

THE

INDIA WALTON ON THE CUSP — P6 • INSIDE RIKERS ISLAND — P8

INDYPENDENT

#267: NOVEMBER 2021




DIRTY LAUNDRY

NYC LAUNDRY WORKERS ARE CLEANING UP AN ABUSIVE INDUSTRY

BY LACHLAN HYATT — P10

GARY MARTIN

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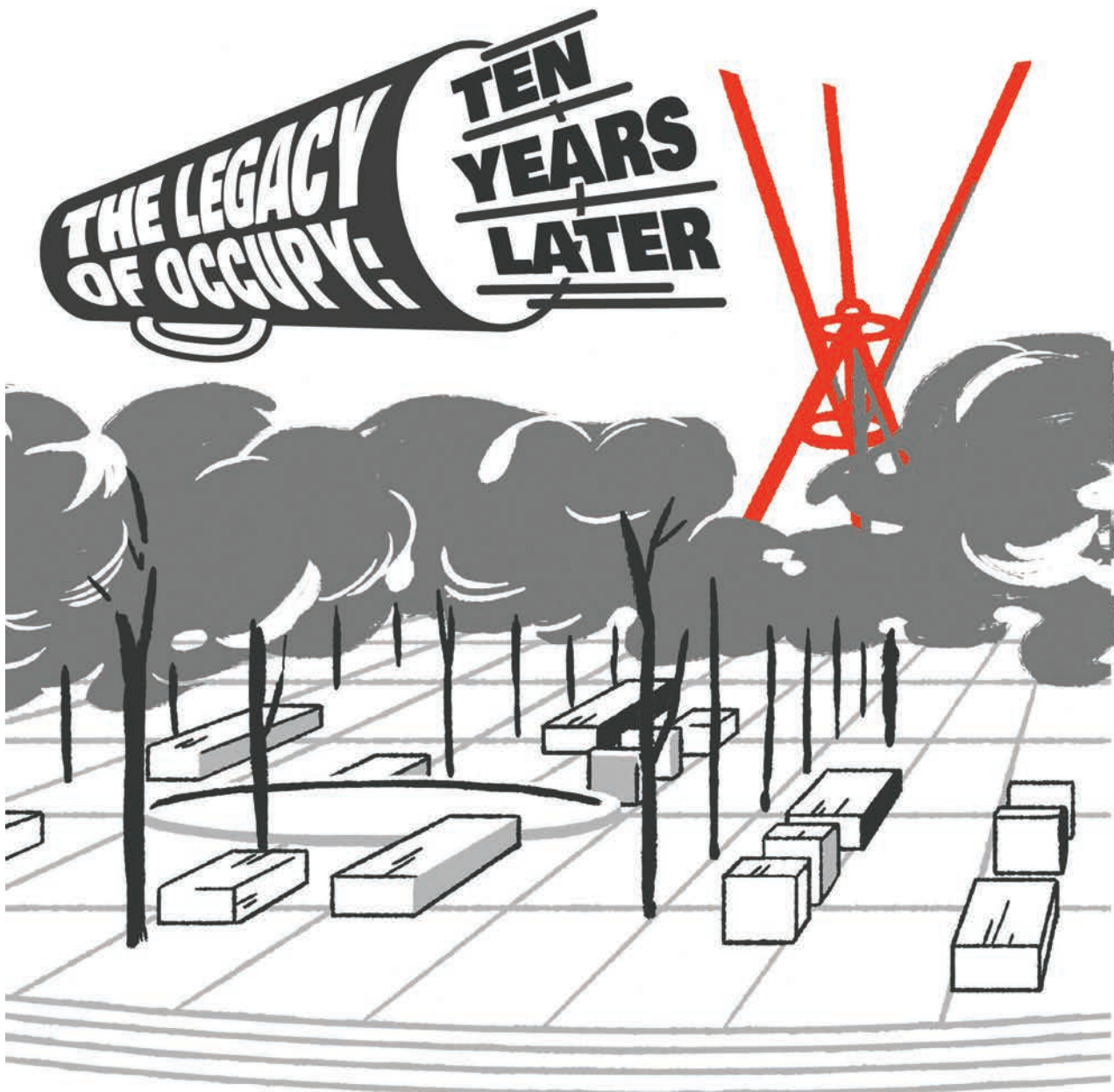
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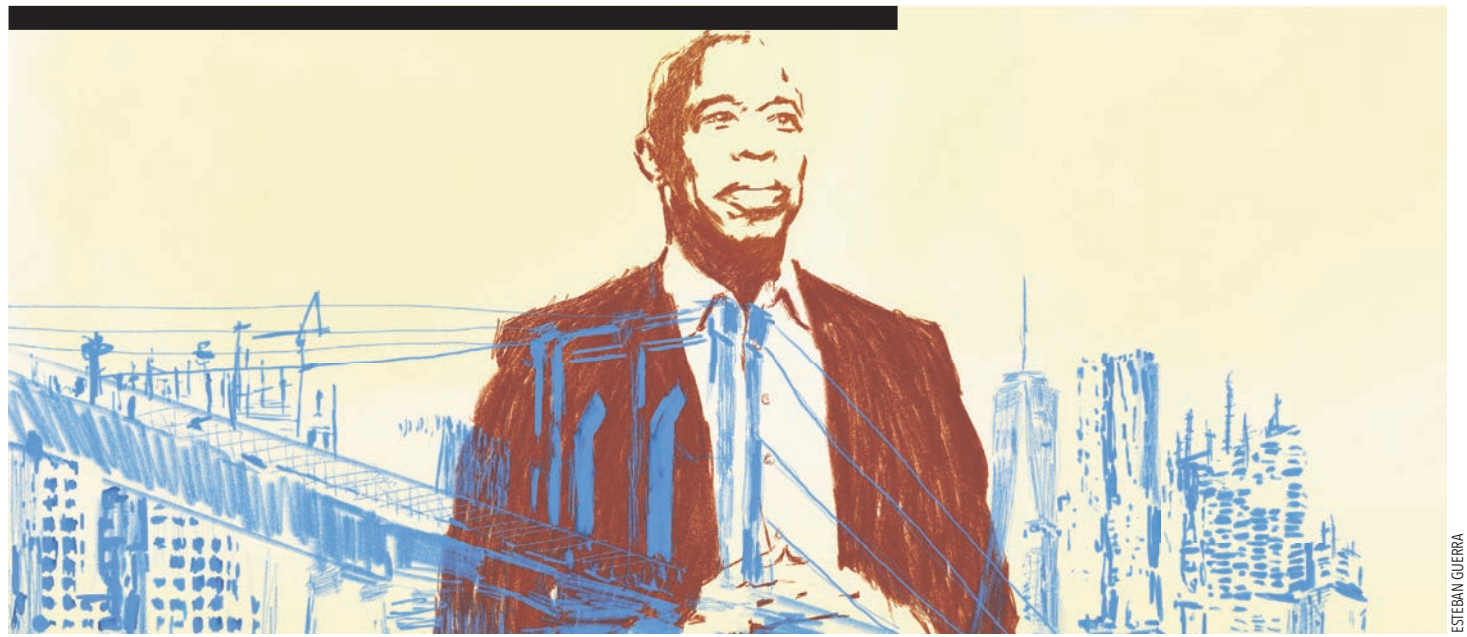
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NYC POLITICS



ESTEBAN GUERRA

ERIC ADAMS EMBRACES BIG REAL ESTATE. WHAT'S IN IT FOR THE REST OF US?

BY THEODORE HAMM

“Build, baby, build,” declared newly elected Brooklyn Borough President Eric Adams at a press conference near the Brooklyn Academy of Music in May 2014. “Build tall, build high,” advised Adams, performing the BP’s role as real estate booster.

This past June, a few miles up Lafayette Avenue in Brooklyn, Adams played the part of embattled mayoral candidate outside the Bed-Stuy building he owns and claims to call home. “I am real estate,” announced Adams, who is a landlord under investigation by the Department of Buildings for a possible illegal conversion of the basement unit into his purported residence.

En route to Adams’ victory in the June Democratic primary, many of Brooklyn’s leading real estate players — including Jed Walentas (DUMBO, Domino Sugar site, etc.), Andrew Kimball (Industry City) and Donald Capoccia (Bedford Armory) — helped build the outgoing borough president’s war chest. In recent months, many of the biggest names in Manhattan real estate, including Durst and Rudin, have joined the fundraising bandwagon.

A New York City politician who succeeds with the backing of leading real estate developers is hardly a new story. Bill de Blasio won in 2013 with the support of Bruce Ratner (Atlantic Yards), the Rudins and the “animal rights enthusiasts” who had designs on Upper West Side horse stables. Meanwhile, Kathryn Garcia, Adams’ leading challenger in June, was the candidate pushed by Alicia Glen, de Blasio’s deputy mayor for housing who had come from Goldman Sachs’ real estate investment wing.

None of the many mayoral candidates in the Democratic primary carried the support of the Democratic Socialists of America, which makes rejecting donations from real estate interests a prerequisite for its support. As *The Independent* reported during the primary, developers spent lots of money on attack ads against the DSA’s slate, thus helping Crystal Hudson take her former boss Laurie Cumbo’s seat in Central Brooklyn.

Despite hyperbolic claims by Adams that the “out-of-control” city has been “anti-business” under de Blasio, the dominance of the F.I.R.E. sector (finance, insurance and real estate) remains unchallenged. In late September, the *Real Deal* reported that the luxury

housing market in Manhattan had already surpassed the 2014 high of \$11 billion in transactions. Brooklyn home prices are also at record levels.

What’s good for developers and existing homeowners, of course, isn’t good for aspiring homeowners or renters. The current median rent in Brooklyn of \$2,650 is close to the pre-pandemic high, and while Manhattan’s median \$3,100 is \$400 shy of 2019, that’s still quite upscale. Given that Adams is in their corner, the Real Estate Board of New York (REBNY) may be sitting pretty. But what’s in store for everyone else?

• • •

Like all Democratic mayoral candidates in the last few cycles, Adams puts affordable housing front and center on his agenda. The first item on his list is to “up-zone wealthier areas where we can build far more affordable units.” That may sound like a laudable goal that would help working-class people gain access to neighborhoods with deep resources, but as *The Indy*’s Todd Fine documented, the proposed SoHo rezoning carries few guarantees that affordable units will be built.

