

Los Angeles moves toward restricting food distributions in public places

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Two members of the Los Angeles City Council have presented a motion that moves toward banning the distribution of meals to homeless people in public areas. The proposed ordinance follows similar initiatives taken or being discussed in some 30 cities around the US, including Orlando, Philadelphia and Seattle.

The motion is in response to services provided by the Greater West Hollywood Food Coalition (GWHFC) and the UCLA Mobile Clinic. Every evening, for some 27 years, a truck organized by volunteers feeds one hundred or more homeless people at the street corner of Sycamore and Romaine. Some local residents have complained that the activity attracts homeless people to residential areas.

Both advocates of the motion, Councilmen Tom LaBonge and Mitch O'Farrell, are Democrats. In September they introduced a motion summoning the City Attorney, the Los Angeles Police Department, the Board of Public Works, the Department of Disability, the County Health Department and the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority to "report on measures which address providing meal service to individuals in the public rights of way."

The councilmen cast the homeless as the perpetrators, rather than the victims, of the social crisis: "Due to the large demand to feed those in need, these activities [providing services for the needy] frequently spill out onto the sidewalk and street, creating numerous public safety and public health concerns."

Instead of addressing the social crisis itself, the response of the political establishment in Los Angeles is to restrict social assistance.

The growth of homeless and hungry families and individuals is a direct product of the economic crisis and the response of the ruling class, which has included

sharp cuts in social services at the national, state and local levels.

As a result of the sequester and cuts implemented by Congress and approved by Obama, the already meager \$7 billion a year allocated to the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program was significantly cut. The National WIC Association estimates a 9.3 percent cut and "hundreds of thousands of participants cut from the program" for the current year.

Democrats and Republicans in Congress are currently discussing billions of dollars in cuts to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, or food stamps), on top of allowing the expiration on November 1 of additional funding.

The sequester cuts have also hit Head Start, a federally funded program that provides preschool and early preschool programs for low-income families, with devastating effects for millions of families.

All of this has led to a growth of hunger and homelessness, even as the banks and Wall Street firms have been bailed out with hundreds of billions of dollars.

The proposed motion in Los Angeles, which targets the most vulnerable layers of the population, has broader implications for democratic rights that go beyond the attack on the homeless. According to the motion, "concentrations of people, lack of ADA [Americans with Disabilities Act] accessibility and blocking of streets and sidewalks cause significant public safety problems."

There is an ominous contrast between the motion's intent to contain and reduce "concentrations of people" and the basic democratic rights laid out in the Bill of Rights, specifically the First Amendment, according to which "Congress shall make no law... abridging... the right of the people peaceably to assemble..."

California, home to 38 million people, includes approximately 10 percent of the world's billionaires. Los Angeles, which includes Hollywood, has the second highest concentration of homelessness in the country after New York.

According to the Department of Housing and Urban Development's 2013 Annual Homeless Assessment Report, California accounts for more than 22 percent of the entire country's homeless population, with 136,826 people. Since 2007, homelessness in California has increased by 4.5 percent.

In Los Angeles County alone, the homeless population has increased 27 percent in the last year, the largest increase among major cities. Of these, 76 percent are unsheltered.

The Institute for the Study of Homelessness and Poverty at the Weingart Center offers more alarming figures. According to a recent report, an estimated 254,000 men, women and children experience homelessness in Los Angeles County during some part of the year. On any given night, approximately 82,000 people are homeless. This includes some 4,800 to 10,000 young people, many around the Hollywood area.

The largest concentrations of homelessness are in South Los Angeles and Metro Los Angeles. A fifth of the homeless are veterans, as many are disabled, a quarter are mentally ill, half are African American. Most (up to 77 percent) do not receive any public benefits. A third of this population hold a bachelors degree or higher, compared to 25 percent of the population as a whole.

The Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA) released a report last June that confirms a drastic increase in the homeless population in Los Angeles County (16 percent in the years 2011-2012) and spells out the devastating effects of the Obama administration's social cuts.

Michael Arnold, Executive Director at LAHSA, wrote that: "Over the past year, we've seen a significant reduction in federal resources available to fight homelessness. The increase we see today in our homeless population demonstrates the direct relationship between resources to address the problem and our ability to have an impact."

Homelessness is a grave social problem. The intensification of the social crisis is a result not simply

of abstract economic forces, but a very deliberate class policy, in which massive resources are being transferred from the population as a whole into the hands of the corporate and financial elite. Having nothing to offer by way of social reform, the ruling class responds to the crisis it has created through reactionary and retrograde measures such as that being promoted in Los Angeles.



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