of the capitalist state is being strengthened in anticipation of mass protests and strikes as the aspirations of workers and young people collide with the austerity measures Mamdani is preparing to implement on behalf of Wall Street.

The fight against mass incarceration and police repression requires the independent industrial and political mobilization of the working class, including millions of workers in transit, city, logistics, construction, health care, public education, food service and other sectors. This means building rank-and-file committees to defend the social and democratic rights of workers and young people and breaking politically with the Democratic Party and the DSA.

Only by placing society's vast resources under the democratic control of the working class, to guarantee every person housing, healthcare, education, a job and a decent livelihood, can the social roots of crime, and with them the need for jails, be eliminated.



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