Neighborhood activists, allied with incoming progressive City Councilmember Christopher Marte, have already forced City Planning to revise its initial blueprint. Even in the best-case scenario, fewer than 1,150 affordable units would be built over the next two decades — raising the question of whether up-zoning is a viable solution to the affordable housing crisis or just a way for luxury developers to cash in. In attempting to alter the character of wealthier neighborhoods, the Adams administration would thus engage in protracted battle with powerful, litigious foes. While Adams may score some political points for waging that fight, his administration may not end up creating many new affordable units for working-class families.

Meanwhile, Adams is also proposing to “think big by building small,” stating that he intends to overhaul the city’s “outdated rules” that prevent developers from “building the small, cheaper micro-units common around the world.”

Given that most of the city’s high-rise luxury towers are utterly devoid of aesthetic appeal, one can only wonder what these lower-end units will look like. Adams further calls for wide-scale legalization of basement apartments (like his own), although that would need to be accompanied by massive investment in flood prevention.

Much will depend on who Adams selects to lead his Department of City Planning. De Blasio’s appointment of veteran industry insider Carl Weisbrod in 2014 certainly pleased the REBNY crowd. Weisbrod’s successor, Marisa Lago, maintained a low profile until departing to work for the Biden administration at the end of September. Whether Adams will allow any of his key appointees — police commissioner, schools chancellor, etc. — to operate free from his control remains to be seen.

In his first term, Mayor Bloomberg — now a leading Adams financial supporter — pushed through the Downtown Brooklyn rezoning. Seventeen years later, we now see the results: an endless proliferation of high-rise luxury towers in an area devoid of basic amenities such as parks. Over the past eight years, Adams has presided over the transformation of the area from his perch at Borough Hall. Once central destinations in the lives of Black Brooklynites, the Fulton Street Mall and Albee Square Mall are now gentrified and the streets are quiet.

Alas, that’s life in REBNY’s city.



ROJAS FOR MAYOR CAMPAIGN

RUNNING TO THE LEFT

CATHY ROJAS OFFERS WORKING-CLASS NEW YORKERS AN ALTERNATIVE ON NOV 2

BY JOHN TARLETON

New Yorkers will cast one more ballot in this year's mayoral race when they go to the polls for the Nov. 2 general election. Former NYPD police captain and Democratic nominee Eric Adams is the overwhelming favorite. Celebrity vigilante Curtis Sliwa is the Republican nominee. Carrying the banner of unabashed millennial socialism is Cathy Rojas, a full-time Queens public school teacher and multi-issue activist who is running as the candidate of the Party for Socialism and Liberation, a smaller, further left analog to the Democratic Socialists of America. The DSA has made its name in New York politics by knocking off a half-dozen Democratic incumbents in the past three years but is not contesting this year's mayor's race.

Rojas, 30, races from one corner of the city to the next as her schedule permits. She is calling for universal rent control, a \$6 billion cut to the NYPD budget and the end of mayoral control of New York City's public schools. She's been endorsed by Brooklyn State Senator Julia Salazar and newly elected Harlem City Councilmember Kristin Jordan Richardson. According to her latest Campaign Finance Board filing, she's raised \$21,000, a total dwarfed by the \$19.8 million in private and matching public funds Adams has garnered this election cycle. When we talked on the phone, our conversation came on the heels of a full day of teaching for Rojas in addition to her campaign work.

"It's exhausting," Rojas said. "But bigger than feeling tired and exhausted is my love for humanity and my love for working-class people."

THE INDEPENDENT: On Nov. 2 New Yorkers will have the chance to vote for Eric Adams, the Democratic nominee, Brooklyn borough president, former state senator. Why should they vote for you instead?

CATHY ROJAS: Based on the people Eric Adams has been meeting with and the people who have been donating to his campaign, he has shown who he is and who he will be representing once he's in office. He is the candidate who has received the most amount of funding from real estate developers, from millionaires, from Republican candidates.

I have been meeting with public sector workers, with taxi drivers, with workers from Colombia. I've been going to rallies in support of abortion rights. I'm not a career politician. I'm a public school teacher, a community activist for 10 years, a daughter of immigrants born and raised in Queens. We need someone that not only comes from a working-class background, but continues to show that they are committed to putting the interests of working-class people first, not pandering to wealthy donors. I think that we need a New York City that's going to work for the New York City working class. That's why people should vote for me.

Tell us about your background and the experiences that led you to identify as a socialist.

I grew up in Woodside, Queens. My father was an auto body painter, my mother a housekeeper. At a very young age, I was going out with her to help with housekeeping. Later, I worked in restaurants as a hostess, a waitress, a bartender. I was a cook in a concession stand. I saw the juxtaposition of interests in the workplace — how the boss many times is really just trying to exploit your labor as much as possible in order to gain the largest amount of profit. That led me to try to build a union in the last restaurant that I was working in.

As for what made me a socialist, I think it was my experience in New York public schools. The schools were predominantly Black and Latino, but the teachers were predominantly white. They weren't invested in our well-being or empowerment. Many had racist ideas which led me to question why our culture was constantly being demonized. By sixth grade, I was seeing people being expelled or sent to juvie instead of receiving mental health services. In high school, I read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, and it became very clear that we are oppressed to protect the profits of the rich.

In college, I was active in a coalition of CUNY and SUNY students protesting budget cuts and tuition hikes. I've been a member of the Party for Socialism and Liberation for about five years now. I was one of the lead organizers in the campaign to kick out the proposed Amazon headquarters from Queens, which would have gentrified our community and displaced many working-class immigrant families. During the crux of the pandemic, I organized a weekly food delivery program when our un-

documented community was completely and totally neglected, and wasn't receiving any type of aid.

As mayor, how would you approach questions of policing and public safety differently from previous mayors?

I think we have to look at what works. Studies show the police spend only about 2% of their time solving major crimes. Most of the time they are targeting people for crimes of poverty — not paying their MTA fare, ticketing street vendors and so on. When we put people into the criminal justice system, that doesn't create real solutions for when they come out.

We need transformative solutions like violence intervention programs that have been tested in different New York communities and in other cities. They hire people recently out of jail who are respected by their peers but who no longer want to engage in violent acts and want to help move their community past violence. They are trained to be mediators and to do conflict resolution between different groups of people in order to prevent further violence. Because people know them, many times they are told when there may be a confrontation that will happen.

We know that the communities that have the lowest crime rates are those that are the most funded. Our platform calls for eradicating homelessness by enacting rent control in which nobody's paying more than 20% of their income for housing. We also want to fully fund education so students would have more access to after-school programs, to green space, to summer youth employment.

Eric Adams is overwhelmingly favored to win the election on November 2. What would you define as a successful outcome?

We want to expose as many New Yorkers as possible to our political platform. The power of the people is always greater than the power of any one politician. We want to see a New York City where the working class as a whole begins to demand this be a rent control city, where teachers demand an end to mayoral control of the school system, where there's a mass movement in favor of violence prevention programs as opposed to criminalization. If we receive 10,000 votes, that will be the highest vote total that a socialist candidate for mayor in New York City has received since 1957. It would demonstrate a movement in favor of socialist ideals, of working-class ideals, of creating a society that is rooted in humanity as opposed to profit.

CAMPAGNING: NYC mayoral candidate Cathy Rojas.

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ELECTIONS



LYNNE FOSTER

BUFFALO RISING SOCIALIST INDIA WALTON ON VERGE OF MAKING HISTORY

BY JOHN TARLETON

On June 23, a registered nurse and first-time mayoral candidate defeated Buffalo's four-term incumbent mayor, Byron Brown, in the Democratic primary to win one of the more shocking political upsets in New York history. After India Walton delivered her victory speech to a raucous crowd, an incredulous reporter asked if she was in fact a socialist.

"Oh, absolutely," Walton said without missing a beat. "The entire intent of this campaign is to draw down power and resources to the ground level, to the hands of the people."

Brown lost the primary by seven points but never conceded. He is now running a well-funded write-in general election campaign that seeks to portray his opponent as a dangerous extremist who will hike taxes, defund the police and let violent criminals run wild.

Walton has a compelling biography — grew up poor, had her first child at 14, got a GED, had premature twins at 19, became a nurse, a union activist and a community organizer — and she has proven to be a nimble campaigner with a gift for making "radical" ideas seem like common sense.

Housing should be decommodified, she insists. The community should benefit when private developers receive public subsidies. Cops should be held accountable for their actions. Schools should receive more funding, not less. Crime is reduced and public safety increased by alleviating poverty and the destabilizing effects it has on the lives of low-income people.

"We're not 'against' the wealthy," she tweeted in mid-October. "We just don't believe they have a right to dominate our society."

Should Walton win on November 2, she will be the first socialist to lead a major American city in 60 years. It would also be a milestone in the growth of the democratic socialist movement that took root during Bernie Sanders' two presidential runs. More than 100 democratic socialists have been elected to city councils, state legislatures and Congress since 2016.

Legislating and holding committee hearings is one thing. Wielding executive power and overseeing the day-to-day affairs of a major city is another. Not that it hasn't been done before. The "sewer socialists" — who were derided by their more ideologically-minded brethren for focusing on practical governance — presided over Milwaukee for much of a 50-year stretch that ended in 1960. More recently, Sanders was credited with revitalizing Burlington, Vermont during his four terms as mayor from 1981-1989 before he was elected to Congress.

Buffalo is closer geographically to Cleveland than New York City and normally goes unnoticed here in the Big Apple. Michael Niman, a professor of journalism and media studies at Buffalo State University, says the city already had the building blocks of a progressive political culture. This includes a high rate of unionization, long-running support for gay rights, a Black community with roots dating back to the Underground Railroad, a sprawling public parks system built at the height of Buffalo's late 19th century prosperity and numerous community land trusts which are a common, though chronically underfunded mechanism for creating permanently affordable housing in a city that was later

ravaged by decades of deindustrialization. However, Niman cautions that Walton's ascent shouldn't be seen in strictly ideological terms. After 15 years in office, he says, the incumbent mayor has simply alienated many people with an approach to city government premised on rewarding his well-heeled friends and punishing his foes.

"Byron Brown doesn't wake up each morning asking, 'What can I do to make life in Buffalo better?'" Niman said. "He's more Nixonian and wakes

up asked himself, 'How can I fuck over my enemies today?'"

