UN special rapporteur on poverty visits LA's Skid Row

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The UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty, Philip Alston, toured Southern California last week as part of a two-week tour to investigate the economic condition of the poorest and most vulnerable people in the US. Alston is to share preliminary remarks at the conclusion of his tour on the December 15, and is to release a final report next spring.

Explaining the motivation for his probe, he said, "Some might ask why a UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights would visit a country as rich as the United States. But despite great wealth in the US, there also exists great poverty and inequality." This much is incontrovertible and—to vast swathes of the American working class—obvious.

Initial accounts indicate that his time in Los Angeles was spent primarily in the impoverished area known as "Skid Row," a neighborhood infamous for its homelessness, drug abuse, and police brutality. Alston also spoke with representatives from the American Civil Liberties Union who wrote to him in October of anti-camping ordinances that criminalize homelessness by punishing sleeping in public places. According to the ACLU, they constitute a violation of human rights under international law.

Alston commented at a town hall in Skid Row last Wednesday that "I think it's [the poverty in Skid Row] on a scale I hadn't anticipated, block after block of people. … When you see how concentrated it is, it's more shocking."

The conditions in Skid Row are indeed shocking. Estimates for median income fall between $13,000 and $17,000, depending on how borders are drawn, with about two thirds of the area living below the poverty level. Just several blocks away, in the steadily gentrifying downtown, rent bottoms out at around $1,800 per month. Homelessness in the area saw an increase of 20 percent over last year, to almost 2,000 people within the 0.4 square mile neighborhood.

A shortage of public bathrooms has resulted in a public health disaster. In May 2012, the LA County Department of Public Health sent a report to LA City Hall noting an "Immediate Threat to Public Health." It elaborated: "Survey teams observed small piles of feces and/or urine on the sidewalks and grass areas of the majority of the streets surveyed (i.e., 8 of the 10 blocks surveyed). Additionally, teams observed an accumulation of feces/urine in two storm drains, no soap in one of the City maintained automatic public toilets, and trash and debris in another public toilet."

Reverend Andy Bales of the Union Rescue Mission, the largest homeless shelter in the United States, has had to undergo amputations because of this. He told the *Guardian* in June, "I lost my leg because I got E coli and staph and strep from the sidewalk because of feces being present." These conditions are a health risk not only to the homeless, but to anyone in the area.

Drug use and mental disabilities are also significant problems here. The same 2012 county report found 13 discarded hypodermic needles in the 10 blocks they surveyed. Four out of 10 homeless people in the US have a serious drug addiction or are severely mentally ill.

Then there is the matter of the police violence. There have been several attempts over the last few decades, particularly in 1987 and 2002, to remove the homeless by means of aggressively enforcing "anti-camping" ordinances. However, given their sheer number, arresting or relocating the homeless all proved too difficult, and the efforts were dropped. Nonetheless, such efforts have been marked by police violence, and there have been several attempts to resuscitate these orinances. In 2015, a video went viral of the police

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murder of a homeless man known by the name “Africa.” He was killed by police who were part of the “Safer Cities” initiative, which itself was part of renewed drive towards gentrification.

As grievous as conditions in Skid Row are, however, they are only a more concentrated expression of the same basic issues that permeate the rest of American society. There has at no point in history been a greater chasm between the elite and the working class and the conditions in Skid Row differ from those facing the rest of the working class in concentration only, not in kind.

In the sphere of public health, the ruling class has Medicare and Medicaid in their sights. With the passage of the Trump tax plan, the consequent tax deficit can be used to provide a readymade excuse to defund them.

The substance abuse in Skid Row is paralleled by the growing nationwide opioid epidemic, driven simultaneously by the general distress on the part of workers, which compels the more desperate and vulnerable toward drugs, and the indifference or outright malice on the part of the elite and drug companies.

Police brutality has reached such dimensions that a few workers are killed virtually every day by police, be they homeless, unemployed or working.

The political establishment does not only ignore such miseries, but intensifies them. The Trump administration and the Republicans are moving to pass the most reactionary tax bill in decades, in which essentially everyone earning less than $75,000 will pay more taxes by 2027.

But the chief political responsibility for the plight of those living in the poorest areas of Los Angeles lies with the Democrats, who have held political power in the city since 2001. They are more directly responsible for the continuous police repression, the inordinately high rent, and the consequent homelessness here. SNAP (food stamps) funding has been cut under both Democratic and Republican administrations.

The basic interests of the working class find no expression within the political establishment. Whatever Alston’s recommendations to the UN—itself a body of capitalist nations—the conditions of the working class can be nowhere improved without a political struggle against the two big business parties that support the profit system.

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