

Bailiffs and police break up another homeless camp in Manchester

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14 July 2016

Last week, bailiffs and police were brought in to evict a large group of homeless people from land adjacent to London Road, a major thoroughfare that enters central Manchester from the south of the city.

Situated next to Manchester's main Piccadilly railway station, the land belongs to the University of Manchester. The eviction follows a long-standing battle between the homeless, the University and Manchester City Council, which resulted in legal action to remove the homeless from the land.

The area came to be known as Tent City, home to a growing number of people who had been living there for months, having nowhere else to go.

At its height up to 40 people lived at the site, which is directly opposite the large McDonald Hotel. At the time of the eviction, staff from Manchester Council's rough sleepers team were offering to try and find temporary accommodation for those still there.

Martyn Clarke 35, one of the rough sleepers, who had been staying at the camp since Christmas, said he did not agree with the "brutal" method used to evict them, although he was keen to accept the offer of a place to stay. Martyn poignantly declared, "They have evicted the homeless, literally".

The eviction follows criticisms of the camp in the local media, which often cited problems with drug and alcohol misuse, the number of vulnerable people attracted to the camp, and the resultant problems.

It came in the wake of several high profile evictions from the streets of Manchester in recent times. Last year, a group of homeless people living under the Mancunian Way flyover, and calling themselves "The Ark," were evicted from that land, again owned by the University of Manchester.

After Manchester City Council was granted an injunction, in July 2015, to stop the setting up of

homeless camps in the city centre, students and members of the public organised demonstrations in support of the plight of homeless people.

Earlier that year, in April, homeless camp protestors were evicted from a site in St Anne's square, in central Manchester. At the time, WSWs reporters visited the area, and spoke to a number of homeless people who had been staying there.

Shelter, a homeless charity, has produced figures in a recent report showing that last year in England, 148,000 renting households, equivalent to 350,000 renters, were put at risk of eviction.

Using Ministry of Justice figures, Shelter identified "home threat hotspots" across the country, where renters were at greater risk of losing their homes.

This increase is occurring not merely within the capital, London, where historically the problem has been greater. Growing numbers of people across the country are at risk, with Shelter reporting a marked increase in the numbers of people under threat of eviction, who have approached their organisation for help.

As the problem of homelessness escalates, homeless camps are springing up across the UK. The more visible these become, the more local authorities across the UK resort to legal methods to break them up, and criminalise the homeless.

Legal injunctions and Public Space Protection Orders (PSPOs) are now being used to ban homeless people from setting up tents, or from demonstrating against local authorities.

Last year, Bournemouth council on the south coast of the UK came under fire after it broadcast the sounds of bagpipes and Alvin and the Chipmunks throughout the night, to prevent homeless people from sleeping in the area around the town's travel interchange.

Following criticism from charities, Newport council had to back down last year, when it proposed the use of a PSPO to ban rough sleepers from the city centre, ahead of a new shopping centre being opened. Similar plans have been considered in Liverpool and London.

There is concern that councils across the UK are resorting to methods that are in breach of the Humans Rights Act. Rosie Brighthouse, the legal officer for the civil liberties organisation, Liberty, said last October, “We’ve seen a rash of proposed PSPOs nationwide, which risk criminalising the most vulnerable in society.”

In the last year, Liberty has been fighting the implementation of many PSPOs, and recently reported that Wrexham County Borough Council had to back down when it tried to impose an anti-social behaviour order. The plan involved criminalising “sleeping within Wrexham Bus Station in Kings Street, and any public toilet facilities within the Town Centre during the hours of darkness”. Earlier this year the council succeeded in banning people from sleeping in two of the town parks at night, utilising a PSPO.

Walking around the centre of Manchester, or any other major city or town in the UK, one invariably sees growing numbers of people sleeping out and begging. This week, just on Manchester’s main shopping thoroughfare, Market Street, this writer saw at least 15 homeless people bedding down for the night, with only a sleeping bag, on concrete floors in shop doorways.

The problem of homelessness and rough sleeping has not arisen overnight. It has emerged over a protracted period, and is due a number of factors, including the lack of social housing construction, enormous cuts to services, and changes to the welfare benefits system, which are leaving individuals and families increasingly vulnerable.

Now, sleeping rough is being criminalised for those poor and vulnerable people who end up homeless on the streets. Using PSPOs, however, in no way addresses the underlying causes that have produced this social crisis. They actually make it worse, as the real issues are never addressed, with PSPOs being used to punish some of the neediest in society.

In effect, PSPOs move the problem of homelessness onto somewhere else, in an attempt to hide it from the public gaze, in the hope that no one notices that the system is falling apart in front of our very eyes.

Meanwhile those targeted are simply fast-tracked into the criminal justice system, since anyone who breaches a PSPO can be fined on the spot or end up in prison.



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