

One dead as fires strike homeless encampments in Oakland, California

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On Saturday around 11 a.m. in Oakland, California a fire broke out in a semi-official homeless encampment in the city's Fruitvale district, destroying the tents and belongings of roughly 20 people. Just by luck there were no injuries in that incident. However, another fire broke out in a West Oakland camp on Monday, killing one man.

The specific causes of both fires remain unknown. Police at the scene of the Fruitvale fire decided it was not intentionally set and are likely to leave it at that. Under the conditions homeless people face, more fires and more fatalities are inevitable.

Aaron Edmond, who lives at the Fruitvale encampment, told the WSWWS, "It's just a matter of time for fire to break out." To keep warm at night tents are frequently packed with bedding and any attempt to cook or even a stray cigarette butt can lead to disaster. "We try to teach fire safety and hand out extinguishers, but it's not enough," Edmond explained.

The camp became semi-official in November 2017, when the city authorized the organizers of an earlier community-led encampment, "The Village," to use the land and set up portable toilets. In October, the city council declared Oakland to be in a "shelter crisis" and decided they would allow homeless camps on certain parcels of city owned land.

Only four sites were ever officially registered and their chosen locations drew the ire of Oakland locals. Two were assigned to working class West Oakland while several wealthier voting districts were spared the development of a homeless settlement.

Since then, homeless people across the city have been pushed away from businesses by police and to the increasingly cramped city council approved locations near freeways and railroad tracks.

In Alameda County, whose county seat is Oakland,

the homeless population spiked 39 percent between 2015 and 2017, to 5,629 people, according to the most recent Point in Time Survey. The survey also reported that 57 percent of Alameda County's homeless residents lost their homes due to housing prices.

Kaleo, a young man at the Fruitvale camp, described his experience: "A few years ago I was living in an apartment and worked at a fast food restaurant for \$8 an hour. I got involved campaigning to raise the minimum wage and I started facing retaliation at work. Then my landlord started raising the rent. I tried to fight it, but I just couldn't afford housing anymore."

According to RENT *Café*, the average market rate for a studio apartment in Oakland in 2017 was \$1,700 per month. Oakland ranks among the most expensive cities in the United States by rent price, as the extreme and pervasive gentrification of San Francisco has driven even well-compensated professionals across the Bay to Oakland—where they in turn price out working class residents. An analogous dynamic has played out in New York between Manhattan and the outer boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens.

A growing number of homeless under these conditions are currently working but still cannot make ends meet. "We have all varieties here," Edmond said. "Some families with children; there's a contractor here with his tools who could redo your kitchen. Just across the road there's honestly a doctor living homeless. We're just normal people in a bad situation."

The mayor of Oakland, Democrat Libby Schaaf, shared her own idea for resolving the homelessness crisis in her 2017 State of the City Speech: "Give up the Airbnb. Fix up that back unit."

In response to a historic expansion of the homeless population, the immediate solution emanating from the city of Oakland's highest official is to implore

residents to welcome the homeless into the shed in their backyard. Workers are told that the homeless would be fortunate if they could live with trash pickup and all the homely accommodations of a tiny shed, and that periodic deaths from insecure and substandard housing are just part of life.

In December 2016, 36 people died in the Ghost Ship fire, where an old warehouse had been turned into informal housing. In March 2017, four people died when a halfway house in West Oakland burned down despite the city flagging it as unsafe in 2015. The recent fire death in a homeless camp is just part of the overall trend.

Oakland's housing crisis is part of the broader growth of social inequality and financial parasitism. On one hand, since the 2008 economic crash, wages have stagnated and full-time work has been replaced by part-time. On the other, the stock market has been reaching record highs while speculation has driven housing prices ever higher.

"We're living in a rich county," said Jabari Shaw who volunteers helping Oakland's homeless, "but you look here and it's like the slums in Brazil." He pointed to the role politicians had played in driving the crisis. "I remember when Jerry Brown was mayor and started making laws that put liens on houses for old cars out front or broken roofs," Shaw noted, "you started seeing more people lose their homes."

The policies pursued by the Democrats and Republicans have driven the immense growth in inequality. A report last November by the Institute for Policy Studies showed that the three richest Americans—Jeff Bezos, Bill Gates and Warren Buffett—have more wealth than the poorest half of the country's population. The wealth of those three amounted to \$264 billion and has only grown since then.

In contrast, the poorest 60 percent of Americans do not have enough money to cover a \$500 emergency. This inequality grew under the Obama administration's bank bailouts and quantitative easing and is accelerating under the bipartisan cuts to corporate taxes in Trump's tax bill.

"I learned last election that you can't get the help you want from Democrats or Republicans," Kaleo said, "the system is so broken, we need a new party."



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