

Persecution of homeless mother continues in Toronto

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Authorities in Toronto are continuing to persecute a 41-year-old homeless woman, proceeding with draconian charges of child abandonment against her, despite media coverage indicating the tragedy of her plight. The woman faced court February 10 and was ordered to appear in the Ontario Court of Justice on March 11. Her bail conditions require that she remain in a shelter, report regularly to authorities and seek counseling.

She gave birth to a girl almost three weeks ago, leaving the baby to be found outside Toronto City Hall, in a stairwell below Nathan Philips Square, where the woman often slept out. By choosing this very public location, the woman clearly intended the baby to be found quickly. Equally obvious is that she was traumatized by the pregnancy and birth, then had to endure further terror at the hands of the police.

The infant, named Mira or “miracle” by hospital staff, is reported to be progressing well and has been placed in foster care by the Children’s Aid Society (CAS), an agency funded by the Ontario provincial government.

Hounded by journalists, the woman hurried from the Old City Hall building on Monday, yelling at reporters to “leave me alone.” No one in the media has even suggested that mother and baby may be reunited. Instead, the coverage has focused almost exclusively on the serious criminal charges the woman faces.

But in the only brief comments she gave to a reporter, she made it clear that she wishes to have custody of her baby and be given a chance to raise her in decent conditions. “I’d like to get a place to live (and to) work. When I get on my feet, I’d like to (raise her),” she told CFTO television news.

Despite this, CAS went to the Family Court, seeking an extension of an interim order, leaving the baby in the

care of the foster family. Moreover, CAS executive director Bruce Rivers briefed reporters, emphasizing the legal requirements that the woman would have to meet in order to obtain custody.

Rivers said the woman would need to submit a long-term “Parenting Plan” to the Family Court, setting out her ability to house, nurture and care for her baby. The CAS would also make recommendations to the court.

It is highly unlikely the woman could successfully prepare such a plan, without a good deal of assistance. At the very least, she would need a commitment that she and her child will receive decent, affordable, secure housing, a livable income, an assurance of ongoing access to health and other support services, and possibly parenting and family assistance. Her chances of success are no doubt diminished significantly by the criminal charges she faces.

Government spending on all forms of welfare and public housing in Ontario has been slashed over the past decade, particularly under the Tory government since 1995. Yet, there has been one exception—the CAS budget has been doubled over the past seven years, accompanied by a 63 percent rise in the number of children taken into state care. According to housing activist John Clarke of the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty, poor families, who are vulnerable to eviction, live in fear of having their children taken away by the CAS.

No public statement has been made about the plight of the woman and her child by the newly elected New Democratic Party federal leader, and former Toronto City Councilor, Jack Layton.

City Hall’s response to the issue of homelessness was highlighted this week, by the passage of a bylaw that insists upon the dispersal of homeless shelters from downtown Toronto and into the suburbs. Instead of

demanding or providing decent and affordable public housing with security of tenure, the City Council has voted to remove the growing numbers of homeless people from wealthy and middle class neighborhoods.

The bylaw bans the opening of new shelters within 250 meters of an existing shelter or in any council ward that already has more than 500 shelter beds. It also restricts new facilities to major arterial roads. There are currently 67 shelters in Toronto City, with 4,000 beds, with more than half in the downtown area.

The bylaw is an attempt to “clean up” Toronto, where soaring property values, tourism and other billion-dollar corporate interests are at stake. But suburban councilors are equally hostile to the homeless. Etobicoke ward Councilor Rob Ford said: “The city is going to be turned into a ghetto if we have homeless shelters across the city. Property values are going to depreciate.” Graham Reid, a sales representative with Coldwell Banker Pinnacle Real Estate, told the *National Post* that installing a homeless shelter could depress a neighborhood’s property values by as much as 10 percent.

Many homeless people are opposed to moving out of the inner city areas, where support services are difficult enough to access. Health, drug and alcohol counseling and other services are nonexistent in some outlying suburbs. In addition, homeless people are ordered to leave shelters in the mornings, exposing to the winter’s freezing winds. At least in the inner city, people can go into heated subways and underground malls, which do not exist in the suburbs.

Inhumane laws and policing aimed at attacking the poor and vulnerable are not confined to Toronto. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police this week charged an 18-year-old woman with child abandonment following the discovery of a newborn baby in a Cape Breton, Nova Scotia hospital washroom last Sunday.

No details of the young woman’s situation have been released. However, the actions of police in Cape Breton and Toronto are the same—the laying of criminal charges, which carry jail terms of up to two years, against women in need of compassion.

While funds for housing, health, education and welfare have been slashed across Canada, the federal government this week unveiled a \$2.4 billion increase in the military budget over the next three years, in the context of preparing for a war against the people of

Iraq. This amount alone would begin to redress the long-outstanding deficiencies in funding for public housing.



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