According to Rob Galbraith, senior research analyst with the Buffalo-based Public Accountability Initiative, Brown has emphasized heavily subsidized, "silver bullet economic projects" such as the University of Buffalo's downtown medical campus and an unused \$950 million Tesla auto factory in South Buffalo. During his time as mayor, the city's poverty rate of 28% has remained largely unchanged while child poverty rests above 40%.

The neglect by city hall has led to "an escalation in organizing," Galbraith said, and a growing awareness among various community groups of a shared foe. "Among the activist community here," he added, "there's been an emerging class consciousness so that all of their [particular] critiques are genuinely critiques of capital."

Faced with a political insurgency that might put one of its own in city hall, western New York's ruling elites have responded by pouring money into Brown's write-in campaign. According to *Investigative Post*, a Buffalo-based, non-profit news site, Brown has raised \$851,000 for the general election with two-thirds of that sum coming from donations of \$1,000 or more. Brown's donors include Republican real estate developers who previously supported Donald Trump. Walton, meanwhile, has raised \$617,000 with more than half of that made up of small donations of \$100 or less. Brown's financial advantage allowed him to go on television first with ads slamming Walton.

"He's literally offering nothing but red baiting and just general, dishonest fearmongering about India," Galbraith said.

Walton has come under scrutiny for her use of food stamps as a young mother, for unpaid traffic tickets and for a 2014 arrest she has refused to comment on. Niman suspects the attacks may backfire and make Walton more sympathetic to the many Buffalonians who have experienced similar difficulties in their own lives. With Brown running as a write-in candidate, both Niman and Galbraith said the race was too unpredictable to forecast a winner.

"People have been resigned to the idea that government does not work for them, that it works for the people who are already rich," Galbraith said. "It's a very simple kind of bone-deep understanding a lot of people in Buffalo have. It's what propelled India to win in the first place in June, and it's the strongest sort of tailwind for her going into November."

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WHY RIKERS HAS UNRAVELED

INMATES AND STAFFERS DESCRIBE HOW THE PENAL COLONY BECAME A SITE OF UNIMAGINABLE HORRORS IN THE PAST YEAR

BY AMBA GUERGUERIAN

“**W**hen they need to be transferred to me for whatever reason, the ear is ripped off, the nose is ripped open, the eye is cut, the broken bones, if we can splint them, we do; cast them, we do,” says Nadyne Pressley, a nursing supervisor who has worked on Rikers Island since 2008. Pressley is currently working at the urgent care unit in the West Facility, one of the 10 jails on the island.

The three unions that represent the health-care workers on the island — 1199SEIU, SEIU Doctors Council and New York State Nurses Association — began pushing for safety fixes in 2019, but “in the last year it got more serious,” says Pressley, vice president of the nurses union’s corrections branch. “We need to know that we’re going to be able to go to work and return from work safely.”

That is not currently the case. Since August, the Rikers Island jail complex has been in the headlines for violence, egregiously bad living conditions for inmates, and lack of services. Mainstream media and politicians have framed the problems as the result of a shortage of correction officers (COs) over the past five months. While the lack of officers has certainly exacerbated worsening conditions, jail staff was calling for reform a year before the shortage began.

• • •

Correctional Center, commonly known as “The Boat,” a five-story jail barge anchored off the Bronx, across the East River from Rikers.

It has similar problems. “We have black maggots coming out of the drains,” Broadnax says.

When COs started being absent in droves in April — around 1,000 quit (some joining the police) and an average of 1,000 more calling out sick every day — the situation became dire. Every activity by prisoners, whether it be getting the mail, going to the clinic, getting food, being moved out of intake or using the law library, is attended by a guard. With the number of COs on duty reduced by as much as one-third, there’s been a decline in not only safety measures, but in services. When there’s a decline in services, inmates become aggravated and more likely to act violently.

Medical staff, often confronted with a prisoner at their wits’ end, are being assaulted. Female corrections officers — who make up 60% of all guards — are regularly reporting sexual harassment from those incarcerated. Assaults on other inmates are at a high, with COs often taking little to no action to stop the assailants.

Cleveland Broadnax is currently in protective custody, and says even that’s not a safe place: One Monday morning, he saw two men jump three others, and no jail staff stepped in. “To be in protective custody and be subjugated to this kind of violence is bad, especially when it goes unmonitored,” he said. He also saw a man being beaten with a cane so badly that his scalp split open.

Thirteen prisoners have died so far this year, the highest rate since 2015, about half of them confirmed suicides. When Broadnax walked through Rikers’ intake building in September, he witnessed “two people tried to hang themselves. Or they did hang themselves, but they didn’t die.”

Newly arrived prisoners are not supposed to stay in intake for more than 24 hours, because in those cells, commonly referred to as the “bullpen,” they don’t receive regular meals, a bed or medical care. Lately, it’s been common for them to spend a week in intake.

“When I got to Rikers, I was in the bullpen for about five days. It looks like a slave ship in there. There were like 30 of us piled in there. People were laying beside each other all the way up to the wall, under the bench, and all the way up to the bars,” a prisoner identified as Jeffrey, who was admitted on September 7, told the Marshall Project.

Rikers Island is the largest provider of mental-health services in New York City. “I see lost souls. The system has failed them. When they leave us, there is nothing for them,” says Paulette McGee, a nurse in mental services. “This helps explain the high recidivism.”

About half the prisoners being held at Rikers have been diagnosed with a mental illness. They all need healthcare upon arrival, as do those with injuries or chronic illnesses.

Because of the staffing shortage, though, many are not being taken to the medical centers on the island. “Out of 200, 300 we’re supposed to see in a day, we’re seeing maybe 25, 30,” says Pressley. “To look at the list of patients that haven’t shown up ...” She shudders. “What they call it is ‘not produced.’ They don’t say that they don’t have DOC escorts, that DOC can’t move them. They just say the patient is not produced.”

This means that those incarcerated are regularly missing their daily medications, such as antipsychotics, insulin and methadone, and someone with a severe injury may wait for days before being treated or not get treated at all. It is in this atmosphere that those incarcerated on Rikers Island and those who work on the island are abusing and neglecting each other.

“I used to think guys were crazy for acting the way they do, but now I see that you get better results when you act out,” Broadnax said across the two small tables that separate loved ones from reaching each other during visiting hours. I had waited two extra hours to see him because an alarm had gone off on the facility.

He explained that when a service is seriously lacking, either an individual or a group of incarcerated people will run out of their dorms as soon as the dorm door opens, causing an alarm across the jail, which freezes all action and forces the issue to be attended to. “We call it ‘sticking up.’ It’s a faster way of getting what you want. The guards respect violence.”

William Valentin, a retired CO, inadvertently shares the opinion. “The only way to deal with violent inmates, I’m sorry to say, is with violence.”

• • •

ON AUGUST 17, representatives from healthcare workers unions and the Correctional Officers Benevolent Association, the union that represents 9,000 active-duty COs, held separate rallies in front of the entrance to the island in Queens, calling for safer working conditions. One word got out that COBA would be present, decarceral

WHEN THE COVID-19 VIRUS HIT RIKERS, the city Department of Correction (DOC) didn’t keep the spread to a minimum. Prisoners told me that guards often went maskless, cleaning supplies were hard to come by, aging buildings were reopened for use as inadequately administered quarantines, programming and services were cancelled, and health-care was difficult to access.

“I got COVID real bad. Most of the room was very sick. People caught COVID, they took them out but put them right back in our unit within four, five days and it spread like wildfire,” says Cleveland Broadnax, who has been incarcerated for 28 months awaiting trial. He spent his first year on Rikers and then was moved to the Vernon C. Bain



DANIEL FISHER

groups staged a counter-protest across the street.

COBA members were by far the largest contingent, with at least 300 present. Union president Benny Boscio spoke to the crowd about Mayor Bill de Blasio's failures, and lamented COs being made to work triple and even quadruple "tours," shifts of 24-36 hours. DOC started putting COs on triple shifts early this year, before the staffing shortage began, and now, they are sometimes extended to quadruple shifts.

Earlier this year, Jacob Blake died while his cell was left unattended for 15 hours. The attending guard left his post due to exhaustion, says COBA.

"These officers are regular people. They're mothers, they're fathers, they're sisters, they're brothers just trying to make a living. And imagine if you go to work one day and they don't let you leave for 36 hours," says William Valentin, who retired from Rikers in 2017. "They're not getting meal periods, they're being forced to work at the same post for hours at a time, and then they go home, they sleep for a couple hours and they gotta be back at work again. They have no life outside of the Department of Correction. They have children they have to take care of, family. They can't do it."

"It was bad to where we were feeding officers at times. They were doing triples and not getting meal releases, and they were eating with us," said Broadnax.

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GUARDS AND PRISONERS often come from the same streets. Both are majority working-class people of color. "When I was hired, all you needed was a GED or high school diploma. They recruited officers that were from the same demographic area as the inmates: Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens, Manhattan. Everywhere the inmates came from, the officers came from," Valentin says.

The current crisis is being defined by mainstream media and politicians as a lack of officers, as "inmates vs. guards." The analysis usually ends there. We need to understand why COs stopped showing up to work, then look beyond them to the reason for endemic problems on Rikers. It's important to see guards as a function of systematized violence, and understand that they and inmates are oppressed by many of the same factors.

In March, guards started quitting, and others took unlimited sick days in what was effectively a sickout. Rikers began to feel the rollbacks of jail reforms around the same time, with the number of prisoners steadily climbing to 5,500, from a low of 3,800 during the pandemic. Also at the beginning of 2021, officers began to denounce triple shifts and planned reforms to solitary confinement, a punishment tool most guards favor. And in early May, in another move that angered COBA, Mayor de Blasio appointed Vincent Schiraldi, a prison reformer, as head of the DOC.

The mayor announced his plan to close Rikers in 2017, but set 2027 as the tentative closing date for Rikers — five years after he leaves office. While de Blasio has never been very serious about criminal-justice reform, there are others who are eager to roll back the movement's modest gains and restore a law-and-order status quo.

District attorneys are once again moving to fill Rikers with low-income New Yorkers who can't make bail. It's much easier to sweat out guilty pleas from people who face months or years in Rikers awaiting trial. Prosecution-friendly judges are happy to oblige, as it shields them from being skewered by headline-hungry politicians if a defendant commits a heinous crime while out on bail. And as Eric Adams demonstrated in this year's Democratic mayoral primary, "tough on crime" rhetoric can still be a winning ticket for an ambitious politico. *The New York Post* and *The Daily News* front-page headlines scream bloody murder when a violent crime happens.

