

Ilyse Hogue: The Trojan Horse of the Anti-Choice Movement



# It's About Inequality: New York's Class-Conscious Mayoral Race

For the first time in years, class politics are creeping back onto the New York campaign trail.

**Matthew Arnold** August 12, 2013

Like 1 Tweet 0 TEXT SIZE SUBSCRIBE



Public Advocate Bill de Blasio speaks with potential voters on July 30, 2013. (AP Photo/Frank Franklin II)

Class politics of the bottom-up sort are back in New York City.

After almost a dozen years of rule by a billionaire technocrat prone to [Marie Antoinette eruptions](#) about the lives of the city's poor ("You can arrive in your private jet at Kennedy Airport, take a private limousine and go straight to the shelter system and walk in the door and we've got to give you shelter"), a Seinfeldian campaign season that turned on tabloid fodder and a vague sense of Bloomberg fatigue is, in some quarters at least, moving toward something more substantive: a shot at resetting the balance of power between the city's Haves and Have Nots (and Have Somes, and Have It Alls, etc.).

Several weeks back, five of New York's Democratic mayoral candidates [spent a night](#) at Lincoln Houses in Harlem, emerging in the morning to deplore creeping mold, weak water pressure and repairs long deferred by the city. More recently, one of them, Public Advocate Bill de Blasio, together with a host of progressive city councilmembers and a state senator, tried [living on a McDonald's worker's salary for a week](#). None made it five days.

City Councilmember [Stephen Levin](#), whose district spans parts of Williamsburg and Greenpoint and a good swath of the Brownstone Belt, stretched his \$77 for food and transportation all of three-and-a-half days before a run-of-the-mill travel SNAFU—he got stuck on a layover at Chicago's O'Hare International Airport—put him over budget.

"To me, it highlights how, if you're living on minimum wage, catastrophes happen – life still happens, unexpected things that can set you back. And if you're on minimum wage, you don't have much of a cushion," Levin said.

Levin ended up spending around \$125 on food and work-related transportation for the week. Even that budget—far more lavish than a minimum-wage worker's might be—demanded some questionable dietary choices.

"I filled up on carbs," he said. "I'd have a Cup of Noodles and a Coke for lunch. I needed the sugar and the carbs because I'd skipped breakfast."

To the children of low-wage workers, a living wage can mean not having to move schools constantly because the family is homeless or on the verge of homelessness, noted Levin, for

whom expanding access to free breakfasts and lunches for public school kids has been a focus of City Council work.

It's easy to be cynical about stuff like this. These are political stunts, after all, in the grand tradition of Jane Byrne (the Chicago mayor whose 1981 stay at the Cabrini-Green housing project, notorious for its uncomfortable proximity to the city's Gold Coast, [went less smoothly](#)). All have solid homes and salaries to return to after their stint in minimum-wage purgatory.

But even in these times of unprecedented inequality, when [four out of five Americans will experience severe economic distress at some point in their lives](#), it's uncommon for politicians—even true-blue progressive politicians, even in New York City—to bother to appeal to the poor, or to the boutique vote of bleeding heart affluent who care about the yawning gap between themselves and the people who power the service-economy cloud upon which they're borne aloft.

Maybe there's something in the water, what with [fast food workers out on strike](#) and the president [talking](#) about how, after four years of economic stall and four decades of wage stagnation, the American Dream is losing its power to make the proles suspend disbelief anymore.

The numbers are certainly daunting. Last year, there were 3.6 million workers making the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour, or less, according to the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#). That's nearly 5 percent of US workers ages 16 and up. Around half of those workers are under 25, but as of last year, nearly nine in ten were over 20, [according to an Economic Policy Institute analysis](#), and 28 percent have kids.

Here in New York City, almost a third of renters (31 percent) are ["severely rent burdened,"](#) with more than half their income going to pay the rent, according to NYU's Furman Center. Another quarter (24 percent) are "moderately rent burdened," spending 30 to 50 percent of their income on rent. A [study](#) released last month by the Economic Policy Institute found that an adult with a child needs \$67,153 a year to make ends meet here—that's \$32.28 an hour, full-time—while a minimum wage worker making \$7.25 an hour stands to make between \$10,000 and \$18,000 a year. Which will barely buy you a magnum of champers at a Meatpacking District nightclub these days.

The number of New York City workers paid minimum wage has increased tenfold over the past six years—nearly a third make less than \$25,000 a year—and the purchasing power of minimum wage workers is 26 percent lower than it was in 1970.

"I work two minimum-wage jobs, and I live hand-to-mouth," said McDonald's worker Kareem Starks in a statement. (Starks was one of the workers whose budget politicians tried, and failed, to live on during their weeklong dive into minimum-wage reality). "Both my kids had graduations last month and I wasn't able to buy them anything at all to celebrate them. If I made more money, I'd also have a chance to see them more."

Starks is playing by the rules of McDonald's "Practical Money Skills" [microsite](#), a hilariously patronizing [public-relations faceplant](#) that the company cooked up for its employees with an assist from Visa (because if anyone knows about responsible money management, it's the financial services industry that gave us Fabulous Fab, the London Whale and Lehman Brothers). He works two jobs, as the McDonald's Budget Calculator assumes employees will. But even if you're working the punishing seventy-hour week they base their budget on, making ends meet on \$7.25 an hour requires some improbably low expenses, like \$20 health insurance, a \$50 heating bill, a \$150 car payment and \$600 rent. Yeah, good luck with that. And if everything shakes out according to the Golden Arches's expectations, you're left with \$25 a day for luxuries like food and transportation. You could buy yourself a couple of Big Mac Value Meals and a pair of swipes for your Metrocard and still have more than \$4 left over to sock away in your 401K.

