“You’re living to just pay bills”: Brooklyn residents speak on hunger, rents and the deadly Flatbush collapse

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On Tuesday night, hundreds of residents lined up around the block for a Thanksgiving food giveaway at the Madison Square Boys & Girls Club in Flatbush, Brooklyn.

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to residents about the cost of living, the deadly building collapse in the neighborhood earlier this month and the broken campaign promises of Democratic Mayor Zohran Mamdani, a member of the Democratic Socialists of America.

“Look at the lines here,” said a retired home health aide who has lived in the neighborhood for years. “These are people who work in the area. A lot of them come from work and a lot of them can’t afford to even complete a Thanksgiving dinner, so they’re standing on these lines.”

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Reflecting on the growing need for food assistance in the neighborhood, the retiree said, “There was a time we would never be out here at this hour. We would never be on lines like this. We didn’t have this problem before.”

“I’m on this line, so we have nothing. Food pantries is how we make ends meet,” said another Flatbush resident, born and raised in Brooklyn. “My oldest son was able to get on food stamps for a while, but they took it away. He got unemployment because he lost his job, and the unemployment was over the amount for food stamps.”

The same resident explained the difficulties of making ends meet even in households with multiple incomes.

“It feels like you have to pick between one or the other, or you have to really, really budget yourself. It has to be a very tight budget. Even if you have two-income households or multiple-income households, you still have to budget. And even sometimes that budget isn’t really enough. And if it is enough, then you don’t have enough to save for a rainy day.”

“You’re living to just pay bills and feed yourself. There’s nothing else on the side.”

The resident also spoke about growing social inequality in the city.

“I think that there’s a very large separation of the rich and the poor. As we can clearly see, the poor is increasing a lot more.”

“Many times people say, ‘Oh, go out and work,’ but there aren’t as many jobs as we think they are.”

Asked about Mamdani’s promises to make the city more affordable, the resident responded, “I don’t really see anything going down [in price]. I don’t see any of the apartments’ rent going down. I don’t see anything else really becoming affordable. He’s fixing a lot of potholes. That’s about it. That’s all I see.”

The Thanksgiving food distribution took place nearly two weeks after the November 11 building collapse in Flatbush that killed eight people, including two children, and injured at least 18 others. The disaster has exposed the consequences of decades of real estate speculation and the failure of successive city administrations to enforce housing and construction safety regulations.

“Whoever was doing the construction needs to be completely fired. Whoever was running it, all them,

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they need to be fired, and they don't need their construction license back," the lifelong Brooklyn resident said.

"It's a connecting building. That's like somebody breaking down this building right here that's connected to this building but not doing the research on that building. So why wouldn't you put a standing wall?"

The resident demanded that the construction company be put out of business and that the families affected by the collapse be fully compensated.

"They need to compensate all of those people with housing and all other supplies; everything should be covered. I don't feel like they should lift a finger for anything for not even the rest of the year, for the next year from now. Because that's a traumatic experience."

On November 3, voters approved five changes to the City Charter put forward by Mamdani's Commission on Government Efficiency, including a measure to centralize and speed up construction permitting and allow more Department of Buildings officials to approve projects.

The resident expressed concern that accelerating the approval of construction projects would lead to further disasters.

"I think the vote is going to cause more issues. It passed, but I did not vote for that because it's going to push things to go through faster and not go through the lines that it needs to go through."

The retiree attributed the disaster to the pursuit of profit by landlords and developers.

"It hurts to know that that happened even when it didn't have to because they were warned repeatedly. But then you have the rich landlords that only look out for their money and their sales. And they don't take people's lives into consideration. They were warned not to build that big building in between private houses. And they didn't listen. They did what they wanted to do."

"These landlords only care about making money. They really don't care about protecting the people who live in these buildings that they own and they should be held accountable for what they've done."

The collapse took place amid the rapid redevelopment of Flatbush, where new luxury apartment buildings are going up even as working-class residents struggle to pay rent in deteriorating and unsafe buildings.

"There are a lot of buildings going up around here and it's changing the neighborhood from what it used to be," the retiree said. "The luxury buildings are going up and the people who live in the area cannot afford any of these apartments."

The lifelong Brooklyn resident also expressed opposition to the Trump administration's assault on immigrants and democratic rights.

"I don't like the ICE raids. I don't think you should ever take away anyone's birthright [citizenship]. That's wrong. That's illegal and going against an amendment. I have an immigrant family. I just find it wrong."

"Immigrants built this whole entire country," the resident continued. "Nobody here is one race, one nation, one whatever. Everybody here, their family is from somewhere else and came here for whatever reason. Even the president, his family."

Asked about the eruption of strikes and mass protests across Europe, the retiree saw parallels with the situation confronting workers in the United States. "I assume they're going through something similar to what we're going through here. We just haven't gotten to that point yet. But if things continue to escalate, maybe we are going to end up in that situation too."

"We have to speak up," the retiree continued. "I think we all are in the struggle together, maybe in different ways, but we're all feeling it. The world, as we know, is not the same. Things are changing very fast with global warming and everything else. So we have a lot of work that needs to be done."

Asked about the need for the working class to take political power, the retiree responded, "Are you saying that you would rather see the worker, the average working person run society? You would like to see them run the government? Wow. That would be nice… that would be good if that would happen."

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