

California: Fire exposes conditions at Oakland homeless encampment

Adam Mclean, Evan Blake
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A fire broke out at an Oakland, California homeless encampment early Tuesday morning, destroying the tents of about half of the 80 people who lived there. Luckily no one was killed in the blaze, despite reports of the fire department taking upwards of 15 minutes to arrive.

Homelessness is a chronic and widespread social problem in the United States, with California being the worst hit state, due primarily to extremely high real estate prices. According to the department of Housing and Urban Development, there are 130,000 homeless in the state. The situation in Oakland can be seen as a particularly acute example of conditions that are growing nationally.

The WSWs spoke this week with residents of the Oakland encampment about the fire and the conditions in the encampment.

Needa Bee, an activist with The Village, a homeless advocacy group that helps maintain encampments, spoke about how the encampment was created by the city. “This should have never happened in the first place. The people here were brought here by the city of Oakland. This overcrowding, it leads to the conditions for a fire of this magnitude to happen. The city should have left people alone, or given them permanent housing, not herded them over here.

“The mayor of Oakland is spending 3 million dollars to house 40 people in 27 tuff sheds. She’s picking the biggest encampments and doing that—the one on Bush street with 110 people, the one over on Northgate that was 120 people, right now they’re going build a third tuff shed, they’re evicting the people today. There’s 150 people that live around Lake Merritt, but they’re only going to house 40 of them. But they’re using this temporary housing to get rid of the biggest encampments in Oakland.”

The tuff sheds are rudimentary structures, similar to a backyard tool shed with insulation and electrical outlets, which must be shared between two people. Those currently sleeping rough in the Lake Merritt area will be given until October to voluntarily relocate to a new shanty town being erected in the Henry Kaiser Convention Center parking lot. After the first week of October camping around Lake Merritt will be forbidden and the homeless cleared out.

“After the administration bulldozed our first village they were forced to give us this land,” Needa said. “Two days after, the city administration herded six encampments here without talking to us. They put them on trucks, and dumped people here. The creation of this encampment is a violation of human rights and a health hazard. There’s too many people here.”

Mouangjoi Saelee, a resident of the encampment, agreed, saying “They put all our stuff in dump trucks and moved us here. They treat us like actual trash.” When asked about the solution, she pointed to the irrationality of the housing market. “Permanent housing. That’s the way to fix homelessness. There’s an old Walmart building in the city that’s been doing nothing for four or five years—collecting dust. How about making some housing there? Start with that.”

Oakland city council member Noel Gallo’s remarks this week were typical of the contempt of the ruling class for the working class and society’s most impoverished layers, laying the blame for the fire with the homeless themselves, telling KRON4 news, “It’s not the first [fire], and I’m sure it won’t be the last one. ... These are individuals who, the way they get back at you is to set the place on fire.”

Mouangjoi commented that the city official’s indifference was endangering and killing Oakland’s homeless residents. “People are dying waiting for

housing. We found a neighbor here, Noel, dead here today. It had nothing to do with the fire. ... We don't need anything fabulous, just somewhere where we can be inside, safe, secure. We're targets out here. People are raped here, lots of people are sick."

Noel was reportedly dead for over a week before being discovered.

A federal appeals court ruled last week that cities could not make homelessness itself a crime and, on the grounds of preventing "cruel and unusual punishment," said that cities could not force homeless people to move in absence of a place to stay. However, the court ruling was limited to the matter of the forced relocation of the homeless and said nothing about preventing homelessness itself.

There is broad disgust with the prevailing politics of the city—a bastion of the Democratic Party. Needa spoke about the relief efforts pursued by the government, and the accounts given by contacts working in city hall. "[They're] telling us about the level of corruption, specifically around homelessness and housing. The money in there is being redirected and misappropriated to developers. The money in those programs is supposed to go to housing people permanently and it's not."

The question is not whether there is enough money to end this misery. Oakland itself is a wealthy city, home to one of the busiest shipping ports in the world. Just across the bay is the city of San Francisco, and due south is San Jose—the heart of Silicon Valley. Collectively, these cities are home to more billionaires than London or Moscow.

Rather, it is a question of who owns those resources. Jeff Bezos, the head of Amazon and the richest man in the world, recently announced that he would donate some 2 billion dollars—a small fraction of his fortune—to organizations that help homeless. Such initiatives are as cynical as the measures pursued by the city of Oakland.

When relief and support programs such as these are created by the ruling class, they are invariably used to do more for the image of the city or the wealthy individual than the vulnerable. On the one hand, this accounts for the massive underfunding of these programs. On the other, it promotes lucrative business deals developers are able to pursue through programs ostensibly meant to alleviate homelessness.



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