New York University students angry over police “cleanup” of homeless on campus

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Earlier this month, the New York Police Department’s (NYPD) 6th Precinct celebrated on Twitter its destruction of the temporary shelter and possessions of several homeless people on the steps and sidewalk in front of New York University’s (NYU) Silver Center for the Arts. The tweet read: “Clean up performed today on Washington Place. Great job by all those who participated!” and was accompanied by photographs of the building front while the homeless were there and after the cops removed them.

The tweet was immediately condemned by Twitter users and NYU students, prompting a wave of disgust and outrage at the bragging over a show of force against the most helpless layer of the population.

One person tweeted, “But what happened to those people? Were they directed to a shelter, programs, a place they can stay without being kicked out? Place they can shower? Given donations? Offered a cup of coffee or meal? I won’t hold my breath.”

Another commented, “NYPD is bragging about displacing ppl and throwing away their property on NYU’s campus. This is absolutely disgusting and the @NYPD6Pct and @NYU must answer for this.”

Two weeks earlier, the 6th Precinct posted a tweet, which is still up, with almost the exact same content, stating that a successful “cleanup” of Clarkson Street in the West Village was conducted, showing a large pile of a homeless person’s belongings.

“Great job today,” the tweet reads, “by Sector David Neighborhood Coordination Officers Ozuna and Montesdeoca did a cleanup on Clarkson Street. Thank you to @NYCDHS [the twitter address of the New York City Department of Homeless Services] and NYPD Homeless Outreach for all the help.”

The only difference in these two tweets was that the makeshift bed in the January 22 tweet was empty and did not show the homeless people that had made a shelter there from the freezing winter weather.

Both NYU student newspapers, the *NYU Local* and the *Washington Square News*, wrote on the incident. In one editorial piece in the *WSN*, NYU student Alejandro Villa Vásquez wrote, “If our city’s police force actually wanted to supposedly clean up the streets, if anyone actually wanted to, there would be greater pushback against overcriminalization and more legislation passed to secure adequate housing for the poor and those in need … Income inequality is growing nationwide as the middle class disappears. I don’t think any place represents this better than New York City.”

The next day, the NYPD’s 6th Precinct tweeted an apology, stating that the cleanup was done “on the sidewalk not on the individuals … We always offer support and services to all.” A second tweet stated: “We aim to make the West Village safer for everyone, including the more vulnerable residents. Unfortunately, we have had chronic problems in this location that affected people who live and work in our community.”

One student at NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts told the WSWS: “There is a very bad culture toward the homeless. There is really tight security. There are more NYPD, especially on University Place, more so than on any street around. NYU has this mindset [of] ‘Yeah we’re gentrifying.’”

Paulette, an NYU undergraduate, told the WSWS that visible homelessness is common around the university’s “city campus.” She also pointed to the conduct of the police in their actions and language that tried to brand their actions as a solution to the homeless crisis.

When the WSWS asked her about the dislocation of homeless people from shelters in sub-zero weather, Paulette said, “That’s terrible, because unless there is

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an alternative space, NYU should not be kicking people out."

The area near the Silver Center, the NYU building whose outside was cleared of the homeless, is on the itinerary of NYU tours for prospective students and their families. The building has a grate through which warm air rises, and homeless people live there without disturbing students or passers-by.

The building is next to the Brown Building, also owned by NYU, which has enormous historical significance for the working class. It was formerly named the Asch Building and was the site of the Triangle Shirtwaist fire that killed 146 garment workers, mostly young women, on March 25, 1911. This makes the NYPD's social cleansing there even more obscene.

This "cleanup"—and others like it that have gone unnoticed on social media—comes only a few weeks before the spring season for newly-admitted students' tours and other tours of NYU's campus, which might well serve more as a "poor tour" of the inequality and desperation in New York were it not for the diligence of the NYPD in hiding the social blight.

Since the outcry, in an effort at damage control the NYPD has notably featured photographs of its officers sharing cups of coffee and chatting with the homeless in Manhattan.

Homelessness in New York City has grown steadily since "progressive" Democratic Party Mayor Bill de Blasio was elected in 2013 in a campaign that promised to address the huge income gap in the city.

New York currently has about 73,000 homeless people. Over 63,000 of this group, many of whom are families, stay in city shelters, an increase of 43 percent from 10 years ago. Nearly one in 10 New York City public school students is homeless. Shelters in the city are notorious for being overcrowded, dirty and lacking necessities. Hundreds of thousands more double up with relatives or live illegally in the city's public housing developments.

The result of de Blasio's promises to address homelessness and inequality has been little more than police action to clear the homeless from public view.

The green light for the brutal and degrading police treatment of the homeless at NYU was set by de Blasio last month when he instructed the NYPD to begin removing the homeless from the subway stations in bitterly cold weather: "We will not tolerate people bringing vast amounts of belongings into a subway car. We won't tolerate people sleeping on the benches," he said.

The rising cost of living, driven by exorbitant and uncontrolled market-value rents, is pushing thousands of people out of their homes and neighborhoods throughout the city.

New York University itself bears a good deal of responsibility for the housing crisis in New York City. Over the last few decades NYU, one of the largest private landlords in the city, has bought and redeveloped dozens of properties in the neighborhoods of Greenwich Village and the East Village as it seeks to soak tens of thousands of students from NYU of tuition and living expenses.

Both Democratic and Republican politicians have assisted NYU to receive property-tax breaks from the City, allowing the university to amass an endowment of over $4 billion.

In the context of expelling the homeless from NYU property, it is worth recalling that NYU's Board of Trustees includes such multimillionaire and billionaire figures in real estate as Gale Drukier, whose family owns BD Hotels; Kelly Kennedy Mack, the president of Corcoran Sunshine Marketing Group, one of the city's leading luxury residential marketing firms; Constance Milstein, the founder of real estate development firm Ogden CAP Properties; New York real estate magnate Larry Silverstein and his daughter Lisa; Daniel Tisch, a trustee of Vornado Realty and Trust; and Leonard A. Wilf, president of Garden Homes.

These are the individuals who belong to the class that is not only the direct cause of homelessness, but which benefits from the social cleansing in front of the Silver Center.

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