None of the recent reforms to the carceral system — restrictions on the amount of physical force a CO can use against a prisoner, reforms to solitary confinement practices, bail reforms — have been properly implemented by city officials.

In 2015, in the aftermath of *Nuñez v. City of New York*, a 2011 class-action suit filed by Rikers detainees, DOC changed its rules on the ways that COs can punish inmates. However, it did not implement these reforms, resulting in some COs taking a largely hands-off approach.

The new policies, intended to reduce the unnecessary use of force, restricted "painfully escorting" or restraining inmates without reason, or striking them in the groin, neck, kidneys or spinal column. It also prohibits blows to the head or face, kicking an inmate, and the use of choke holds, carotid restraint holds or neck restraints. Jail staff, however, can use any means necessary to subdue a prisoner if they feel it's the only way to protect themselves or someone else from serious bodily injury.

According to Valentin and Pressley, the reforms have been poorly implemented and the officers not retrained, while incoming officers are rushed through hurried and inadequate trainings. "Annual qualifications such as CPR/first aid, mental health training, and firearms qualifications are severely lapsed. Less than 50% of all DOC staff are up-to-date in their annual qualifications," Valentin said in a text.

"I don't think hands-off was a bad policy. They just didn't actually train anybody on it. They're so-called implementing, and everyone's getting attacked," said Pressley.

In contrast, the reprimands COs faced when they didn't follow the new rules *did* take effect, usually resulting in the loss of vacation days. In order to avoid reprimands, COs now often step back during assaults by inmates on other inmates or health-care workers.

The end of solitary confinement on the island, announced by de Blasio in June, is following a similar trajectory. "The removal of long-term [solitary] confinement is a positive thing,"

Vincent Schiraldi said. "But I don't think we've implemented it the way you should. When you take that stuff away, you need to fill the day with programs and incentives and decency in a way we haven't done."

In late September, Mayor de Blasio visited Rikers for the first time since 2017, after years of calls from across the ideological spectrum for him to do so.

"When the mayor came down, he had a whole crew of security. He had a separate DOC entourage! I don't even know where he found them with the shortage," said a jail staffer who asked to remain anonymous for fear of retribution. "The rumors are that when he called for his officers, he made sure everything looked clean. The mayor came; they moved everything."

According to this staffer, DOC moved inmates from intake to the gym so the mayor wouldn't see the pileup in the intake building. "Where did they all go? You think we're putting in fraudulent claims? You didn't even ask them, 'Where are the admissions?'" As the mayor walked through the near-empty building, the remaining prisoners were yelling at him to go to the gym where he would find their cellmates.

Having hundreds of inmates crowded in the gym seems to have caused COVID to spread on Rikers, as every jail on the island has an outbreak. On October 13, 15 days after the mayor's visit, an inmate died of the virus.

"No other system would be allowed to operate in this manner. Only carceral systems are allowed to operate in this manner," says Darren Mack, co-director of Freedom Agenda, a decarceral organization. "L.A. has almost three times as many people in jail, but their budget is almost half the size of New York's." The correction budget for New York City is \$2.6 billion.

"They need to rein in and reallocate the DOC budget. They need to right-size and transition jail staff into non-carceral city jobs. They say the city budget is a reflection of what the city values," says Mack. "And people that are actually doing really effective work, like social workers, they don't get paid well by the city and they're the first ones on the chopping block when there's a deficit. When it comes to carceral systems — D.A.'s offices, NYPD, the city-wide jail system, DOC — they don't even consider reducing those budgets."

Mack, along with many other prison reformers and abolitionists, opposes the Borough-Based Jail Plan, the city's \$10 billion plan to construct four new jails to replace Rikers. They argue that no new jails should be built to replace Rikers, and that resources should be funneled to community-revitalization efforts intended to curb crime.

Visit cagefree.nyc for a comprehensive, long-term plan for decarcerating New York City and reinvesting in communities.

NEW YORK'S DIRTY LAUNDRY

IMMIGRANT WORKERS AND THEIR ALLIES ARE CLEANING UP AN INDUSTRY RIFE WITH WAGE THEFT AND ABUSIVE WORKING CONDITIONS

BY LACHLAN HYATT

In March 2020, at the height of the pandemic, Beatrice Ramirez tried to make a face mask out of paper because her employer would not provide her with one. “You’re strong, just keep working, buy your own, buy your own!” Ramirez recalls her supervisor saying when she asked for masks and gloves to handle the loads of soiled laundry from nursing homes, restaurants and even hospitals that regularly piled up at New Giant Laundry Center in Queens.

Like Ramirez, many workers have had to choose between risking contracting COVID-19 at work and staying home and being unable to support their families. Such hardships reveal the extent of the unfair labor practices that have long plagued New York City’s laundry service industry. Yet, laws and programs that were launched in response to demands from workers and their allies to address enduring labor issues for immigrant workers have faltered, leaving many in a lurch.

“I think the pandemic brings the opportunity for people to see what is going on around us,” said Rosanna Rodriguez, co-executive director of the Laundry Workers Center (LWC), a New York City-based labor organization that organizes and supports laundry workers to self-advocate. “That brings the opportunity also to organize because many workers believed this is normal in this industry, and now they realize, this is not normal and they have to take action,” said Rodriguez in regards to the industry’s everyday working conditions.

Ramirez is one of the estimated 12,550 laundry service workers in New York State, many of whom continued to clean laundry in New York City through the bleakest months of the pandemic. According to a 2018 report published by the Laundry Workers Center, 79% of laundry workers are undocumented immigrants like Ms. Ramirez and were ineligible for pandemic-related unemployment benefits or federal COVID-19 stimulus payments. As the virus shut down businesses and buckled the economy, excluded immigrant laundry workers, who were classified as “essential service” workers by former Governor Andrew Cuomo, struggled to access resources. By April 2020, around-the-block food pantry lines were a common sight in immigrant-heavy neighborhoods.

“Because they are immigrants, they are being excluded from any economic support from the government, even if they pay taxes, even if they contribute to this community,” said Mahoma Lopez, another co-executive director of the LWC. “Especially the laundromat workers,” he said. “They’ve been excluded from everything.”

New York City’s laundry service industry was already known for exploiting immigrant workers prior to the pandemic. According to the New York Joint Task Force on Worker Exploitation, laundry service is among the industries with the “highest rates of employer non-compliance.” The aforementioned 2018 report by the Laundry Workers Center found that one in five workers were paid \$10 an hour or less, a violation of New York City’s \$15 minimum wage.

IN THE FIVE YEARS Ramirez worked at New Giant Laundry Center, she was working 12 hours a day, seven days a week without a lunch break, at times even spending 24 hours cleaning clothes at the behest of her boss.

The laundromat, which lacks air conditioning in the summer and

heating in the winter, is furnished with multiple cameras to monitor the workers. Ramirez said that her employers, James Changho Park and Grace Park, would berate and shout at the laundresses if they were not working quickly enough or taking too long to eat their food.

Ramirez also said that her wages were withheld by her employer as she worked for \$6.75 an hour, less than half of New York City’s minimum wage. She also never received extra pay for the 20 or more overtime hours she worked each week.

“They were exploiting us and paying us below the minimum wage and there’s a lot of workers who can’t do anything or won’t do anything [to defend themselves],” she said. “It’s abusive.”

When one of her coworkers fell ill with COVID-19, Ramirez was assigned to take over their station without the protection of disinfectant. That week, Ramirez began to experience symptoms of the virus before she rushed home, where she tried to isolate herself from her five daughters and her mother battling terminal cancer.

Exhausted, afraid for her family and unable to afford missing work, Ramirez laid in her bed and prayed the illness would go away. Later that week, she was diagnosed with COVID-19.

With no sick pay and fearing the bills she would accrue by going to the hospital, Ramirez was among the workers who felt compelled to continue working even after she contracted the coronavirus.

Too sick to eat, Ramirez took Tylenol and drank black coffee or tea to make it through her shifts. While attending the self-service section of the laundromat, Ramirez would refuse to help clean or fold customers’ clothes, warning them to leave “as fast as possible.” Within the week, she felt too weak to continue working and had to lie down on the floor when her bosses who didn’t permit sitting weren’t looking. She said that she asked her bosses for permission to go home but they demanded that she finish the day’s work.

“If you don’t want to work for me, a lot of people are wanting to work and I’ll give the job to someone else,” Ramirez recalls her boss telling her. Trembling from her fever, she went to the bathroom so she would not be seen by her bosses and called her husband to pick her up and take her home. She was fired later that same day.

“It’s normal, the way they reacted to it,” Ramirez said, “They don’t care about their workers.”

THE WORKERS OF THE WASH SUPPLY LAUNDRMAT in the Upper West Side, owned by Liox Cleaners, encountered similar difficulties working through the pandemic without COVID-19 protocols or government safety nets.

“All the workers there, we get sick,” said Maribel, a Wash Supply employee who asked for her last name to be withheld for privacy reasons.

Maribel said she and five others worked in a cramped basement without ventilation, heating, emergency exits, toilet paper or adequate PPE during the pandemic. Despite handling up to a thousand pieces of laundry a day and sometimes having to clean 80 to 100 pounds of laundry per hour, they were not provided with masks or gloves by their employer. He also did not enforce social distancing measures, nor did he administer regular temperature checks.

“Basically not only during the pandemic but before the pandemic, the situation was really, really bad and difficult,” said Sandra Mejia, a former employee of the Wash Supply laundromat. Mejia



said that she earned \$12 an hour at the laundromat with no paid overtime or sick days.

In November 2020, the Wash Supply workers hired a lawyer and sued Liox Cleaners, demanding better working conditions and the wages that they allege were withheld.

In response to the list of workplace violations being carried out at Wash Supply, the Laundry Workers Center organized a unionization effort in hopes that the workers would become a part of the Laundry Workers Association. Mejia said Liox responded by hiring a consultant to persuade the workers not to unionize. She said Liox management began intimidating the workers with threatening letters and more aggressively monitoring their work. Liox Cleaners did not respond when asked by *The Independent* to provide a comment for this report.

“With damages and penalties, the attorney calculates a model like \$1.5 million,” said Lopez of the Laundry Workers Center about the allegedly stolen wages of the six Wash Supply workers.

