

US: protest hits plans for stadium in New York City

Peter Daniels
16 May 2005

Several hundred protesters rallied on Manhattan's West Side Saturday to oppose plans to build a new pro-football stadium in the area funded largely with New York City taxpayers' money.

Demonstrators carried signs reading "Schools not stadiums," "Housing not stadiums" and "Firehouses first." Residents of the area, known as Hell's Kitchen, said that traffic from the stadium (no new parking facilities are planned) would create intolerable conditions in their neighborhood.

Tax breaks and massive giveaways for sports arenas and similar projects are far from unusual in the United States, but New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg's proposal stands out for its arrogant and reckless disregard for the interests of the vast majority of working people.

Bloomberg's plan, unanimously approved last month by the state's Empire State Development Authority, will hand over at least \$600 million in city and state funds to the New York Jets football team, which presently plays in nearby New Jersey and is looking for a new home. The Jets are owned by a friend of Bloomberg's, fellow billionaire Robert Wood Johnson IV. The projected cost of the stadium has steadily risen from \$1.4 to \$2.2 billion, and the eventual city and state share of this cost may also rise from its present level.

The Mayor is not at all fazed by those who find something wrong with subsidizing the wealthy owners of the Jets and giving developers a chance to make their own killing with the help of public tax dollars. He claims, firstly, that the stadium is central to the city's bid to host the 2012 Olympic Games. The International Olympic Committee is scheduled to announce its decision about 2012 on July 6. The selection of New York is by no means assured, and is in fact considered somewhat unlikely. But Bloomberg insists that, even without the Olympics, a 75,000-seat stadium in Manhattan, just west and south of Times Square, will do wonders for the city.

"Keep in mind that what this is about is jobs, jobs, jobs—and people need those jobs now," Bloomberg declared

recently, sounding a lot like Bush making his pitch for the privatization of Social Security.

The Mayor claimed that the stadium would produce 7,500 permanent jobs. In fact, the estimates of both the Independent Budget Office and the state itself are for less than half of that figure, and the vast bulk of these jobs would be for workers in low-paid, seasonal service jobs at football games as well as concerts, trade shows and other activities staged when the stadium is not in use by the Jets.

As far as construction jobs, stadium backers have used the number 18,000. This number was arrived at in a rather unusual way, by multiplying an average of 4,500 construction jobs by four, the number of years it is estimated will be required for completion of the project. Even the 4,500 figure is much higher than independent sources have estimated.

The hypocritical talk of jobs for the unemployed cannot disguise the fact that this colossal giveaway to the wealthy comes at the continuing cost of basic services that desperately need the \$600 million that Bloomberg and Republican Governor George Pataki are so eager to give away.

Just a few weeks ago, for instance, the Community Service Society reported that one quarter of those New Yorkers who live in rental housing spend at least half of their incomes on rent. The median rent burden for poor households is a staggering 57 percent of income. Among poor households, as defined by the federal government's own misleading poverty-level income, 65 percent pay at least half of their incomes to put a roof over their heads, and this leaves them, on average, about \$30 a week to cover everything from food and clothing to transportation and even the cost of heating and utilities.

The CSS pointed out that these figures are based on data that is already four years old. Since 2001, incomes for workers and the poor have stagnated at best, while the city has allowed regulated rents to be increased by about 5 percent every year. Thus, the situation today is even worse. This can also be seen in the permanent crisis of

homelessness in New York, including thousands of the working poor, families headed by working people who nevertheless are forced into homeless shelters for lack of affordable housing.

There is not a single area of public services that is not plagued by deepening crisis, a crisis that has been compounded by official government neglect and contempt for the poorest sections of the working class.

Even the city's supposed success stories, like the upgrading of the subways in recent years, are being revealed as hopelessly inadequate. Billions of dollars have been spent on new subway cars and other improvements, but the lack of infrastructure planning has been manifested in a series of breakdowns in recent months, as fires, water main breaks and broken signals have delayed riders repeatedly.

While Pataki and Bloomberg agree to each come up with \$300 million for the stadium, the state has ignored a July 30, 2004, deadline set by the state's highest court in 2003 for coming up with a plan to spend an additional \$5.6 billion to provide a decent education for New York City's public school students, who are forced into crumbling and overcrowded schools and where 40 percent of students who enter high school never graduate.

In obscene contrast to the state of housing, transit and the public schools, the city's multimillionaire CEOs have continued to receive ever-increasing salary, bonus and stock grant packages. *Newsday* recently reported on CEO pay for 2004, including \$32,134,673 for E. Stanley O'Neal of Merrill Lynch, \$29,789,359 for Henry Paulson, Jr. of Goldman Sachs, and \$20 million-plus packages for the heads of Lehman Brothers, Bear Stearns, Morgan Stanley and American Express, with others receiving more than \$10 million.

Workers are well aware of the class divide in this city. A recent poll found that 65 percent are opposed to public funding for the stadium project, with only 27 percent in favor and 8 percent undecided.

This opposition finds no organized political expression, however. While the stadium deal is not yet assured, this is not because its critics within the political and financial establishment have any principled differences with Bloomberg's rule on behalf of the ruling elite.

On the contrary, most of the criticism has merely indicted the mayor for focusing too much of his energy on the stadium, at the expense of other real estate projects whose backers are seeking their own public subsidies. The *New York Times* quoted one wealthy developer who complained, "We're just having trouble getting the support we think we deserve. We've given to the Olympics, we support the stadium. But the stadium, in particular, has diverted attention from important projects like ours."

The stadium faces outright opposition from Cablevision, the owners of Madison Square Garden, which would face stiff competition from a new stadium on the West Side. Cablevision, which made its own higher bid for the development rights but was turned down by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, which controls the site chosen for the stadium, has filed suit against the deal. A decision is not expected in State Supreme Court until sometime in June.

Also maneuvering for their own advantage are the Democratic and Republican leaders of the state legislature. Sheldon Silver, Democratic speaker of the State Assembly, and Joseph Bruno, Republican majority leader of the State Senate, have withheld their final OK, which will be necessary before the state's Public Authorities Control Board gives its approval. Both Bruno and Silver are angling for deals that have absolutely nothing to do with the needs of the working class for housing, health care, education and jobs. Silver wants money for a downtown development plan that would benefit wealthy interests, and Bruno has called for similar tax giveaways for upstate projects.

Democratic politicians are jockeying for position in preparation for next September's primary election to choose an opponent for Bloomberg as he seeks reelection in November, but none are capable of presenting any alternative to Bloomberg's combination of what the media dubs "social liberalism" with brazen attacks on living standards and public services.

Some prominent black Democrats, most prominent among them Al Sharpton, have reached their own deals with the developers and come out endorsing the stadium plan. Sharpton has made TV commercials for the Jets, touting what he claims are commitments to steer business to minority contractors.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact