

Police step up harassment of Los Angeles homeless

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The last several years have seen a significant growth in the population of homeless people across the United States. At the same time, there has been an intensification of police harassment of the homeless and those who provide them with aid.

In recent weeks, the WSWWS has documented several instances of this in California, where the crisis is especially acute, including the initiation of efforts to clear out an encampment of hundreds of people living in tents and makeshift shelters along the Santa Ana River in Anaheim and the arrests of 12 activists outside San Diego for providing food to the homeless in a public park.

According to a recent analysis of police data by the *Los Angeles Times*, arrests of homeless people in Los Angeles went up by 31 percent from 2011 to 2016, increasing from one in ten to one in six of all detentions. In this same period, the number of homeless people living in Los Angeles County has increased from 39,000 to 58,000. In the city proper, the population has increased by 75 percent since 2011. Meanwhile, the death rate of those living on the streets of Los Angeles has almost doubled just since 2013.

Moreover, there are numerous tickets that can be written for small infractions that put disproportionate pressure on the homeless. For example, a ticket for sleeping on the sidewalk can cost \$238 after California administrative fees, according to the *Times*.

In addition to putting serious financial strain on those who can least afford it, this has made “failure to appear in court” by far the most common charge among those arrested, more frequent than possession of a controlled substance or parole violation combined, the next two most common charges, respectively.

Several residents at the homeless encampment in Anaheim that the WSWWS interviewed last week

reported that they or someone they knew there had recently received a ticket for minor infractions.

The increased harassment of the homeless is key component of the efforts to gentrify downtown Los Angeles, which is just a few blocks away from Skid Row, the largest concentration of homeless people in the state.

According to the real estate site Zillow, there are only a few one-bedroom apartments in Downtown LA that rent for less than \$2,000 a month, and none under \$1,700. The median price is closer to \$2,500. Rent for fully half of Los Angeles residents is considered unaffordable.

Given the astronomical cost of rent, vacancy in Downtown is at a 17-year high, with some 12 percent of units sitting empty. Among those, some are owned and see occasional use, but are otherwise empty for most of the year.

However, the high vacancy rate in Downtown is unique to that area. Very low vacancy rates in the rest of the state are one of the main forces putting upward pressure on rents and housing prices. But this too is also a consequence of the fact that it is less profitable to build additional and affordable housing than to undertake other construction projects.

A recently passed and much-touted linkage fee proposed by Los Angeles’ Democratic Mayor Eric Garcetti is expected to bring in \$100 million per year from developers to be spent on affordable housing projects.

The fee is expected to cover the building and maintenance of only 1,700 affordable units per year. At this rate, holding population growth rates and other factors constant, the fee would see Los Angeles have affordable housing for all of its residents after 300 years.

Even if this affordable units materialize they would represent a mere pittance that will do little good for anyone struggling to make ends meet, on the street or otherwise. In order to make rent for workers in Los Angeles affordable—typically defined as costing less than one third of a household’s income—there would need to be over 500,000 such units created, according to the nonprofit California Housing Partnership Corporation.

In the meantime, there is a near record-breaking amount of construction in downtown, but the new residential buildings are primarily luxury apartments and condos, most of which require an individual to have an annual income of over \$100,000 to be considered affordable. One of the construction projects, called Oceanwide Plaza, costs \$1 billion—by itself, ten times as much as the expected annual income from the linkage fee—and is expected to finish at the end of this year. Its housing will be exclusively luxury condos, and it will also contain a 5-star hotel.

The explosion in the homeless population while vacancy rates in Downtown LA soar, combined with the fact that any significant affordable housing projects have been rejected by major developers, is a testament to the irrationality of the capitalist system.

The resources to provide adequate housing for everyone exist, as is evidenced by the massive development projects currently underway. If a complex like the Oceanwide Plaza, which spans an entire city block and boasts twin 40-story towers, can be built in the space of a few years, then the means exist for the construction of an equivalent amount of affordable housing. However, anything that impedes private profit is ruled out of hand.

The fact that the only response to the housing crisis by the Democratic Party is a politically expedient token measure makes clear that there are no options that genuinely address the issues confronting society that do not collide head-on with the profit motive.



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