

Protesters reject NYC budget deal, call City Hall protest noon June 28

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Participants in a two-week-long encampment known as "Bloombergville" protesting New York City budget cuts rejected a "deal" made June 24 between billionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg and the City Council because it leaves too many cutbacks in place when no cutbacks are necessary. Activists quickly called for a mass demonstration on June 28 at 12 noon when the City Council is supposed to vote to ratify the deal.

Bloombergville protesters loudly chanted "Shame" as City Council members left the Department of Education headquarters next to City Hall after approving the tentative deal on the city's \$63 billion-plus budget for 2012. Initial reports indicated 4,000 teacher cuts were avoided, though 2,600 teachers will be eliminated through attrition, which will increase class size. Threatened closings of 20 fire stations were apparently avoided.

New Yorkers Against Budget Cuts, which mounted the 24/7 Bloombergville during the budget debate, said in a statement: "More than 1,000 city jobs in health care will still be cut. City libraries, which thousands of New Yorkers rely on for job help and computer access, will still face cutbacks."

Tuition for City University of New York students is set to rise continually for years. This hits not only current CUNY students but younger ones too. Dinae Anderson, a high school student, told Workers World that young people are demanding a future and an end to the "school-to-prison pipeline," with military service as the only alternative. She



Larry Hales speaks at general assembly of Bloombergville on Jan. 24.



argued that if all young people currently in prison for victimless crimes were released, there would be enough money to provide free tuition -- or a job -- for all youth in the state.

The NYABC statement denouncing the deal continued: "With a \$3.1 billion surplus in the city's coffers, not one job or service should be cut. ... Billionaire Bloomberg intends to give banks money for interest -- money they collect for doing nothing -- that isn't even due yet. ...

"All of this while Wall Street enjoys record bonuses and salaries. The New Yorkers on the receiving end of these devastating cuts must not be forgotten as politicians pat themselves on the back and help billionaire Bloomberg give the banks everything they want. We will stay in the streets and keep fighting -- both [June 27] at 4 p.m. and [June 28] at noon before the City Council votes."

Michelle Keller, a leader of NYABC and vice president of Local 375 of American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees District Council 37, told WW that the public service job losses "have been going on from the beginning. We have to find a new way to organize to stop it." DC37's delegates assembly is meeting this week to evaluate the situation, she added. The United Federation of Teachers also has a delegates assembly this week.

Ramon Jimenez, of the South Bronx Community Congress and 2010 Freedom Party candidate for New York state attorney general, told WW, "It was people's struggle that helped avoid some of the threatened cuts. Now we just have to keep fighting."

Part of global pattern

The New York City austerity budget follows a pattern set in New York state as well as in Wisconsin, California, Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, Tennessee and other states. Worldwide protests against the economic crisis provoked from Tunisia and Egypt to Greece and Spain have helped inspire the fightback here in the U.S.

The similarities point to the need for a broad strategic alignment to fight the austerity onslaught. As in Wisconsin and most of the North African and European countries, the protests in New York included participation by labor unions along with mass initiatives by community and student groups.

On March 24 thousands marched from City Hall to Wall Street and back. On March 30 another thousand workers occupied the state capitol in Albany. On May 12 there was a more massive march, organized by the UFT and its allies, as well as NYABC and other groups.

On June 14, DC37 mobilized thousands of public sector workers, and the next day the NYC Building Trades Council staged a giant march of construction workers. This march was the first



Bloombergville residents shout 'Shame' at City Council members who agree to deal with NYC mayor.

WW photos: John Catalinotto

large labor march in decades to break through police barricades intended to hem them in and blunt their message.

NYABC launched Bloombergville in the midst of this upsurge of labor-community-student protests. On June 22, after maintaining a 24/7 protest encampment since June 14, Bloombergville speakers received thunderous applause at a National Nurses United rally on Wall Street. One such speaker was Genghis Mohammed of Picture the Homeless. The other was Ilya, a student who helped organize a "People's Town Hall" meeting of 360 people on Staten Island a week earlier.

Workers passing the Bloombergville campers near City Hall have given cash contributions; drivers of cars, buses and sanitation trucks have honked their horns in solidarity; and different unions have provided food to sustain the protesters during the two-week encampment.

While the city budget protests continued, a large statewide effort has focused on rent law reforms. Tent cities known as "Cuomovilles" -- for New York's Gov. Andrew Cuomo -- sprang up in many places. As the state legislative session ended, housing groups called the minor reforms superficial and inadequate, and warned they would lead to an increase in homelessness.

When the state legislative session passed the bill legalizing gay marriage, Bloombergville's "General Assembly" -- a nightly meeting to debate, decide and carry out all aspects of the long-term protest -- called on all to join the New York City Pride demonstration June 26 and to march with Queers for Economic Justice, sponsored by the United Auto Workers.

The general assembly also decided to welcome an anti-war rally on June 27 that will say: "The bombs fall both on Libya and NYC -- we say No!" The rally, sponsored by the United National Anti-War Committee, cited a call by the U.S. Conference of Mayors last week to "redirect the billions now spent on war toward urgent domestic needs."

Gavrielle Gemma, who organized a citywide strike of New York City telephone operators in the late 1960s, told WW of the importance of connecting these issues: "The right of unions to exist is being challenged, and immigrant rights are under attack. Foreclosures and unemployment continue to devastate working-class communities and youth, hitting people of color twice or even three times as hard.

"It is not just a moral question to connect these issues -- it is a necessity for the working class in the fight on economic issues," said Gemma, who wrote "The union struggle & the imperialist war machine" in WW's June 30 issue.

Many activists believe that as the movement continues and expands, general assemblies can become a feature of the people's movement, with people's assemblies at neighborhood, borough or county, city, state and national levels. They should encompass broad sectors of the people's movement, with the goal of forging a unified agenda that can ultimately challenge and later replace city councils, state assemblies and Congress itself -- all of which are bought and paid for by bankers, war profiteers and large corporations.

Bloombergville leader Larry Hales' progressive program

Larry Hales, a leading Bloombergville activist, founder of the CUNY Mobilization Network and NYABC leader, compared the experiences in different countries:

“The struggle in the U.S. -- as Bloombergville has shown -- has not reached the pitch of what we have seen around the world in response to a neoliberal agenda that is now being imposed even in the imperialist nations. The mass response in Wisconsin was the high-water mark here so far, and had not been seen in many years. Despite the size and militancy of the struggle there -- which included the occupation of the state Capitol -- Gov. Scott Walker's bill seeking to dismantle public sector unions passed.

“Instead of opening up a struggle at the workplace or in the streets, the union leadership has been using the courts to fight Walker. Walker's attack requires the unions in Wisconsin and nationally to mobilize all their forces. This is becoming increasingly important, as from Ohio to Michigan to New Jersey, both Democrats and Republicans are attacking public sector unions on behalf of the banks and the ruling class.

“These attacks, which include massive cuts of social services and privatizations, reflect the current period. It can be seen even in Europe, especially Greece, that the capitalist governments, doing the bidding of the ruling class, are hell-bent on their program, which is similar to structural adjustments forced on third world nations by the IMF and World Bank decades ago.

“Greece has seen numerous general strikes and large-scale actions by the working class in the millions, yet the austerity being forced on Greece by European banking interests continues and has intensified.

“The struggle in the U.S. has waned a bit since workers and students in Wisconsin inspired the working class here. It was clear before then, and even more so now, that protests alone, whether they be the normal rally, assembly and march or something more creative, have an end time and are not enough.

“A mass movement is needed: one that understands that these attacks are aimed at permanently destroying public sector unions and vital social services, one that unites all sectors of the working class and uses many tactics with the goal of pushing back this assault.

“Such a struggle also needs demands that put it on the offensive. It can call for a massive jobs program; an end to imperialist war; abolishing the Pentagon; education, housing and healthcare for all -- a progressive program that is in solidarity with oppressed people here and abroad.”

For more on Bloombergville, see BloombergvilleNow.org and www.NoCutsNY.wordpress.com

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