When the [story](#) of this remedial home ec course blew up, McDonald's defended its budget as a "general outline of what an individual budget might look like," and company flacks, splashing floss sweat like fry grease at lunch rush, [defended](#) the fast food giant's "competitive" wages and benefits and talked up the ownership of restaurants by "independent" businesspeople. Which is to say: Hey, everybody else in fast food pays their workers rock-bottom wages, and we can't make our franchises pay them better.

0

fweet

1

Like

bmit

ddit

0

Please support our journalism. Get a digital subscription for just \$9.50!

But of course they *could* make them pay a living wage, as can cities. New York's City Council passed a so-called living wage law, the Fair Wages for New Yorkers Act, last year—but only after Speaker Christine Quinn, the onetime community organizer-turned-Bloomberg protégé, had [reduced it to little more than a symbolic measure](#) (she gave a sick leave bill a similar, if less drastic, working over earlier this year). Mayor Bloomberg promptly vetoed the law, invoking the specter of the Soviet Union, but the City Council overrode him.

And so 400 to 500 low-wage workers on heavily city-subsidized developments must now be paid a whopping \$10 an hour. For all the Mayor's hyperventilating about Bolsheviks under our \$60,000 Hästens horsehair-mattressed beds, the Real Estate Board of New York could scarcely stifle a yawn. The new law isn't nothing—it's a marker, maybe, for more substantive action in the future. But it's not nearly enough to lift wages at the bottom throughout the city's real estate industry, much less across sectors.

So here's to you, Bill de Blasio, State Senator Daniel Squadron and Council Members Letitia James, Jessica Lappin, Donovan Richards, Steve Levin, Ydanis Rodriguez and Jumaane Williams, all of whom took the minimum wage challenge sponsored by New York Communities for Change and UnitedNY. It shouldn't be shocking to see a serious mayoral contender shed his loafers for the shoes of a low wage worker, but after two decades of City Hall being synonymous with Wall Street, it is. Maybe it's safe to shed our civic cynicism and dream anew of a different kind of city as well.

*Paul Ryan says he wants to listen to real people fighting poverty—but why didn't he allow one to testify at a congressional hearing?*

**Matthew Arnold** August 12, 2013

Like 1 Tweet 0 [Email icon] TEXT SIZE [minus] [plus] SUBSCRIBE

Print | Web Letter (0) | Write a Letter | Single Page

**Suggested for you**

- Running Against Mayor McCheese (and Bloomberg, too)
- Exploiting Egypt's Rape Culture for Political Gain
- Bill de Blasio for Mayor
- ALEC Convention Met With Protests in Chicago
- I Only Regret That I Have But One Life to Give for My Country: Yours
- A Statement of Peace, or an Epitaph

**From around the web**

Advertisement

- Surprisingly simple solution to help your joints. See why these ingred... Instaflex
- Myrtle Beach on sale. Rates as low as \$69 per night & package specials... Visit Myrtle Beach
- How Seniors Can Scoop Up Free \$20,500 Checks (See If You Qualify) newsmax
- Pastor says he turned his father's \$40,000 retirement into \$396,000 by... moneynews
- Avoid doing these exercises that make you fatter every day HomeWorkoutRevolution
- The E-Cigarette craze is sweeping the country. Is it really that good... ADPHealthInsights

**— Nation — BUILDERS** Your Voice. Your Values. Your Nation.  
 Confirm your commitment to The Nation's groundbreaking news and commentary, driving progressive values into our national conversation.

Like

Add New Comment

Before commenting, please read our [Community Guidelines](#).



Showing 0 comments

Sort by newest first ▾

[Subscribe by email](#)  [RSS](#)

Trackback URL

More Politics

**Obama Seems Lost in the 'War on Terror'** (Barack Obama, Foreign Policy, War on Terrorism)

**It's About Inequality: New York's Class-Conscious Mayoral Race** (City and County Level Campaigns and Elections, Cities, Politics)

**Member of Congressional Science Committee: Global Warming a 'Fraud' to 'Create Global Government'** (Climate Change, Global Organizations, Politics)

**Warning: This Gasoline Is Hazardous to Your Planet** (Climate Change, Regulations, Politics)

Nation Media

 **Help Iraqis and Iraq Veterans Gain the Right to Heal**

 **Voices for Trayvon Martin**

 **Jumaane Williams: Voices for Trayvon Martin**

 **Jeremy Scahill: The War Against Whistleblowers**

Also From The Nation

**Obama Seems Lost in the 'War on Terror'** (Barack Obama, Foreign Policy, War on Terrorism)

**It's About Inequality: New York's Class-Conscious Mayoral Race** (City and County Level Campaigns and Elections, Cities, Politics)

**Protesters Live in a Tent City to Oppose Post Office Closure** (Budget Wars, Activism)

**No, for the Love of God, Johnny Manziel Isn't Rosa Parks** (Sports, Society)



- Home
- Blogs
- Columns
- Current Issue
- Magazine Archive
- Multimedia
- E-Books
- Puzzle
- Community
- Educators
- Students

- Politics
- World
- Books & Arts
- Economy
- Environment
- Activism
- Society

- Advertise
- Subscription Services
- The Nation Builders
- Newsletter
- Nation in the News
- Store
- Spanish Translations

- Help
- About & Contact
- Digital, Mobile and E-Reader
- Community Guidelines
- Work for Us
- Privacy Policy
- Terms of Use