

Ontario law aims to drive poor off the streets

A correspondent
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A law that makes it illegal to panhandle near bank machines and bus stops or to wash car windows on a roadway came into force in Ontario this past week. Benignly tilted the Safe Streets Act, the law is a vicious attack on the poor and the homeless.

Toronto Mayor Mel Lastman has served notice he expects police to rigorously apply the new law so as to drive “squeegee kids” and “aggressive panhandlers” off the streets of Canada's largest, and in many respects wealthiest, city. On Lastman's orders, Toronto police mounted a drive against squeegee kids, the homeless, and panhandlers last summer. Police stopped and questioned thousands despite complaints from civil liberties groups and advocates for the poor that police had no legal authority to target “street people.” Now the Tory provincial government has given Lastman and the Toronto police legal sanction to escalate the persecution of the marginalized and vulnerable.

Passed in late November, the Safe Streets Act seeks to stigmatize the poor as drug and alcohol abusers and associate them with prostitution and other social ills. In addition to making it illegal to approach a motor vehicle for the purpose of offering a service and empowering police to arrest all but the most supplicant beggars, the law makes it illegal to ask for money when under the influence of drugs or alcohol, outlaws ticket scalping and other forms of “aggressive soliciting,” and makes it illegal to dispose of condoms or syringes in parks or school yards.

Those found guilty of violating the Safe Streets Act will be liable to fines of \$500 for the first offense and a \$1,000 fine and jail term of up to six months for subsequent offenses. There is every prospect that a significant portion of Toronto's estimated 25,000 homeless will become entangled in the criminal justice system, if not end up in jail. Even some police have questioned the wisdom of the new law, noting that it risks compelling the destitute to take to theft and other

desperate acts to survive. Said one cop, “This new law gives us a tool to get these guys off the streets. But where are they going to go?”

Both opposition parties have criticized the new law, but from the standpoint that it hinders the Tories' law and order campaign. “This legislation,” said New Democratic Party leader Howard Hampton, “is an embarrassment and it's an insult. It's an embarrassment because there are real crime problems out there in our communities.”

Since coming to power in 1995, the Ontario Tories have imposed massive cuts to social services, while waging a relentless campaign to stigmatize the poor. Among the very first actions taken by the Harris Tory government was to slash welfare benefits by more than 21 percent. Subsequently, the government canceled all support for social housing construction and instituted a mandatory “workfare” program for welfare recipients.



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