

Manchester protesters face eviction as UK rough sleeping rises

Dennis Moore
13 July 2015

A group of homeless protesters who have been camped out on the streets of central Manchester for the last few months face eviction, and could face jail if an injunction goes ahead.

Manchester City Council served a notice on Friday June 19, ordering protesters to pack up their tents and leave St. Ann's Square and Castlefield. Twenty or so of the protesters have refused to leave.

The decision to set up the camp was made following a march against cuts to services and austerity and was initially sited just outside Manchester Town Hall. The local council took legal action to move the protest, so they then moved to outside Manchester Central Library in St. Peter's Square.

The protesters have adopted the name Homeless Rights of Justice and describe themselves on their Facebook page as a "collective of activists and homeless people working together to change the way Manchester deals with the homeless."

At the time of their removal from St. Peter's square, Manchester Council had spent £88,000 on policing and legal costs since the camp was set up a month earlier.

The council are applying for a citywide injunction that will ban the protesters from entering, sleeping or setting up tents in the city centre. A court hearing will take place on July 26.

Speaking in the *Manchester Evening News* newspaper, Ben Taylor, a solicitor who represented some of the protesters, said the group had not caused any harm, adding, "It would be a draconian step. What on earth would the terms of the injunction be? Not to be homeless in the city centre? Not to gather in the city centre? These are massive restrictions on people's liberties."

The protest has arisen in response to a sharp rise in the numbers of people sleeping rough in Manchester

and throughout the UK, with cuts to services and the reduction of available beds in hostels.

Most of those camped out are vulnerable people, who are unintentionally homeless. Therefore the local authority, Manchester City Council, has a duty to offer them permanent suitable accommodation.

The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) statistics indicate that there has been a 55 percent rise in rough sleeping across England between 2010 and 2014. There has been a 14 percent rise in rough sleeping on last year, with 2,744 people reported by local councils across the country as sleeping rough on any one night in 2014.

Manchester, Rochdale and Salford have experienced the highest rates of rough sleeping in the North West. Speaking to the *Manchester Evening News*, Amanda Croome, chief executive of Manchester's Booth Centre homeless charity, said, "We are seeing an average of five new rough sleepers every day. As soon as we are housing people there's more people coming through so the problem is definitely getting worse."

The problem of rough sleeping is particularly acute in London, where rough sleeping is rising more than twice as fast as in the rest of the country, with 742 people sleeping rough on any one night in the capital in 2014, an increase of 79 percent since 2010 and 37 percent since 2013.

Jon Sparkes, chief executive of the homelessness charity Crisis, said, "These figures show that the law is badly failing people facing homelessness. Welfare reform, benefit cuts and a chronic shortage of affordable homes mean more and more people are coming to their council as homeless. But as the law stands, far too often when single people ask for help, they are turned away to sleep on the street."

Wolfgang and Paddy are two of the protesters at the

Manchester camp.

Wolfgang ended up becoming homeless following the death of his father, who had been killed fighting in Iraq.

He explained, “We’ve had the church on our side, we’ve had the public on our side. The support has been amazing. People have given us food and clothes, and have been making donations.”

“Homelessness isn’t a ‘problem’, it’s an epidemic. I have seen hundreds of people sleeping out on the streets of Manchester.”

Explaining the attitude of the local council, he said, “That’s a big problem. Say you are being abused at home; say you’re being beaten black and blue, but you cannot prove that you’re being beaten black and blue. You then leave your house because you cannot stay there anymore.

“You have to live on the streets and go to the council for help. You are asked, why did you leave? You say, because I was beaten, and they ask, can you prove it? You say no. You are then found intentionally homeless and are back on the streets.”

Paddy has lived on the streets on and off for years. He said, “I do not understand why there are so many homes lying empty, while at the same time there are homeless people on the streets with nowhere to live.

“It does not matter where you were from, or how you became homeless. If you are homeless you should be looked after.”

The accumulated cuts to services have had a detrimental effect on homeless provision. In 2013, Narrowgate, the only emergency night shelter in Manchester and Salford, was forced to close after its funding was cut. This left 28 men and women without accommodation and led to five staff members being laid off.

The impact of Narrowgate closing was immense—135 organisations had referred 2,200 people to the shelter, of which only 865 had been found permanent accommodation.

At the time of its closure Alan, who has been homeless for six years and relied on Narrowgate for accommodation and support, was informed via text message that the shelter had closed. “At the end of the day it’s a place where we all used to go, we all used to meet up,” he explains, at a breakfast drop-in Manchester city centre.

The closing of Narrowgate followed the closing of

Manchester’s Salvation Army hostel in 2011, which had a dramatic impact on the city’s young homeless population as those under 35 are disproportionately affected by rules restricting the claiming of housing benefit.

It is estimated that in the UK there are more than 700,000 homes lying vacant and across Europe there are 11 million. This would house all the continent’s homeless twice over.

Many of these homes were bought as investments by people never intending to live in them, situated in vast holiday resorts, at the time of the feverish run up to the 2007-2008 financial crash. Hundreds of thousands of homes that were half built have been bulldozed in an attempt to shore up the prices of existing properties.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact