DIRTY LAUNDRY
NYC LAUNDRY WORKERS ARE CLEANING UP AN ABUSIVE INDUSTRY
BY LACHLAN HYATT — P10

DEFUND CLIMATE CHAOS
REMEMBER SUPERSTORM SANDY
9TH ANNIVERSARY

MARCH WITH US!
FRIDAY, OCTOBER 29
12:30PM
ASSEMBLE: CORNER OF PEARL ST. AND ROBERT WAGNER PL.
(UNDER BROOKLYN BRIDGE, NEAR 372 PEARL ST.)
BIT.LY/REMEMBERSANDY
ERIC ADAMS’ SUMMER HARVEST, P4
The Dem mayoral nominee raked in millions of dollars in campaign donations this summer amid frequent fundraising forays to Martha’s Vineyard and the Hamptons.

WORKING-CLASS CHAMPION, P5
Queens public school teacher Cathy Rojas is running as the left alternative in the Nov. 2 general election for mayor.

BUFFALO STAMPEDE, P6
India Walton is on the cusp of becoming the first socialist elected mayor of a major U.S. city in 60 years. Can Buffalo’s ruling class stop her?

NYC’S JAIL FROM HELL, P8
Rikers Island inmates, medical staff and guards talk about why the jail complex has unraveled so badly in the past year.

READY FOR A FRESH START, P10
New York laundry workers are fighting to clean up an industry rife with wage theft and dismal working conditions.

MEDALLION MESS, P12
Deeply indebted taxi drivers are staging a 24/7 protest outside City Hall to press their demands for a bailout.

IN THE BAG, P13
NYC’s 65,000 delivery workers recently won a package of laws that guarantees restaurant restroom access, prompt payment of tips and more.

STRIKETOBER, P13
40 years of stagnant wages. A brutal pandemic. America’s essential workers have had enough.

CLIMATE CLOCK TICKING, P15
Negotiators from 197 countries (and thousands of protesters) will gather in Glasgow, Scotland, Nov. 1-12 for this year’s U.N. climate summit.

HELLO VILYAMSBURG, P17
A new book tells the story of one of Brooklyn’s most distinctive communities.

REVEREND BILLY’S REVELATIONS, P19
The good reverend shares his Rx for climate change despair.
A Daily Independent Global News Hour with Amy Goodman and Juan González

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The Indypendent
November 2021
THE INDEPENDENT
By Theodore Hamm

B

ulld, build, 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 mayor’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 Rubins 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 arm.

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. 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.

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

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RUNNING TO THE LEFT
CATHERINE 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 Liberalization, 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 INDYPENDENT: 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 billionaires, 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 Liberalization 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 undocumented 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.
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 decommisioned, she insists. The community should benefit when private developers receive public subsidies. Cops should be held accountable for their actions. Schools should benefi t when private developers receive public subsidies.

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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 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 fi rst place in June, and it's the strongest sort of tailwind for her going into November."
Mahogany L. Browne’s evocative book-length poem explores the impacts of the prison system on both the incarcerated and the loved ones left behind.

“I have never read a book quite like I Remember Death by its Proximity to What I Love, which explores a daughter’s longing for her father who is often a persistent and haunting spirit. There are endless pathways to read this searingly intelligent collection, full of magical footnotes, journalistic asides, and love notes to readers as it measures abiding love against societal threat, as it weighs personal loss against national gain. I praise Mahogany L. Browne who is a fire starter, a conjurer of essential prayer, and torchbearer who lights the way to justice. Her words are flame, igniting love and its essential truth. This book is an act of supreme invention that wills itself to survive through powerful insistence.”

— Tina Chang, Brooklyn Poet Laureate, author of *Hybrida*
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

When they need to be transferred to me for whatever reason, the ear is ripped off, the nose is ripped open, the eye is cut, whatever reason, the ear is ripped off, the broken bones, if we can splint them, we do; cast them, we do,” said 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.

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 quarantine units, programming and services were cancelled, and health-care was difficult to access.

“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 him from his 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. On word got out that COBA would be present, decarceral
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.

“They 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.

GUARDS AND PRISONERS OFTEN COME FROM THE SAME AREAS. 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.

"I don’t think hands-off was a bad policy. They just didn’t implement 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 cells.

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-car- ceral 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 chopp- ing 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 abo- litionists, opposes the Borough-Based Jail Plan, the city’s $10 billion plan to construct four new jails to replace Rik- ers. 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.
In the five years hour or less, a violation of New York City's $15 minimum wage. Workers Center found that one in five workers were paid $10 an non-compliance.” The aforementioned 2018 report by the Laundry co-executive director of the LWC. “Especially the laundromat laundry workers, who were classifi ed as “essential service” workers everyday working conditions. have to take action,” said Rodriguez in regards to the industry’s community also to organize because many workers believed this is normal contracting COVID-19 at work and staying home and being unable to support their families. Such hardships reveal the extent of the wage and there’s a lot of workers who can’t do anything or won’t minimum wage. She also never received extra pay for the 20 or supply employee who asked for her last name to be withheld for inc, the situation was really, really bad and diffi cult,” said Sandra like Ramirez, many workers have had to choose between risking like Ramirez, many workers have had to choose between risking Like Ramirez, many workers have had to choose between risking exhaust, afraid for her family and unable to aff ord missing work. Ramirez had in her head and just pushed the show would go on. Later that week, she was diagnosed with COVID-19. So we started fl oating the idea duration and the alternative, the Department of Labor took action on the 17th of December and scheduled a meeting for this report. The NY HERO Act was passed by the New York State Senate and signed by Governor Cuomo. The act aims to “clarify the labor law, in relation to preventing occupational exposure to an airborne infectious disease and bring compliance with COVID-19 safety protocols that were absent in many of the laundromat 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 if an airborne infectious disease is negotiated by the New York state unions, as the state has a higher, a highly contagious communica-
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 $55,000. 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 survive 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 among 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.”
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 couriers 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 or 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 HidALyn 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.
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Complementing the previously released books, The Six-Pointed Star and Five Days, Five Nights, written by Cunal under the pseudonym, Manuel Tiago

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 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,” Mejia 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.
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 helps keep 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
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 stop fueling climate change.

MARCH TO THE FEDERAL RESERVE

One New York community, 350.org, is organizing a demonstration on Friday, October 29th targeting the financial institutions that fund the fossil-fuel industry. The city and state demand 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 communities.

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 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 mourn 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 Baum

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 survivors remain of Hungary’s Satmar Hasidim settling in Williamsburg after the Holocaust. According to Deutsch and Casper, they only planned to stay in Vilnyamsburg 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 of 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 founded, 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. 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 competition 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 pressure, 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 shutting 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.”
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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 super-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

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