“This could be anyone tomorrow”

Anaheim, California: Homeless encampment residents speak on their conditions

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A December Housing and Urban Development report detailed a net increase in homelessness in the US for the first time in seven years. While homelessness in the US—and in California in particular, with some 114,000 homeless in the state—has exploded in the last several years, there is little official work to alleviate the conditions of the thousands who have been abandoned.

Rather, the issue is dealt with only to the extent that it affects the interests of the wealthy, and in such a manner that is only considerate of those interests. This is the case with an Anaheim, California homeless encampment, which sits on the Santa Ana riverbed next to Anaheim’s Major League Baseball stadium. The stadium generates more than $1 million per year in taxes alone and is owned by Disney, which has also received long-term tax exemptions from the city to renovate Disneyland resort hotels.

Rather than offering equal charity to those living on the riverbed, the city has started a “slow and methodical” drive to shut down the encampment. The city is asking for “voluntary compliance” in vacating the encampment, but failing that has threatened to escalate this drive.

WSWS reporters spoke to residents about their conditions in the encampment and ensuing removal. The general picture that emerges is that residents are predominantly working class, but most have suffered certain financial shocks—often due to health issues—that they have been unable to bear, and find themselves on the street. This, combined with an already high cost of living and unaffordable housing in the area, exacerbates homelessness.

Typical was Cher Stuckman’s case. She had previously worked as an administrative assistant in a hospital and later as a nanny, but after suffering from a stroke and from chronic seizures, and after supporting her daughter’s own illness, was unable to afford to keep a roof over her head.

"They treat their homeless like s***, like we’re second class citizens, like we’re not worth anything," Stuckman noted. "We are worth something. We all have a trade that we can do, but for whatever reason can’t do it. There are very few people down here who are just bums. Very few … There’s a misconception that everyone down here does drugs. That’s wrong. I mean, people are people. There’s some use, sure, but it’s not extreme.

“There’s not any affordable housing in Orange County. I was born and raised out here and look how I’m treated. I pay my taxes. I’ve worked since I was 13 years old. I’m going to be 60 this year. How many years of work is that?

“I’d like to see any of the people who are trying to push us out—I’d like to see them live homeless. It’s not fun. It’s possible, but it’s not fun. No one wants this. You make do with what you have.”

In the encampment Stuckman met her partner, previously a tow truck driver for many years, who has helped take care of her health.

Denise, a middle-aged woman in a wheelchair, said that it was impossible for her to get a job because of her disability. Pointing to apartments behind her, she said, “This could be them tomorrow. This could be anyone tomorrow.”

A good number of those in the encampment are still working. A young worker named Jeremy said, “I used to work on the tugboats in New Orleans. Then I came to California and worked out here on the water. But

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then I got laid off. What I do now is I wash windows at the gas station. I've been doing that for several weeks now, every day, for free. I work for tips."

Victor, who had previously owned a painting business, talked about the difficultly in recovering from homelessness. "People aren't all here because of drugs and alcohol. They come here and *become* alcoholics. There are plenty of people that don't belong here. They come here when they have nowhere else to go.

"A lot of people have jobs, but it's hard to get them. You walk into a place with an application, and you haven't showered, you're dirty, you're already feeling self-conscious about yourself. you're not going to get a job when there are three or four other guys, clean-shaven coming from home, that you have to compete with."

While some in the encampment accepted the actions of the police, others were more suspicious. One man reported police throwing belongings into a compactor when their owner wasn't there to claim them, saying it was trash that needed to be cleaned up. Another told an anecdote about a friend who received several tickets for minor violations like not having a flasher on his bike, and subsequently being told by the officer "You're from the riverbed right? Go back there and spread the word." He called the aggressive ticketing a form of harassment.

Donovan Farrow, a veteran and independent contractor who has done electrical, dry wall, and framing work, described getting mixed messages from the police. "Usually the sheriff deputies will talk with us nicely. Some of them even brought us hamburgers. And then the Anaheim PD [Police Department] will come along and start pulling on my tent.

"They've already taken away items of mine, even though I did exactly as they said: 'separate the trash from personal items.' They threw away my harmonicas, my personal collection! Soon after that the sheriff's department came around and the guy told me, 'You did a good job of composing yourself.' That was nice to hear. But less than a half hour later, Anaheim PD is pushing me."

Residents' attitudes toward their looming expulsion, and to their general conditions, was one of frustration. Some made note of the massive inequality that characterizes the US.

Donovan said plainly that "the problem is American capitalism. They control the oil. They control the food. They control the pharmaceuticals. They control everything."

Jessie, a retired engraver, commented, "There's no middle class anymore. It's like you're either poor or rich. There's not much room for people in between. That's not the way this country is supposed to be. It's supposed to be equal for everybody. We're getting away from the ideals on which the country was built if we're not taking care of the people who help make the country. The people who are working in the factories, not the politicians, the people who actually make the stuff, they're the ones being squeezed out."

Victor brought up the question of war: "The president, the hell with the president. Getting us into situations we don't need to be in. I mean, if he went to war today, I would not wave the flag. Not behind Trump."

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