New York City ruling elite warns Mayor de Blasio of “widespread anxiety”

By Fred Mazelis
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More than 150 leaders of New York City’s corporate and financial elite sent a letter to Mayor Bill de Blasio last Thursday insisting on ruthless measures to defend the interests of big business, amidst Depression-like conditions triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The letter, issued by the Partnership for New York, was signed by a who’s who of the ruling elite, including, among others, the chairman and CEO of Goldman Sachs, the CEOs of Citigroup and Morgan Stanley, the managing partners of some of the city’s biggest law firms, and the bosses of real estate giants like Tishman Speyer.

Media reports suggested the letter to de Blasio reflects ongoing tensions between big business and the mayor. This is vastly exaggerated. When it comes to fundamental policies and actions, there is virtually no difference.

De Blasio first won office more than six years ago claiming that he would vanquish inequality. Far from fighting inequality, he has presided (as the WSWS explained in advance) over ever-widening gaps between the rich and poor, symbolized by such projects as Hudson Yards, on Manhattan’s Far West Side, alongside new records for homelessness that have been set every month.

The economic collapse in the course of the pandemic has the corporate and financial establishment worried, however. They are demanding an intensified back-to-work drive, and are concerned about whether the “progressive” mayor, whose second term in office concludes next year and who is limited to two terms by law, will be able to keep the lid on growing social discontent.

The business executives’ letter devotes about six words to unemployment and homelessness. Then it moves on to its main concern: “There is widespread anxiety over public safety, cleanliness and other quality of life issues that are contributing to deteriorating conditions. … We need to send a strong, consistent message that our employees, customers, clients and visitors will be coming back to a safe and healthy work environment. People will be slow to return unless their concerns about security and the livability of our communities are addressed quickly and with respect and fairness for our city’s diverse populations.”

Kathryn Wylde, the president of the group, who is regularly quoted in the big business media, told the *New York Times*, “Until the people come back, the streets aren’t safe. If the streets aren’t safe, the people don’t come back.”

The talk of “safe streets” is a million miles away from the concerns of the millions of workers who cannot pay their rent and are having difficulty buying food and meeting other expenses. The massive business district in midtown Manhattan is largely empty, with only about 10 percent of office workers returning to their offices. In fact, despite spikes in shootings in some areas, crime remains at its lowest level in decades.

It is not public safety that concerns most workers, but safety from the continuing threat of COVID-19, as well as the need for measures to alleviate poverty. Despite the relatively low current level of coronavirus infections, there are still about 500 positive test results reported daily in New York. Workers are not only concerned about conditions in their work locations, but also about commuting daily on crowded trains and buses.

The “widespread anxiety” of the ruling elite is totally different from the anxiety besetting the working class. Just days ago, National Public Radio reported on a survey it had conducted along with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the T.H. Chan School of Public Health at Harvard, on the social and financial impact of the pandemic in the four largest cities of the US—New York, Los Angeles, Chicago and Houston.

Forty-six percent of households in these urban centers report serious financial pain in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic and the economic crisis. This figure rises to 54 percent of households with annual incomes of less than $100,000, and the numbers are higher among immigrants, Hispanic families and African Americans. The survey was taken during the period when $600 in additional weekly jobless benefits were still being received, so today it is even worse.

New York City faces a budget deficit of at least $9 billion, and the Metropolitan Transportation Authority is looking at a $16 billion shortfall, the consequence of the fact that ridership on the buses and subways remains only about 25 percent of its pre-pandemic level.

In the face of these huge gaps, the de Blasio administration is asking for permission from the State Financial Control Board, the agency set up during New York's near-bankruptcy in 1975, to obtain long-term borrowing to plug the current deficit. New York Governor Andrew Cuomo has not been receptive to the request, and the Partnership for New York has made its opposition to further borrowing clear. "They think the problem is money," said Ms. Wylde, referring to de Blasio and his advisers. "The problem is not money. The problem is uniting the city around a practical plan for recovery."

This language is vague, but the message from big business can be summed up in the following terms: an accelerated back-to-work drive, despite the fact that it will guarantee a rising rate of COVID-19 infection and death; no new outlays to meet the needs of the unemployed and the homeless; and a law-and-order campaign in preparation for mass repression of working class resistance.

De Blasio's record since he took office on New Year's Day 2014 has demonstrated that, when it comes to fundamental class interests, there is not the slightest difference between him and Cuomo, or the signers of the latest letter from the Partnership for New York. In fact, his response to the letter from the business leaders was to offer his cooperation. "We need these leaders to join the fight to move the city forward," he said.

The business leaders are also laying down the law for de Blasio's successor. For 20 years before the current Democratic mayor's first term began in 2014, the city was run quite openly by Wall Street, through Republican Rudy Giuliani, followed by multibillionaire Michael Bloomberg, who began his mayoralty as a Republican and ended it as a Democrat, though the party label made absolutely no difference.

The reference to "quality of life issues" in the letter to de Blasio is particularly significant, since it harks backs to the vicious law-and-order campaign under Giuliani, continued in slightly more "polite" form by Bloomberg. "Stop-and-frisk," later ruled unconstitutional, was used to arrest hundreds of thousands, primarily minority youth, under Bloomberg. William Bratton, head of the police force under Giuliani and then for the first two years of the de Blasio administration, was closely associated with these policies. Now working in California, Bratton immediately spoke up in support of the business leaders' warning about "quality of life" issues.

Over the past six months of the pandemic, the signers of the letter to de Blasio have all vastly increased their wealth, alongside the soaring stock market. They have no hesitation, however, in demanding further sacrifices from the working class. But they want to make sure that appearances are kept up. The *Times* reports that "Ms. Wylde said she waited to publish [the letter] until after Labor Day, in part because of concern among some members, who had spent months outside the city, that they would be criticized for weighing in on New York's future from afar. 'They felt it was unseemly to be writing from the Hamptons.'" What delicacy!

There is no essential difference between de Blasio and the business leaders. The massive borrowing called for by the mayor will run up the debt even more to the banks and bondholders, while doing little to prevent mass layoffs and service cutbacks. The only answer to the current crisis is the fight for a socialist program, including the expropriation of the financial parasites, to provide the resources to end the pandemic and to meet the urgent needs of the working class.