In February 2021, after the laundresses voted to unionize, Liox fired all of the workers, shut down its laundromats, removed its cleaning and drying equipment, declared bankruptcy and moved to an unknown location in Brooklyn under a new name. The workers believe the company did this to avoid paying the wages owed.

Lina Stillman, who represented both Beatrice Ramirez and the Wash Supply workers in their respective lawsuits against their employers, said the pandemic has caused an influx of allegations of wage theft and unsafe working conditions around New York City, further exposing problematic practices in the laundry industry.

The Wash Supply workers took to the streets to rally support after being fired. Working with labor organizations such as Workers Alliance Against Racism, local Teamsters unions and the Urban Justice Center, the Wash Supply workers held multiple protests outside the Liox office in the Lower East Side.

“We are in solidarity with the Wash Supply workers and will be here until they are rehired and receive the pay they were denied,” said a representative from the Professional Staff Congress, the City University of New York faculty union, at one of the solidarity rallies on February 27. “This is a part of a city wide and country wide struggle ... where all workers are mobilizing in defense of their demands!”

During the unionization effort and its aftermath, the Department of Labor took notice of the LWC and contacted the group about the laundresses’ working conditions. “So we started floating the idea of if they can certify U visas for the workers,” said Rodriguez, re-

fering to a visa that immigrants who were victims of criminal activity can apply for. “The DOL interviewed all the workers, one-on-one conversations. And at the end, they realized that they were almost in slavery conditions over there and they decided to certify the U visas for the workers.” Now the LWC is looking for lawyers to represent the workers in the visa application process.

The Wash Supply workers await the National Labor Relations Board’s ruling on a September hearing regarding their lawsuit, which, if won, will force Liox to rehire the workers.

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IN SPRING OF THIS YEAR, the public outcry of laundry workers — joined by other labor movements centered around undocumented workers such as the Street Vendors Project, Los Deliveristas Unidos and the Fund Excluded Workers coalition and their widely covered 23-day hunger strike — fueled a flurry of legislation to address immigrant labor struggles exacerbated by the pandemic.

On May 6, the NY HERO Act was passed by the New York State Senate and signed by Governor Cuomo. The act aims to “amend the labor law, in relation to preventing occupational exposure to an airborne infectious disease” and force compliance with COVID-19 safety protocols that were absent in many of the laundromats and other workplaces around the city.

The NY HERO Act stated that the disease exposure prevention plans that the act requires businesses to adopt “must go into effect when an airborne infectious disease is designated by the New York State Commissioner of Health as a highly contagious communicable disease that presents a serious risk of harm to the public health.” However, the state did not designate COVID-19 as a “highly contagious communicable disease” under Andrew Cuomo and the standards laid out by the act were not applicable until September 6,

Continued on page 14

LAUNDRY LIFE

Doing the laundry. It’s a task many New Yorkers prefer to have someone else handle. That person is often an undocumented immigrant toiling long hours in grueling workplaces. Beatrice Ramirez is one of those laundresses. She shared her story with *The Independent*. This account is translated from Spanish and has been edited for length and clarity.

I have worked as a laundress for 10 years. I work at New Giant Laundry Center 38 hours a week and at another laundromat 20 hours a week. I wake up at 5 a.m. in order to make it to the bus stop in time. I wash, dry and fold 500 or 600 pounds of laundry a day. If there is a lull, we wash the machines.

We mostly wash personal laundry. Everyday we launder very dirty clothes. Blood, excrement from diapers. There was a person who arrived with a lot of blood and vomit in their clothes and things I don’t want to remember. I think, am I going to get sick? I would have turned it down but my boss would never. Sometimes there is a lot of food in the laundry and you can really smell the rotting. Sometimes we add vinegar to help remove stains. The soap is made up of very, very strong chemicals. It hurts my skin and gives me allergies.

And I’m scared of the bacteria in the clothes. My back, my feet hurt, feet that never rest. It used to be that only my feet hurt, but now after having worked the 24-hour shifts, I have pain in my bones, back, neck and head. There is also a bacteria in my stomach.

When the washing machine doesn’t work, you have to know how to turn it off correctly or else you can inhale toxic gas. The machines frequently break but my boss fixes them. There is exposed wiring by the ceiling. Water also falls from the ceiling.

About half of the customers are nice and half are difficult. Sometimes they try to get me to leave the other clients if there is a problem with the machine or get angry if we can’t have their laundry ready in a day. They yell things like, you’re getting paid for this?! Sometimes I get a tip directly, but the boss might yell at us and even the clients and tell them not to tip us.

There is no heat until my boss arrives at 11 a.m. I asked and she doesn’t let us put it on before she arrives, even though we arrive four hours before her. In the winter, I work in a coat and with double pants, otherwise I would freeze. In the summer, it’s hot. There’s a fan; no air conditioning.

Before I sued my employer, I was on the schedule 7 a.m.–7 p.m., seven days a week. But sometimes I would work 24 hours until 7 a.m. the next day. My boss would call towards the

end of my shift and tell me I had to stay. You didn’t take breaks. You just had coffee. We were on our feet all day. I would eat quickly, not even for 15 minutes. Eating, watching, eating, taking bites between work. Days off weren’t possible. I went to my daughter’s graduation, and then right after I had to go back to work. She just gave me two hours and I had to go back to work.

When the pandemic came, our bosses didn’t give us masks or gloves. They didn’t put disinfectant on the doors. We had to bring our own disinfectant, masks and gloves. We never received hazard pay.

My boss hated me. It was really heavy. She always was telling me that I was robbing her. I would tell her, Okay, check the cameras. She always had to be accusing me of something, always.

I was making \$6.75 an hour with no overtime and no benefits. I am now making \$15 an hour, and I am now a member of the LWC. Now, they can’t tell me anything. Before, they gave me lots of shit. Now they can’t. And they give me overtime if I ask for it. After we won the case, I can take a day off if my daughter is sick. I can sit, take a cafe. I have a 30-minute break. I like to take it outside.

— BEATRICE RAMIREZ



AUGUSTINE TANG

TAXI DRIVERS LAUNCH HUNGER STRIKE OUTSIDE CITY HALL

CABBIES SEEK RELIEF FROM CRUSHING DEBTS

BY STEVEN WISHNIA

At taxi drivers' protest vigil on Broadway by City Hall Park, cases of coconut water replaced trays of rice and vegetables generously spiced with chili peppers.

On Oct. 20, Eight owner-drivers launched a hunger strike, demanding that Mayor Bill de Blasio add loan guarantees to the city's revised budget, due Oct. 31, to reduce the crushing debt they carry.

"The city is still not responding to our call for real debt relief," New York Taxi Workers Alliance head Bhairavi Desai told *The Independent*. The union said the mayor's inaction is consigning drivers "to a lifetime of poverty and death in a debt trap."

Drivers chanted "We want justice/ Talk to the union," interrupted by bullhorned warnings that anyone triple-parked south of Chambers Street should move their cab if they didn't want it towed.

Individual drivers own roughly 40% to 45% of the city's 13,587 yellow medallion cabs, the only ones allowed to pick up street hails in central Manhattan south of Harlem. For decades, owning a medallion was a ticket to a career for cabbies, now almost all immigrants. It enabled them to work for themselves instead of leasing from a fleet and was an asset for their retirement.

But owner-drivers have been the ones hardest hit by crises afflicting the industry over the past seven years. Drivers' incomes, stagnant for years, plummeted after the city allowed Uber and Lyft to flood the streets with their cars. Between late 2017 and early 2019, nine financially strapped cabbies, from yellow-cab owner-operators to Uber/Lyft, livery-car service and black-cab drivers, committed suicide.

Last year, the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown almost completely eliminated their street-hail business. "Half the cabs are sitting in storage," Desai told the rally's attendees.

A third element compounds the crisis: The value of medallions inflated more than fivefold from 2001 to 2014, to more than \$1 million, and then the arrival of app-based cabs popped the bubble. Owner-drivers couldn't bring in enough money to make their loan payments, and their medallions had depreciated so much that if they sold them, they'd still be personally liable for hundreds of thousands in debt.

The mayor "must fix the crisis," says Richard Chow, one of the hunger strikers. He spent \$410,000 for his medallion in 2006 and now has monthly loan payments of \$2,766. The lender has offered to reduce his debt to \$275,000, with \$1,600 payments.

Chow, a sixtyish-year-old immigrant from China, seems to have a permanently saddened face. His younger and deeper-in-debt brother was one of the nine suicides.

"Even \$1,600, I can't afford it," he says. "There's not enough business out there."

RIVAL RELIEF PLANS

NYTWA and the city Taxi and Limousine Commission have competing debt-relief plans.

The TLC estimates that 2,500 to 3,000 of the about 6,000 individual owners are in debt, in amounts ranging from less than \$25,000 to \$550,000. It says it can't be more specific because loan documents are private, except for the 1,800 medallions the city auctioned off when it expanded the number of yellow cabs between 1996 and 2014. (The Bloomberg administration was happy to collect an estimated \$850 million in revenue from the bubble; the last auction, in February 2014, was advertised with leaflets boasting "It's Better Than the Stock Market.")

New York Taxi Workers Alliance estimates that at least 4,000 owners are in debt trouble, even though only around 3,000 drive their cabs themselves. Many, says Desai, are retired, still owe money and lease the cabs to other drivers through brokers — a business that collapsed during the pandemic.

A 2019 survey of 450 drivers by the TLC found their average debt to be \$499,000.

The TLC's Medallion Relief Program, unveiled in late August, would provide \$65 million in grants to distressed owners. It would give them \$20,000 for down payments to lenders who restructure loan principals and set lower monthly payments plus up to \$9,000 to help with monthly payments during the first year.

As of Oct. 16, the mayor's office said, the program had helped 102 yellow medallion taxi owners, reducing their average debt of about \$325,000 by almost half. The city-supported renegotiations with lenders eliminated the remaining debt owed by 21 of them, generally relatively small amounts, according to the Taxi and Limousine Commission. More than 1,000 other owners are in the pipeline, after completing appointments with the TLC's Owner/Driver Resource Center.

The TLC came up with the idea of grants for down payments last year, when, in its efforts to help drivers sur-

vive the loss of work during the pandemic, it found that having a down payment was the best leverage they had to get lenders to renegotiate, but drivers still usually needed to borrow the money from family or friends.

