

# Hundreds of homeless forcibly evicted from Southern California refuge

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Dozens of police and state officials descended on the Ontario, California homeless encampment known as “tent city” on March 17 under the pretext of reducing crime and stopping the spread of disease. Approximately 200 residents living at the encampment were forcibly removed.

Residents, many with severe physical and mental disabilities, had been given little notice of the planned eviction. Requests for a 30-day reprieve had been denied by local officials.

Officials acted with the ostensible intention of removing all non-Ontario residents from the area. To that end, tent city residents were given color-coded arm bands which divided them into three categories; Ontario residents, non-residents, and those who were given a short period of time to prove residence in Ontario. Dogs and other pets were removed from the site along with motor homes and cars that were unable to start properly.

The police most likely kicked out many residents who were citizens of Ontario, but were unable to adequately prove it. The evicted residents were then bused out of the encampment, leaving personal belongings behind in many cases. Their ultimate fate remains unclear.

One volunteer interviewed by local news station KTLA 5 reported that he had conducted extensive interviews with camp residents and believed that only about 15 percent of the original 400 were not from the city of Ontario as opposed to the 50 percent actually evicted.

The encampment itself is located on a group of vacant, dust-covered house lots adjacent to the Ontario airport approximately 40 miles east of the city of Los Angeles. Begun during the summer of 2007 with a group of approximately 30 residents, the camp swelled to an estimated 400 over the course of only a few months.

Despite the efforts of a large number of volunteers, who came to offer their help once the existence of “tent city” became more widely known, the residents continue to live in squalid and harsh conditions. Those who do not have an RV or motor home have to live in either camping or improvised tents. Many have only plastic tarps or cardboard boxes to

protect them from the elements.

*World Socialist Web Site* reporters who visited “tent city” shortly after the eviction observed that sanitation has become a problem with garbage strewn right next to where people eat and sleep. Only one portable shower for the entire encampment could be seen.

To step into the camp is like looking into a 21st century version of John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*. Indeed, some have dubbed the camp “Bushville”, a reference to “Hooverilles,” shantytowns set up by the homeless during the Great Depression and whose names were a sarcastic reference to then President Herbert Hoover.

Those who live there represent only a tiny fraction of the approximately 131,000 homeless living in San Bernardino and neighboring Los Angeles, Riverside and Orange counties.

While local officials have used the occasion of the evictions to announce plans to improve portable bathrooms and install a food service area and fire rings, Brent Schultz, housing manager for the city of Ontario, has announced that the newly fenced in area will be secured between the hours of 10 p.m. and 6 a.m., and expressed the hope that volunteers would largely defray maintenance costs that would otherwise be borne by the city.

In addition to the enforced curfew, remaining residents were also given ID cards that allow them a maximum stay of 90 days at the camp. State officials and police, who will now maintain a permanent presence in the area, will also enforce a maximum occupancy of 170 residents. Such measures seem to indicate that the city of Ontario ultimately intends to clear out the site’s homeless population entirely rather than fulfill its stated goal of reducing disease and crime at the site.

The majority of “tent city’s” residents suffer from mental illness, drug addiction, physical disability or a combination of all three. However, a recent news story by the BBC revealed that a handful of people in the Ontario encampment were there as a result of the US housing crisis.

One individual told the British news agency that he had a

choice between “feeding [his] family or keeping the house.” “So I got rid of the house,” he said.

As the foreclosure crisis intensifies, this could directly or indirectly lead to an increase in the populations of this and other such encampments.

California has been particularly hard-hit by the meltdown of the US home market. According to the web site DataQuick.com, which monitors housing and foreclosure activity in California, the county of San Bernardino, which contains the city of Ontario, experienced a 106 percent increase in mortgage loan default notices between the fourth quarter of 2006 and the fourth quarter of 2007. Similarly, the state of California experienced a 114 percent increase during that same period, and this number is expected to rise as home prices decline along with other economic indicators.

The DataQuick site also reports that while 71 percent of California homeowners so notified were able to safely emerge from the foreclosure process in 2006 either by refinancing, becoming current with their loan payments, or repaying their mortgages through the sale of their homes, this percentage dropped to 41 percent in 2007.

While the majority of tent city residents are not as a direct result of the foreclosure crisis, they are victims of its indirect effects.

Mike Dunlap, a volunteer with a drug and alcohol rehabilitation center, spoke with WSWs reporters about some of the conditions that originally drove residents to tent city and about the evacuations which he had witnessed. He responded to our question about the impact of foreclosures on homelessness and our observation that one of the many problems fueling the existence of “tent city” was the lack of affordable housing in the area.

He explained that he expected to see a “trickle-down effect” from the foreclosure crisis. “Normally, a lot of the homeless on SSI [Supplemental Security Income, a benefit paid out to the elderly and the disabled] in the beginning of the month, when they get paid, would be in hotels for a week, maybe two. If they could afford it, they’d double up.

“But what you’re going to see now is all the hotels are going to be full because all the people that have foreclosures that didn’t buy motor homes and trailers took all the spaces wherever they could go. If they fill up all the hotels, where are all the homeless going to go that normally go [to hotels] for two weeks out of a month? They’re going to go on the street. And from that then you’re going to be devastated.

“Every community is going to start seeing that,” Dunlap said. “We know there are more people here, caused by the economy, [caused by there being] no jobs, caused by foreclosures. People run out of money and they’re at the bottom.”

He added that the Ontario authorities pushed many tent

city residents into leaving, even those who legally had a right to stay by virtue of their residence, because they wanted to reduce the numbers at the encampment.

“I think what really happened is that they intimidated [the homeless] so bad that they got down to 75, maybe 80 people [remaining],” Dunlap explained. “I don’t doubt that some will die out there,” he continued, “Because knock them down again and again and sooner or later, they’re alone and what else do they do? They commit suicide.”

The WSWs also spoke with Tina, a former nurse, and a homeless resident of Ontario’s tent city who was able to stay at the encampment. She explained that she ended up homeless after suffering a shoulder injury. As a result, she could not perform CPR any longer, losing her nursing license and her livelihood.

“I’ve been renting an apartment since I was 18 and never had an eviction in my life [until this],” Tina told us. “Now my credit is screwed,” she said, explaining her difficulty getting an apartment. “Rents out here [i.e. in Ontario as opposed to the city of Los Angeles] are more reasonable, but trying to get into a place. They want a first month’s rent, a last month’s rent, and a deposit, and a perfect credit rating,” she noted.

We also spoke with Tina about the precarious economic situation confronting working people in the US as a whole. She lamented the impossibility of saving up the three months worth of living expenses that every person is “supposed” to have for an emergency situation “especially if you’re on a limited budget, if you’re on a fixed income.”

She added, “52 percent of working Americans are one paycheck away from being homeless.”



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