

San Jose, California: “The Jungle” homeless camp dismantled

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Last Thursday, residents were forcibly removed from their dwellings at the homeless encampment known as “The Jungle,” a 68-acre shantytown at Story and Keyes roads along Coyote Creek in San Jose, California. The Jungle was thought to be the largest homeless encampment in the United States, with recent estimates of the size approaching 300 residents.

On Monday, December 1, police formally notified those living at The Jungle that on the following Thursday they would be forced to leave. Then, on Thursday morning, more than 30 police officers, along with social workers and officials from the Santa Clara County Water District, swept through the site with bulldozers and trash compacters, displacing the roughly 60 people who remained at the camp.

Eva Martinez, 63, told the *San Jose Mercury News*, “This is my home. Now I’ll have to lay down on the street, somewhere outside. I couldn’t bring out all of my stuff. The rest will end up in the dumpsters, I guess. It’s terrible. It’s terrible for all of us.”

The decision to remove inhabitants at The Jungle came in July 2013, when the City Council approved a budget of \$4 million to provide temporary rental vouchers for The Jungle’s homeless residents. The city claims that 144 of The Jungle’s residents have found temporary housing, while 50 more with rental vouchers still have no place to go. However, dozens more were not provided with vouchers at all.

The last time The Jungle was cleared out was in May 2012, when roughly 150 people were removed from the site. This time, however, police will regularly patrol the site to prevent people from returning, and a metal fence will surround the area once it’s cleared of all items. Removal is expected to be completed by December 19.

The dismantling of the Jungle comes amid the biggest rainstorms in California in recent years. The state has been enduring the third, and worst, year of one of its most

devastating droughts on record. San Jose homelessness response manager Ray Bramson cited the rain as well as other factors such as increased violence and unsanitary conditions as the immediate pretext for the eviction.

Within the past month, one resident attempted to strangle another with a cord of wire, while another was nearly beaten to death with a hammer. Trying to present the displacement as a process of environmental renewal, the State Water Resources Control Board celebrates the fact that nearby Coyote Creek will finally be cleaned of debris and human excrement.

Bramson told the *Mercury News*, “This site is no longer open for any individuals. The fact that anyone has to live in conditions like this is horrible. This shouldn’t be a viable alternative for anyone. We need to make sure that people never have to live in a place like this.” Yet the homeless who have been given temporary rental vouchers will soon be thrust back onto the streets once these limited funds are exhausted. At least a third of the residents of The Jungle have been provided with no alternative source of housing, left to drift to disparate homeless encampments in the surrounding area.

Veronica Mackenzie, 21, told the *New York Times*, “It’s going to be a long night. They should have provided housing for everyone out here, or shelter or something, instead of just pushing us out on the streets.” More than 7,500 homeless people sleep on the streets in Santa Clara County on a given night, in one of the most socially polarized areas of the world.

San Francisco has the second highest number of billionaires in a single city in the United States, with 20, according to *Forbes*. The Silicon Valley, which encompasses the region surrounding San Jose, is home to 34 billionaires, with most living in Woodside, Palo Alto and Atherton, the cities closest to Stanford University. Oracle CEO Larry Ellison is perennially named the richest person in Silicon Valley, and is currently the fifth

richest in the world. In 2013 his net worth ballooned to \$48 billion, up \$5 billion since from the previous year.

The Silicon Valley is home to Google, Cisco, Hewlett-Packard, Yahoo!, PayPal, eBay, Facebook, Intel and Apple, among other tech giants. Accordingly, it is one of the most expensive places to live in the world. The median cost of rent in San Jose, as of October, was \$2,934 a month, while that of the wider San Jose metropolitan area was \$3,163 a month, a spike of 16 percent in one year.

During the recession, state funding for affordable housing has been slashed, in step with the ravages of federal sequestration carried out under the Democratic Obama administration. In November, the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities released a study finding that the number of families receiving low-income housing assistance has dropped by 100,000 since 2012, as a result of the sequester budget cuts implemented in 2013. The study found that over 340,000 veterans, who experience disproportionate rates of homelessness, depend upon rental assistance to afford housing. 600,000 Americans, nearly a quarter of them children, are homeless or living in a shelter on any given night, while more than a million children live either in motels or doubled-up with other families.

Also in November, the National Center on Family Homelessness at American Institutes for Research (NCFH), released a study titled *America's Youngest Outcasts*. The principal finding was that 2.5 million American children were homeless at some point last year, a historic high.

Leslye Corsiglia, the housing director for San Jose, told the *New York Times* that since 2010, the city's funds for affordable housing from federal, state and local sources have been cut by a third, to \$61 million. Combined with the skyrocketing of rental prices, the working class of San Jose and the larger Silicon Valley has been squeezed from all sides, either out of the region or into homelessness.



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