The commission says it has been able to reduce some drivers' payments to less than \$1,500 a month.

That level is still "not sustainable," Desai says. NYTWA's proposal would give individual drivers grants of \$30,000 that they would use for down payments if lenders reduced their total debt to \$175,000. The city would then guarantee the other \$145,000, and payments would be set at \$800 a month — low enough, Desai says, for drivers to make at least minimum wage.

Lenders would still make a profit, she contends, because most "bought their loans on the secondary market for as little as \$115,000."

If the driver failed to make payments on the loan, lenders could repossess medallions, and the city's guarantee would cover the difference between the amount owed and the medallion's market value. Assuming a 5% default rate, that would cost the city \$93 million over 30 years — less, Desai says, than the annual revenue from the \$2.50 congestion-pricing surcharge added to fares in central Manhattan south of 96th St. in 2019.

"I've run the numbers. This makes sense," city Comptroller Scott Stringer says. "This proposal will save an industry, save lives. We've got to go all in."

"We must see the city's initiative as only a beginning, and we must continue to push for additional support for the struggling individual medallion owners," city council Committee on Transportation Chair Ydanis Rodriguez (D-Manhattan) said in a statement, urging people to "listen to the Taxi Workers Alliance advocates' concerns" and follow the recommendations the council's Taxi Medallion Task Force made in 2020.

The hunger strike will rotate participants, so no one starves themselves into anorexic damage. Other participants will include New York State Assemblymember Zohran Mamdani (D-Queens) and City Councilmember-elect Shahana Hanif (D-Brooklyn), who led the crowd in a call-and-response chant in Bengali.

Debt relief, Mamdani said, will make the difference between "merely postponing devastation and suicide and stopping it."

LISTENING: Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez meets with hunger striking taxi drivers at their protest encampment on the sidewalk outside City Hall.



YANIKOMSES/OMIA

DELIVERISTAS WIN LONG-SOUGHT PROTECTIONS

TIP PAYMENT PROTECTIONS, RESTROOM ACCESS AND MORE

BY ERIN SHERIDAN

September 23 was hailed as a “momentous” day for New York City’s 65,000 app-based delivery workers, as months of grass-roots organizing led to the City Council passing a six-bill package that grants labor protections to couriers for services like DoorDash, Grubhub-Seamless, Uber Eats, and Relay.

It’s the first time a major U.S. city has regulated the multibillion-dollar delivery apps, intending to curb some of the worst abuses faced by couriers, most of whom are immigrants. The new laws, passed by a 40-3 vote, require the apps’ delivery contracts with the restaurants to state explicitly that their bathroom facilities are available to delivery workers. The apps also must show workers how far they’ll have to travel before they accept an order, let couriers turn down long trips without being penalized, and inform workers of how much they’ll earn for each delivery.

The apps must set a minimum per-trip payment, pay workers weekly, and provide payment options that don’t require a bank account and don’t charge fees. Apps will have to notify couriers if a customer has removed or altered a tip, and inform customers how much of their tip goes to the delivery worker.

The bills also bar companies from charging workers for their required delivery bags, which generally cost \$60 to \$120, according to Hidilyn Colón Hernández, director of policy and strategic partnerships at the Workers’ Justice Project.

While these laws are an accomplishment, they are not the end of the line. The app-based delivery system’s basic structure remains exploitative.

“What we did was establish a floor, a basic framework of working conditions in the industry,” Colón Hernández said on

The Independent News Hour in early October.

The Workers’ Justice Project helped found Los Deliveristas Unidos, one of a number of groups of delivery workers that banded together as pandemic-related lockdowns and restaurant closures worsened conditions on the job. Many had signed up with delivery apps after losing other jobs at the pandemic’s onset. They held numerous demonstrations, including hundreds riding their electric bikes to City Hall.

“They didn’t have [personal protective equipment], they were not able to use the restroom, and many of them suffered the issue of not getting pay or tips. That brought up a movement,” Colón Hernández said.

Many deliveristas work 12-hour days, six or seven days a week. The apps frequently cut off their access if they reject deliveries or don’t move fast enough to meet the quotas imposed by the algorithm. An average round trip is three to six miles, Colón Hernández said.

According to a report published in September by Cornell University in partnership with Los Deliveristas Unidos, delivery workers make an average of \$7.87 an hour in base pay, and \$12.40 when tips are included. Because they are defined as independent contractors, the app companies don’t have to pay them the city’s \$15 minimum wage, and they have to cover their own expenses such as buying and maintaining an electric bike.

Base pay per trip is currently \$1 to \$2.50 before tips, Colón Hernández said. She called the legislation “a first step toward justice.”

Deliveristas still lack the basic rights that full-time employees have. They are not eligible for workers’ compensation or unemployment benefits — crucial on a job where they ride bikes in traffic and bad weather. Nearly half of respondents to the Cornell survey said they had been in a crash or an accident. They also are often victims of bike theft and assaults.

At least 16 have been killed on the job in the past two years. Most recently, Babacar Dia, 44, a father of four from Senegal, who was killed in a hit-and-run in East New York on Sept. 26.

Colón Hernández suggests that app users can help deliveristas in small ways, such as asking them to check if they actually received the tip you sent.

“They know [customers] tip, but this money is not showing up in their accounts,” she says.

STRIKETOBER!

More than 14,000 American workers went on strike in October. On Oct. 5, 1,400 workers walked out at Kellogg’s plants in four states, and on Oct. 14, more than 10,000 United Auto Workers members struck at 14 John Deere farm-equipment factories in five states.

“The issue here is all about the future of the working person in America,” Kevin Bradshaw, vice president of Local 252G of the cereal workers’ union in Memphis, told *Forbes* magazine. The union wants to eliminate a “two-tier” contract in which younger workers get paid \$10-13 an hour less, and Kellogg’s has been threatening to move production to Mexico.

John Deere workers also want to get rid of a two-tier contract. But the company, which is on track to shatter its previous record for annual profits, wants to eliminate pensions and retiree health care for all workers hired in the future.

In Buffalo, N.Y., 2,000 nurses and others at Mercy Hospital have been on strike since Oct. 1, demanding adequate staffing and raises for the lowest-paid workers. The hospital has hired strike-breakers through a Michigan company not licensed to operate in New York.

In Huntington, W. Va., 450 steelworkers went on strike Oct. 1, citing unfair labor practices.

Two other strikes have gone on for more than six months. A walkout by 700 nurses at Mercy Hospital in Worcester, Mass., could have ended in August, but the Tenet Healthcare chain refused to bump scabs so strikers could get their old jobs back. And 1,000 coal miners in Alabama have been out since April 1, demanding that the owners restore pay cuts the union agreed to when the previous owner went bankrupt in 2016.

— STEVEN WISHNIA

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DIRTY LAUNDRY

Continued from page 11

when Governor Kathy Hochul applied the designation to COVID-19, thereby including it under the NY HERO Act.

“We’re talking about mostly immigrant and Black workers who we’ve been calling heroes,” said Jake Streich-Kest, a campaign coordinator with Align, a labor rights group that played an instrumental role in the passage of the act. But for months, “instead of siding with workers and protecting them, the Department of Health seem[ed] content to side with employers and big corporations who obviously [didn’t] want to have to follow any safety standards.”

Efforts to get long overdue monetary aid to immigrant workers have also faced similar obstacles.

On April 6, New York State included a historic \$2.1 billion Excluded Worker Fund (EWF) in the budget for fiscal year 2022, supplying payments to some undocumented New Yorkers who had been left out from previous rounds of aid. In August, the applications to receive owed relief opened. For some, the fund has been a blessing.

For others, the fund’s tiered system and requirement of documents proving unemployment have left them confused about their eligibility to receive payments. “I don’t have any idea if I qualify because I just started working and I started paying my taxes just recently,” Meijia said.

If an applicant doesn’t have a tax ID number, for example, they have to produce evidence that may be hard to come by, like proof of earnings or a letter from an employer clarifying their employment.

The most common obstacle workers face in accessing the EWF stems from employers who refuse to cooperate with the state in providing evidence they employ or employed undocumented workers. In cases like that of the Wash Supply workers, where relations between worker and boss remain extremely contentious, getting a letter from the employer is all but impossible.

“Even if many of those laundromats closed or they reduced the hours for the workers and the workers are being affected for that, the employers refused to provide letters,” Lopez said.

As it stands now, those who haven’t yet applied are unlikely to receive funds, as are many who have already applied. More than 114,000 applications have been approved with more than \$1.35 billion out of the \$2.1 billion dollars already distributed or scheduled for distribution. On September 24, the Department of Labor announced that it cannot guarantee that funds will be available for any claims submitted after Sept. 24. By Oct. 5, 86,000 applications had been submitted after Sept. 24.

When fighting for the fund, the FEW coalition demanded \$3.4 billion. “We’ve known since the beginning that this is not going to be enough. When we started the campaign, we made the calculation and we knew what we needed,” said Roseanna

Rodriguez of the LWC. “The fund is now running out and many, many people didn’t apply.” Rodriguez also told *The Indy* that many immigrants lost their documents in Hurricane Ida and no longer have proof of residency or identity. “The coalition is really thinking about pushing the governor to put more resources into the fund and reopen it,” she said. “We know it’s a big fight, but we are strong.”

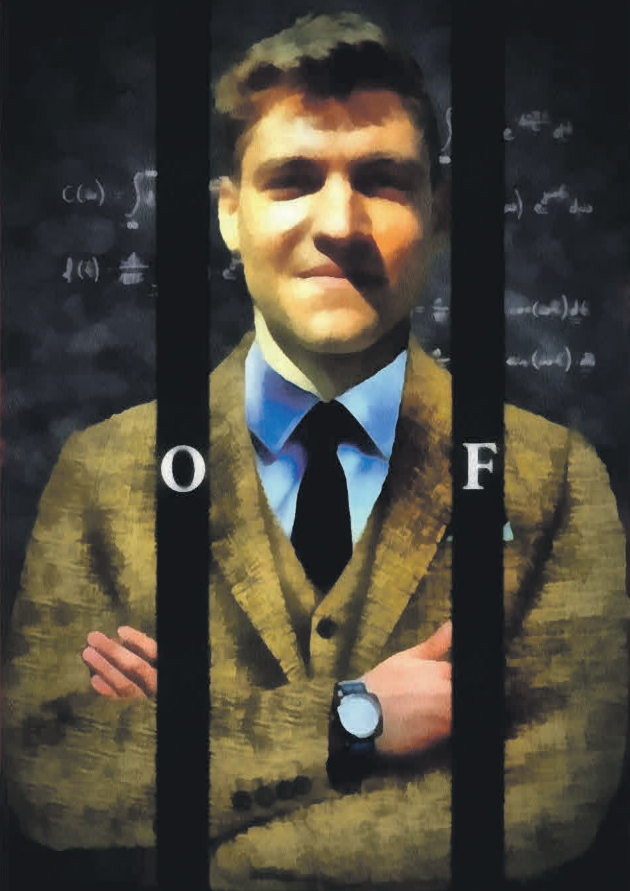
For many workers, these pieces of legislation and the attention now being focused on the laundry industry have either come too late entirely or have disintegrated into lip service, and many of the dangers of being an undocumented worker, laid bare by the pandemic, remain.

