

Sydney's homeless to be removed for Olympics

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Despite public criticism following leaked media reports of their plans, the New South Wales State Labor Government and the Sydney City Council are proceeding with measures to rid Sydney's streets of homeless people in preparation for the Olympic Games this September.

In response to a front-page report in Sydney's *Sun Herald* on January 16 revealing the new procedures, government spokesmen denied that the scheme had anything to do with the Olympics. But their measures bear a striking resemblance to those used in Atlanta four years ago to clear the streets of the poor.

A city council task force will draw up a dossier on every homeless person in the city, detailing all aspects of their lives. The dossiers are meant to include information that can be used to induce people off the streets and into boarding houses or hostels. A "flying squad" of social workers will have first contact with the homeless and then rely on police to remove those unwilling to cooperate. Among homeless people, hostels and boarding houses throughout the Sydney metropolitan area have the reputation of being more dangerous than the streets, because of the increasing frequency of violent assaults, theft and food poisoning that occur there.

Sydney City Council Rangers and private security guards employed by various local and Olympics authorities have been handed new powers to remove "by reasonable force" anyone deemed a nuisance. "Offences" ranging from drinking alcohol to demonstrating, begging, or camping in The Rocks, Circular Quay, Darling Harbour and Olympics sites will be subject to the new measures.

Police will use the Bail Act for the same purposes. The Act allows police to set conditional bail for people charged with minor street offences such as causing a "social nuisance". The result is that people are temporarily removed from an area. These measures are already being used in tourist areas like Kings Cross. In addition recent legislation introduced by the Carr government has given police "move-on" powers. This legislation particularly targets youth, and is used by police to "move on" those considered by them to be

"obstructing, intimidating or harassing" people.

In addition, the government is planning to bus homeless people up to 200 kilometres from Sydney to Wollongong, Newcastle and the Blue Mountains, and house them in disused hospitals, government buildings and caravan parks, in an attempt to triple the amount of emergency housing during the Olympics.

Some of these measures were first mooted last August when Sydney Lord Mayor, Councillor Frank Sartor announced a \$1.2 million offensive to rid Sydney of homeless people. In reference to the anticipated increase in the number of people being attracted to Sydney seeking jobs during the Olympics, Sartor commented: "The city is not a financial nirvana, and people need to make sure they have enough money to care for themselves and to get home again. Also, people need to make sure they have somewhere to stay before coming." When asked about the planned dossiers, Sartor commented "We want to know what it will take to get these people off the streets."

Showing his utter contempt for the homeless, Sartor added: "You could shine lights on them to make life uncomfortable, but they will only move to another hole somewhere else. There has to be a solution. We cannot afford to be a world city, with fantastic fireworks and the Olympics without also showing that we are dealing with our problem of homeless on the streets."

Apart from making tens of millions of dollars from visitors and tourists during the Olympics, federal, state and city authorities, together with the tourism industry, regard the Games as a gigantic public relations exercise to showcase Sydney and Australia as a major tourist destination for the next several decades. Any intrusion by the homeless—one of the most visible signs of the city's immense social problems and inequality—will damage the advertising image.

While state government politicians have been more guarded than Sartor in their comments concerning the issue, it is clear that their perspective is the same. After years of ignoring the plight of the homeless, the government recently formed a Homelessness Action Team (HAT). One of its

briefs is to deal with homelessness in the period preceding and following the Olympics. HAT has the role of finding permanent accommodation for chronically homeless people, particularly those with complex problems like mental illness or drug and alcohol related conditions.

Denials by Sartor and Premier Bob Carr that their measures are timed for the Olympics fly in the face of the fact that the government has conducted detailed studies of all aspects of the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta. Four years ago, 9,000 homeless people in Atlanta were arrested during the eight months leading up to the Olympic Games for begging and loitering. Homeless people were shunted up to 300 kilometres out of Atlanta for the two weeks of the games.

Rising rents, falling working class living standards and chronic unemployment have produced rising homelessness in Australia. The Australian Bureau of Statistics recently reported that, according to its 1996 census, 105,000 people were classified as homeless nationally, more than twice the previous estimate. Of these, 30,000 were in Sydney.

The main government response to homelessness historically has been the Commonwealth/State funded Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP). SAAP-funded services are meant to provide crisis refuges, as well as referral assistance, for young people, single men and women, families and women escaping domestic violence.

In its 1996-97 annual report, the National Data Collection Agency found that in the 12 months from mid-1996 to mid-1997 over 56,000 people in NSW sought support from SAAP. Half of these could not be assisted. In addition to the 28,000 adults turned away, assistance was also refused to an unknown number of accompanying children.

There is little or no data on people who do not contact services, despite indications that there are many homeless people who are reluctant to utilise official and charitable services. These are the people particularly targetted by the new measures.

The National Data Collection Agency attributed the high level of unmet demand to several factors, including lack of access to affordable housing, and lack of growth in funding for SAAP services. It also identified inadequate services for people suffering from mental illness, with demand increasing every year.

Sydney has an acute housing crisis due to the inflated cost of private rental accommodation and the depletion of public housing over the last two decades. Approximately 130,000 families and single people are living in public housing in NSW, with almost as many—nearly 100,000—on waiting lists. In areas of high demand, Central, Northern and Eastern Sydney, the waiting times exceed 10 years. Even those on priority waiting lists—those with identified disabilities or

severe medical problems, such as terminal illness—wait up to two years in such areas.

Many of those on the general waiting lists will never be housed, even though 80 percent are reliant on welfare payments and, as such, are the most disadvantaged sections of the working class.

Strict eligibility criteria apply for anyone wishing to be listed for "wait-turn" housing. For single people, only those earning less than \$390 gross per week are eligible to apply. For each additional family member the allowance is even less. For a family of two the income cut-off is \$500 gross, for a family of three it is \$650, for four people \$720. Regular reviews are conducted to cull out those who are earning "too much".

Those on the waiting lists or ineligible for public housing are the most vulnerable when it comes to trying to find decent accommodation in the private rental market, where rents are soaring and evictions are growing because of the Olympics.

Redfern Legal Centre recently reported that it had dealt with 250 evictions in the South Sydney area alone in the two months before Christmas, with many instances of landlords ousting poor tenants in order to cash in on the Olympics. The centre also dealt with five to 10 tenants a week reporting rent increases of 20-30 percent, particularly in Kings Cross, Pyrmont, Newtown and Surry Hills. It concluded that because demand for rental accommodation is outweighing supply, poorer tenants are losing the battle.

Even the state government's own figures show that throughout the so-called Olympics corridor, or those suburbs near Olympic Games venues, rents have risen by up to 20 percent in the past 12 months. The NSW Department of Housing's rent and sales report for the June 1999 quarter showed that, for example, median rents for two-bedroom flats in Leichhardt jumped by nearly 21 percent, while four-bedroom houses in the same inner-west suburb were up by almost 19 percent.

With these levels of rent increases, working class families will increasingly join the ranks of the homeless.



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