

Thanksgiving in Los Angeles: From Hollywood's American dream to social nightmare

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While the Hollywood establishment is fully engaged in other matters, the social reality in Los Angeles on the Thanksgiving holiday stands in stark contrast to media depictions of the entertainment capital as the place where the American dream comes true.

Last June, a report revealed that the number of homeless in Los Angeles County jumped to 58,000, a 23 percent increase from 2016. In recent weeks, a hepatitis A outbreak among the homeless population has prompted officials to declare a state of emergency in some areas. Last month, it was reported that this year there are thousands fewer shelter beds than in 2009, with only 0.3 beds per homeless person.

According to the Los Angeles Regional Food Bank, an estimated 1.4 million people in Los Angeles County live with food insecurity. Put differently, approximately one out of every six people do not know where their next meal will come from. Exorbitant housing and soaring transportation costs are pushing families with two incomes into food deprivation.

An index of worsening conditions is given by a 68 percent increase in the youth homeless population (18- to 24-year-olds) over 2016. Los Angeles community colleges report that one in five students is homeless, while two-thirds cannot afford proper nutrition.

The situation for homeless youth is believed to be worse than reported. Bill Bedrossian, the CEO of Covenant House California, a nonprofit organization that serves homeless 18- to 24-year-olds, commented that his organization has seen an increase of young men and women in recent years. Half of them are former foster kids.

Moreover, homeless youth are often more "invisible" than other homeless, Bedrossian says, as they often find

refuge with friends or keep odd hours, instead of sleeping on sidewalks or registering in shelters.

This phenomenon was also confirmed by Nathan Sheets, director of operations and programs for the Center at Blessed Sacrament in Hollywood, California, an organization that provides support for the homeless. "The numbers underestimate many of those youth who stay with friends and relatives," Sheets told the WSWs.

The solution to social problems by the establishment is either to hide or institutionalize them. Homelessness enjoys both treatments.

On one hand the severity of social inequality is rigorously concealed by diversion campaigns. On the other, politicians, especially Democrats, propose hundreds of millions of dollars not to address the underlying issues typical of capitalist society, such as social inequality, but to make homelessness an institution with which society should learn to permanently coexist, while private contractors are given the chance to enrich themselves off public funds.

It doesn't require exceptional imagination to foresee that the proposed tax cut bill passed by the US House of Representatives last week, which includes an estimated \$1.5 trillion tax cuts for corporations, will produce deadly conditions for the socially vulnerable, as the budget for aid programs is slashed and crucial entitlement and social programs like Social Security and Medicare are threatened.

Downtown Los Angeles has long been an area of homeless encampments. Every year, the Los Angeles Mission Downtown organizes the "Skid Row Thanksgiving," serving meals to the homeless. Hundreds of tents are situated in the area around 5th Street and San Pedro Street.

The urban landscape here resembles deeply impoverished communities in underdeveloped countries. California, a state that alone ranks as the world's sixth largest economy in terms of gross domestic product also scores the nation's highest poverty rate.

A WSWs reporting team visited Skid Row on Thanksgiving Day and spoke to a few volunteers.

George, a social worker from Lakewood working with foster kids, substance abuse and family therapy, shared his thoughts on social inequality: "Capitalism is self-centered. When is 'enough' enough? Our priorities are off. Tony Stark in 'Ironman' said: 'World peace means having a bigger stick than the other guy.' I don't believe in that at all.

"As a social worker I believe in the cause of the common people in our society. We don't put the needs of the few ahead of the needs of the many.

"I just got my master's in social work last year and I have to live with my in-laws, to whom of course I'm grateful. My parents were immigrants from Tonga with eight kids. We faced the immigrant struggle and dealing with the trauma of poverty. I lost two brothers to drugs and gang. I took out loans, graduated, now rebuilding, saving, but it's hard."

Chico, an actor, noted, "America is supposed to be the land of milk and honey, but it really is sardines and vinegar for so many. The billions spent for the military? We are told we must prepare for the worst, but the worst is already happening here. We must take that money and take care of people.

"The reality is that the poor is going to turn on the rich. When the village speaks... and the village is speaking now!"

Kymm, a real estate agent, pointed her finger to the high-rises on the Downtown Los Angeles skyline: "If you think about the amount of money that's circulated in those buildings, just one of them, like US Bank, would wipe out the homeless issue. When you think of the amount of money just in Los Angeles, you can see the ability to change the conditions.

"I'm in real estate, I know how much those high rises are worth. Still they [bank executives] are able to walk out and walk over a homeless person on their way to a sushi dinner. We can't expect the solution to come from Washington. We should think globally too. We start locally to mushroom globally. We cannot accept

that women, children, the elderly and the ill should live on the streets."

Kim and Rubin expressed their concern over ever increasing levels of social inequality. Kim stated, "Southern California has a lot of money. But what we see here is a lot of regular people willing to sacrifice their holiday to help others in need. Our system, our government are a little messed up. Politicians are out for themselves and their businesses. They don't care about the little person."

Rubin interjected: "The rich are getting richer and the poor poorer. An average person making between \$25, 000 and \$50, 000 cannot afford living in California where home prices keep going up. Many end up living on the street. Other governments like in Canada at least give people free health care. Not here in the US, especially here in California, with all the wealth. It's sad to see so many people below poverty line."

Commenting on the wealth concentration in the US, in light of reports that the wealth of Bezos, Buffett and Gates equals that of the bottom 50 percent of the US population, Rubin stated that "having three people who have that much wealth, there's something wrong. How can you keep that much money and be indifferent to so many people struggling?"



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