“I never felt safe,” said Ramirez, who was rehired at New Giant after winning a suit against her employers. Despite having gained rights as a worker — Ramirez is being paid minimum wage, only works at the laundromat 40 hours a week and is able to take breaks during the workday and receive time off — the conditions of the physical workspace still worry her (see sidebar). “I didn’t feel safe then and I still don’t feel safe,” she says.

Interviews with Beatrice Ramirez, Sandra Mejia and Maribel were assisted by a Spanish translator.

Death Squads with Impunity

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Robert Bruce McLaughlin



GABRIELLA SZPUN

THE HEAT IS ON

SWEEPING ACTIONS URGED AHEAD OF U.N. CLIMATE SUMMIT

BY NANCY ROMER

Each new year brings record high temperatures, expanded wildfires, intensified hurricanes, floods and droughts, melting permafrost, acidification of the oceans and rising sea levels. Nonetheless, the climate crisis we are in the midst of is too often ignored in favor of business as usual. Our planet is headed toward catastrophe unless policies are put in place immediately that will slow the intensification of greenhouse gases. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, we have until 2030 to turn around our dependence on fossil fuels, or reach tipping points from which we will be unable to stop global warming.

WHAT IS COP?

In 1994, this escalating crisis led to the convocation of the international Conference of the Parties (COP) to find a cooperative solution through negotiations between the world's major economies. While COP draws on the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change, it has lacked the teeth for enforcement, and thus has had minimal effect on actual policies, even as it has improved public awareness of the issues. The Paris Climate Agreement adopted by the 2015 COP set the strongest goals yet: keeping the global temperature increase to under 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) and reaching net-zero carbon emissions by 2050 (which means emitting less carbon, particularly greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide and methane, than we take out of the atmosphere).

The 2015 accords, however failed to include clear mechanisms for enforcement, and Donald Trump subsequently withdrew the United States from the agreement. President Joe Biden has rejoined it, but doubts persist whether the United States and other major economies will agree to and respect emergency measures. Will a U.S. president committed to slowing down climate change be

able to deliver on his promises, and how thorough will it be?

When COP26 takes place Nov. 1–12 in Glasgow, Scotland, representatives of close to 200 nations, several hundred organizations, and the media will be again confronted by mass street mobilizations, both outside the official meetings and in other places around the globe. Activists from climate organizations and those of indigenous and people of color, workers and farmers will use the conference to meet, strategize and strengthen their movements.

THE PROBLEM

After decades of fighting climate-change deniers, the broad scientific and even political consensus is that human activity, in particular the burning of fossil fuels — coal, oil and gas — has created runaway climate change through increased greenhouse-gas emissions. While the people most affected are the ones least responsible — poor people, Global South nations, farmers along the equator — the results will affect all life on the planet. Food and water shortages, disastrous storms and droughts, health crises, wildfires and mass migrations will suck up much of our attention and resources and be lethal to many.

The hope of the COP is to get the nations with more developed economies to recognize that it is in their interests to stave off catastrophe right now, by eliminating fossil fuels as immediately as possible and creating economies based on resilience and sustainability. That is a tall but necessary order for capitalist economies that depend on generating profits through constant growth. The vast inequality of resources and power, with a small number of elites in most developed economies determining climate and economic policies, makes the tenuous muscle behind popular power and organizing more important than ever.

THE SOLUTIONS

The most direct way to slow down climate change is to eliminate the use of fossil fuels, limit the growth of the most developed economies, and redistribute resources and power more equitably. We'll need to shift toward regenerative agriculture, reforestation, renewable energy and non-combustion engines, and also give massive financial and technical support to enable Global South nations to make these transitions. Public ownership over the energy industry could help shift toward 100% renewable energy and drive policies away from those designed for maximum profits.

That would be a dramatic turnaround for a planet with almost universally hierarchical and unequal economic and

political systems, but it's a necessity. Renewable energy must completely replace fossil fuels, and economic growth must be based on social and ecological services instead of manufacturing more things. Some of the federal Build Back Better legislation, aka "the reconciliation bill," attempts to reach some of these goals through "social infrastructure," such as education, child care, healthcare, and regenerative agriculture, and the massive creation of renewable energy through solar, wind and geothermal power. And jobs, jobs, jobs.

Local solutions will play a major role in determining strategies to improve standards of living while decreasing greenhouse-gas emissions. Different regions of the world will experience varying levels of climate pressure and need distinct cultural and environmental solutions. A one-size-fits-all approach simply won't work. Local solutions alone, however, cannot substitute for sound national and global policies. The crisis is too big.

The political power of corporations, particularly fossil-fuel corporations, over our political systems keeps us locked in this impending catastrophe. One quick look at Senator Joe Manchin of West Virginia, with his huge campaign contributions from the fossil-fuel industry and his own stock holdings in it, highlights the political barriers. And Manchin isn't the worst of the fossil-fuel fronts!

Even in more progressive nations such as Norway, much wealth has historically been based on extractive resources, including fossil fuels. Recent elections in Norway put a leftist government in power that may change this dynamic.

FAKE SOLUTIONS

Neoliberals assure us that "the market" will solve this problem: Just rely on private corporations to respond to the growing demand for renewable energy and lower carbon emissions. So far, that approach has failed spectacularly. Energy, agricultural and manufacturing markets have consistently prioritized short-term profits over long-term solutions. "Carbon offsets" or "carbon trades" — in which carbon-intensive industries buy low-carbon or even carbon-mitigating investments — still allow these industries to spew greenhouse gases. They are a three-card monte stunt that just moves carbon around, never truly decreasing its volume and harm.

We also cannot "manufacture" our way out. Most manufacturing is resource-intensive and requires a broad supply chain, much of which is carbon-producing. We can only allow economic development with equity and environmental standards. The fact that COP26 has a long list of corporate "sponsors," most of them energy corporations or heavily dependent on fossil fuels, speaks volumes about what may be possible come November in Glasgow.

Continued on next page



REMEMBER SANDY: DEFUND CLIMATE CHAOS!

October 29th is the 9th anniversary of Superstorm Sandy. On the same day world and corporate leaders will assemble at a U.N. climate conference in Glasgow. There will be marches worldwide to demand that they defund climate chaos by stopping the pipeline of money flowing from banks to oil, gas, and coal corporations.

One culprit, Citibank, has pumped \$237 billion into oil, gas, and coal corporations in the 5 years since the Paris climate agreement. In addition, the Federal Reserve is allowing Wall Street to fuel the climate catastrophe. **Make banks like Citibank and the Fed stop the flow of money and we can stop the flow of oil and gas - and save ourselves.**

JOIN US FRIDAY, OCTOBER 29TH FOR THE MARCH!

12:30: Assemble on the sidewalk under the Brooklyn Bridge (372 Pearl St.) at Pearl Street and Robert Wagner Pl.

1:00: March to the Federal Reserve (33 Liberty St.) and Rally

1:30: March to Citibank HQ (388 Greenwich St.)

2:00: Rally at Citibank HQ



BIT.LY/REMEMBERSANDY

This march is co-sponsored by: 350.org, 350Brooklyn, 350NYC, Bronx Climate Justice North, COP 26 Coalition, Fridays for Future NYC, Kids Fight Climate Change, New York Communities for Change, North Bronx Racial Justice, Rise & Resist, TREEage, XR NYC (and more!)

DEFUNDCLIMATECHAOS.ORG



SHADIA FAYNE WOOD

CLIMATE SUMMIT

Continued from previous page

OUTSIDE THE WHITE HOUSE: During the week of Oct. 11-15, the Indigenous Environmental Network led a series of demonstrations in Washington, D.C. protesting continued pipeline and drilling permits that will continue fueling climate change.

CLIMATE ACTION VS. CLIMATE JUSTICE

The enforcement of climate policies alone won't create the change needed. Because low-wealth individuals and nations bear the brunt of climate catastrophe, prioritizing, centering and empowering frontline communities, communities of color, indigenous peoples, and Global South nations and regions are critical to both local and global solutions that bring true climate justice. The indigenous dictum of determining today's actions based on how they will affect people seven generations down the line offers the wisdom needed to move forward. Equity and survival are twin goals in this global drama. It's up to us — the first generation to truly know the extent of climate change — to make this happen. Public solutions are much more promising.

MASS MOBILIZATIONS

Organizations such as Trade Unions for Energy Democracy, Greenpeace, and Extinction Rebellion are sounding the call for mass mobilizations on Nov. 6 to push nations participating in COP26. That effort has been slow in building, because most climate-justice efforts are local or national in focus and have not prioritized the COP, given their organizing capacities.

For example, much of the movement in New York State is focused on climate bills in the state legislature. However, NY Renew, the largest statewide coalition, is organizing a demonstration on Nov. 13 to emphasize the importance of local action in carrying out COP26 achievements. The New York City climate-justice movement is reaching out to the new city political leadership to push for mitigation of the greenhouse gases emitted through buildings, 70% of the city's emissions, by the installation of renewable energy in all public and many private buildings.

A "Remember Sandy: Defund Climate Chaos" demonstration is planned for Oct. 29, targeting the financial institutions in the city that keep feeding the fossil-fuel industry. The city and state demands both emphasize a commitment to public ownership, large-scale investment in offshore wind turbines, and a moratorium on all new fossil-fuel infrastructure, as well as protecting frontline communi-

ties through vocational training and expanding good "climate-friendly" jobs.

