

New York City: Death By Fire Or Rats

NEW YORK, April 17 (IPS) — Health officials here admitted this week that banker-dictated budget cuts have collapsed the city's health system to levels seen previously only in the devastated Mezzogiorno region of southern Italy or in the Third World.

Deputy Health Commissioner Jean Cropper told a U.S. Labor Party representative that his department has drawn up a list of "rock bottom" service levels below which the city's health system would be totally ineffectual. "If they cut below these levels," Cropper said, "we won't go to work... it would be no use..." The entire health system would be shut down leaving the seven million people of the world's largest metropolis defenseless against plague-bearing rats and epidemics of infectious disease.

City officials report that other city services are in worse shape. In the first three months of this year, nearly 50 people died in fires — twice as many as all of last year. Whole blocks in ghettos are being burned to the ground almost daily, leaving families out in the street. Rat control programs have already been cut to the point of being ineffectual. Sanitationmen report that rats "are everywhere;" packs roam freely among the piles of uncollectable garbage in the ghettos of the city's five boroughs. Overall, city services have been slashed by 20-25 per cent, in less than one year of banker-enforced austerity.

The banker's debt collectors, the Emergency Financial Control Board and their political towel boys, Governor Hugh Carey and Mayor Abe Beame, have criminally covered-up the real extent of the city's collapse as they prepare to administer the next ratchet in budget cutbacks. On April 13, Beame announced his 1976-77 budget, calling for \$270 million in new cuts, slashing services by an additional 10 per cent. It is no secret where the money will go: 20 per cent of the city's \$12 billion budget Beame reported is debt service to the New York banks.

There are only two possible outcomes to the city's crisis. Either there is a moratorium on its \$13 billion in outstanding debt and the immediate restoration of essential city services to 1971 levels; or in a matter of months the city will collapse into a holocaust comparable to 14th century Europe, its inhabitants left to die in fires, or killed by rats and disease.

Death by Rats

With an immediate threat of an explosion in the city's already enormous rat population, rat control programs are slated for additional cutbacks. A projected 30 per cent cutback will reduce the target area for the program from 1900 square blocks to less than 1300 square blocks — effectively ceding whole areas of the ghetto to the rats.

As Health Officials admitted, the public health system is totally unable to meet the threat of serious outbreaks of disease, much less deal with the plague threat posed by the destruction of rat control. "It's like the snake pit," one official said referring to the conditions of municipal medical facilities. The hospitals, their staffs and equipment cutback, have themselves become disease breeding and transmission points.

To meet new budget requirements, Health Commissioner Lowell Bellin, the man appointed to dismantle the city health

care system has proposed the closing of all public hospitals. Bellin supported his policy by claiming that the collapsing and expensive private hospital system could more efficiently handle the city's sick. As Bellin's own second level officials have pointed out, the closing of the city's public hospitals would leave nearly two million people for whom the municipal hospitals are the only source of cheap medical treatment, without any medical care whatsoever.

The department has also been ordered to carry out drastic cuts in community health clinic programs, TB and venereal disease monitoring programs and to stay within their banker dictated budget guidelines.

Death by Fire

Cutbacks in fire protection have lengthened the time it takes to respond to an alarm, contributing to sharp rises in both deaths and injuries from fires.

Seven people died in two ghetto fires last Tuesday night. According to firemen at the scene of both fires, the dead "never had a chance." In a fire in a Brooklyn ghetto, firemen found two children in a small room choked to death by smoke. Their mother and another child were found side-by-side on the floor next to a door. One firemen interviewed by a local television station said angrily, "There was no way out here. These goddamn buildings are not made to get out of... something has to be done about them or the whole area will burn and these people with it. Don't they (the city) understand?"

Three weeks ago, Atlanticist banker and Big MAC chairman Felix Rohatyn proposed what he called a novel solution to deal with the city crisis. The ghettos should be razed, he told the New York Times, and then blacktopped over. The first part of Rohatyn's plan is being accomplished: the ghettos are being razed along with their inhabitants.

Casualty rates have soared among the undermanned and overworked fire crews. At the present rate, approximately 60 per cent of all firemen will suffer serious injuries sometime this year. At a recent funeral in Queens for a fireman killed in the line of duty, firefighters gathered around Labor Party organizers for a briefing on the international battle for debt moratorium and the New York budget crisis. The widow came to the organizers, telling her husband's comrades "They are right. They are right. Austerity killed my husband."

Rage Just Beneath the Surface

When Mayor Beame arrived at the scene of a killer fire a few weeks ago, he had to be protected by a phalanx of armed police, as angry residents shouted, "Murderer! You butcher, how dare you show your face here!" A city councilman reports that most state and city legislators cannot safely return to their districts after acquiescing to the banker's ordered austerity, their constituents might do them physical harm.

Fear of this rage forced state legislators this week to pass legislation over Governor Carey's veto that will force the allocation of an additional \$150 million to restore cuts in the city school budget — the first override of the governor's veto in more than 104 years and, more significantly, the first open

act of legislative rebellion against the dictates of the banks and the EFCB.

Beame, in a tirade scripted by the banks, threatened that he would make "drastic and senseless cuts" in city services if he is forced to carry out the so-called 'Stavisky Bill's' mandate. "I will rip up city services," he pledged while simultaneously announcing his intention to challenge the legality of the legislation — on the grounds that the EFCB has full jurisdiction over the city's finances.

Carey and Beame have tried to use the chaos created by the bill's failure to specify where the money should come from to set each city department, and union at each others throat protecting "their turf" from new cuts. Some unionists, however, won't fall for this con game. When asked which department he thought should be cut to pay for the Stavisky bill, John May head of the Transit Patrolman's Benevolent Assn. replied, "No services should be cut. None at all." The fireman's Union has also said that none should be cut.

Neither those unions nor second-level city bureaucrats who oppose austerity are yet willing to wage a political battle to take the money for education and other services from the only place it can be taken — the bankers debt service. Instead many are begging for a few crumbs from the murderers who run the city. After making known the Health

Department's "rock bottom" list, Deputy Commissioner Cropper refused to go to the bourgeois press with the information. "We don't want to wreck our delicate negotiations with the city."

It is impossible to negotiate with fascists.

"I get a lot of people coming into my office," City Budget Director Donald Kummerfeld said in a recent newspaper interview, "They say well, I know the city has problem's...But you can't close this school. You can't possibly eliminate that tropical disease center..." Kummerfeld, the fascist bureaucrat simply tells them they must be shut down, "Some people are so distraught," he says, "when they find out the cold reality, that they literally weep in my office."

The members of the EFCB, Big MAC, their political towel boys like Carey and Beame in the state and city political machinery, their hatchet men in the city and state bureaucracies are mass murderers. Their implementation of austerity to guarantee the repayment of the bankers' debt has killed tens of thousands already, approximately one person for every \$15,000 in budget cuts or at least 80,000 people. Now they threaten the entire population of the city. These murderers must be removed from positions of power, indicted and tried for their crimes.