Progressive climate forces hope that COP26 will minimize greenhouse-gas emissions; shift toward 100% renewable energy by 2050, preferably publicly owned; almost completely eliminate fossil fuels; emphasize decentralized solutions that empower local communities, especially those most affected by climate change; and ameliorate specific harms to vulnerable communities. These goals will need real teeth to transform our economy and politics, but nothing less will save the planet. We either act now or suffer dire consequences tomorrow.

Organizations such as the Sunrise Movement and Democratic Socialists of America, as well as the broad local, state, national and global coalitions, are part of the tapestry of organizational inspiration and power that will help lead the way, through both grassroots organizing and engaging in the political process. Youth are claiming the mantle of leadership after almost two years of globalized fear from the COVID-19 pandemic. The thought of runaway climate change makes those experiences seem minor.

In his new book, *Warmth*, climate activist Dan Sherrill claims that we need to fully accept the reality of climate change, and mourns the loss of the ability to plan ahead with any certainty. We must face the reality and put our collective shoulders into the paramount struggle of our species. We are fortunate to be able to see it before us, to identify solutions, to work to protect all we love, and to prioritize justice as a goal. As Joe Hill told us, "Don't mourn, organize." COP26 gives us a political moment to do just that.

THE STORY OF HASIDIC VILYAMSBURG

A Fortress in Brooklyn: Race, Real Estate, and The Making of Hasidic Williamsburg

BY NATHANIEL DEUTSCH & MICHAEL CASPER
YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2021

New York, New York, New York: Four Decades of Success, Excess, and Transformation

BY THOMAS DYJA
SIMON & SCHUSTER, 2021

By Bennett Baumer

During the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a brief moment when thousands of people fled New York City, and market forces pushed rents and apartment-sales prices down, at least at the luxury end of the market. But it didn't last. A pandemic that sickened over a million New Yorkers and killed over 34,000 could only keep rents down for so long.

The city's post-COVID future will probably look much like its recent past.

There is probably no neighborhood more synonymous with New York's rise from a crime-ridden post-industrial metropolis to a high-rent playground than Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Historians Nathaniel Deutsch and Michael Casper offer a fresh take: Williamsburg's transformation as seen through the Hasidic Jewish experience. *A Fortress in Brooklyn* arrives on bookshelves as the pandemic seems to be abating, but it begins with another dark chapter — the surviving remnants of Hungary's Satmar Hasidim settling in Williamsburg after the Holocaust.

According to Deutsch and Casper, they only planned to stay in *Vilyamsburg* for a short time, as America was a "crazy country" full of assimilated Jews — they said the best profession was to be a painter, because "in America... everything is a lie, and people gloss over everything." The Satmars' start in industrial Williamsburg was so inauspicious that the sect quickly hatched plans to set up a shtetl in leafy New Jersey.

A Fortress in Brooklyn sets this stay-or-leave decision by a beleaguered Hasidic sect in a post-World War II outer-borough hinterland as a pivotal moment for the future Williamsburg. Jews had lived in the neighborhood for decades — the Williamsburg Bridge was nicknamed "Jew's Highway" because of migration from the Lower East Side after it opened in 1903 — but postwar economic policies encouraged suburban development at the expense of cities. Puerto Ricans settled in Williamsburg in the same era, but if thousands of Hasidim had pulled up stakes, it might have suffered even deeper decay and collapse. The book describes crime as a main factor for white flight to the suburbs, but it would do well to include the roles of public policy, housing discrimination, subsidized mortgages and urban divestment, which were more important before the 1960s.

After the planned New Jersey exodus foundered, the Hasidic rabbis decided to stick it out and put down roots in Williamsburg, and this included moving into publicly subsidized housing.

New York University's Furman Center estimates that the city's public housing needs over \$40 billion in capital repairs — enough to gobble up the allotment for the entire country's public housing in President Joe Biden's current infrastructure bill. It is hard to imagine that in the 1960s, Williamsburg Hasidim sought to transform new housing projects into "paths of heaven" — places that would allow growing and mostly impoverished Jewish families to prosper. As whites left, Hasidim would share integrated public housing, and most important, the rent would be capped at 30 percent of their income.

A Fortress in Brooklyn does not sugar-coat the conflicts that occurred.

President Lyndon Johnson's largely successful Great Society anti-poverty spending spurred intra-ethnic com-

petition as to which group got what apartments, program funding and resources, as decided by local City Council members and boards. Williamsburg's Puerto Rican community leaned on churches and a rise in activism to exert influence. Hasidim formed the United Jewish Organization and other groups, but mostly avoided coalition politics to fund their community, which, while encouraging work, emphasized men's unpaid study of Torah and Talmud. That go-it-alone approach balkanized ethnic groups into camps, and alienated potential allies in campaigns for more affordable-housing construction and to repair dilapidated private housing.

the artists/hipsters." Williamsburg rents skyrocketed, and Hasidic housing activists publicly targeted Jewish developers for not building affordable housing for the community. Newspapers and *pashkevilin* (broadside posters) warned darkly of gentrification pricing Hasidim out, and threatened Orthodox landlords with communal shunning. There was also the issue of bike lanes and the alleged moral outrage of scantily clad hipsters scandalizing Hasidic Bedford Avenue. *A Fortress in Brooklyn* dispels the moral outrage myth and ties the issue of bike lanes to Hasidic fears of further gentrification.

For those who yearn for the bad good old days of subway graffiti and opportunistic crime, but believe fervently in New York's "success, excess, and transformation," read Thomas Dyja's breezy *New York, New York, New York*. Dyja keeps the pace quick with healthy doses of pop cultural references, while moving on to Wall Street bull markets minting yuppies and private-public partnerships cleaning up Bryant Park and Times Square.

New York, New York, New York's scope is broader than that of *A Fortress in Brooklyn*. Dyja begins with the Emergency Financial Control Board's 1976 takeover of the city government's finances, as it teetered on the brink of insolvency and a *Daily News* headline screamed "Ford to City: Drop Dead." The city could no longer float municipal bonds to cover budget gaps, but the EFCB struck a deal: Public-sector unions' pensions would buy bonds, and thus the underlying credit of those bonds would be tied in to balanced budgets and controls on wages.

Dyja rips into the vain Rudolph Giuliani, but celebrates the great crime reduction and the growth machine the city has become, while grumbling about Occupy Wall Street. "Nothing fundamental about money, power, or politics really changed," he insists, even as several socialists have defeated old-guard Democratic incumbents, including in Williamsburg. His book perhaps was published too late to include a full accounting of the Black Lives Matter protests, which get mentioned only as "2020 riots."

The feared permanent pandemic exodus from New York did not materialize. However, concerns about affordable housing and the cost of living remain omnipresent. Williamsburg's Hasidic Jews have expanded the enclave's borders south into Bed-Stuy, while also settling in the outer suburbs north of the city, and even as far away as my hometown in Indiana.

An Adams administration will need to address high housing costs by producing and preserving more genuinely affordable housing. It could start by converting foreclosed hotels into permanent housing, and shoring up public housing. How long has the city talked about doing this? Then as now, there are plenty of people ready to ascend that particular "path to heaven."



SUE BRISK

No recent history of New York can be written without addressing the high-crime era of the 1970s and '80s; the salience of crime helped Eric Adams become the Democratic mayoral candidate this year. *A Fortress in Brooklyn* includes anecdotes of thieves crossing into Vilyamsburg to snatch *shtreimels* (large, expensive fur hats) and "if they caught you, you were going to get an ass whuppin'." Hasidim would yell *chaptsem*, or "get him," when thieves both real and alleged struck.

A Fortress in Brooklyn will delight with its Yiddish, and also offers a compelling and interesting take on real-estate development and the mosaic of urban life, including the early-aughts *milkhemes artistn* — "war against



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REVEREND BILLY'S REVELATIONS

Dear Reverend — I'm suffering from environmental anxiety. I only use that word because I saw it online. Environmental anxiety. I'm 16 years old. I see it in my younger sister too. Is there any hope?

— RICK, Bay Ridge

Dear Rick,
We're all asking the same question.

Our "Stop Shopping Choir" is on our way to COP26 in Glasgow and now you read that the oilmen and the bankers will insist that they need to drill and burn for a few more years. What?

So what can we do? The 26th international conversation shows us an arrangement of people having one su-

per-conversation about climate. You have hundreds of thousands of people coming to this city and in the middle is a small private conversation by the oilmen and nation states ... And that's in a building that is no-access.

Hundreds of thousands are parading and dancing, singing and puppeteering and standing up on benches and shouting. It's like the old and the new in a shape of a donut. The hole of the donut is old people who can't change, and they are killers. The huge crowd on the outside is busy making new culture, new ways of living. We are creative, and we are nonviolent, and that gives us the advantage.

The oilmen and the soldiers that protect them are exactly like a prison. The criminals are surrounded by armed guards. They are there only because they believe that the courts and politicians are corrupted enough so that they can be trusted to carry out the fossil policy for another year, until COP27.

But wait a minute. We are creative enough to have a better idea. Start with the banning of these meetings. There is no COP27. Don't let them give their marketing officials something to lie about. Let's start now; loving talk and loving listening, including with those who uphold the old

order, will open the walls of the no-access zone.

The world is dancing and singing in the windows of the power guys. We're dancing and singing because we love life, but it's not just a song and a dance.

— REV BILLY

REVEREND BILLY TALEN IS THE PASTOR OF THE CHURCH OF STOP SHOPPING. HAVE A QUESTION FOR THE REVEREND? EMAIL REVBILLY@REVBILLY.COM AND UNBURDEN YOUR SOUL.

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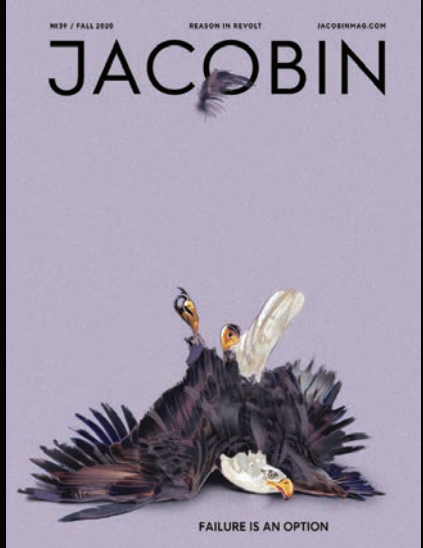
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