

San Diego mayor pushes for crackdown on vehicular homelessness

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Less than two months after San Diego's city council repealed a nearly four-decade old citywide ordinance that prevented people from sleeping in their cars on public streets, Mayor Kevin Faulconer held a news conference on March 25 to announce an effort to overturn the decision.

The sudden move by Faulconer came after city council offices and media agencies were flooded with phone calls and email complaints from residents who complained about an increase of people living in their cars and engaging in allegedly illicit activity in their neighborhoods.

In February, the city of San Diego repealed a 1983 ordinance that prohibited locals from living in their cars on any street within the city limits after a group of homeless workers testified that it was unconstitutional and discriminatory to cite those who are living in their cars, as it comes with an immense financial burden and hardship. They also stated that receiving multiple citations can lead to criminal charges, or vehicle impoundment, and further reduces the ability of the homeless to find work and housing.

Despite the February repeal, there remain many laws that penalize the homeless. San Diego laws prohibit habitation in oversized vehicles such as recreational vehicles (RV's) within city limits on the street or to park in public streets from 2am-6am, and it is also illegal to remain parked in a public street for more than 72 hours.

The city had not been able to cite those who were living or sleeping in their cars after a federal judge had imposed an injunction last year arguing that the laws surrounding the 1983 "vehicle habitation ordinance" were vague and unconstitutional. This ruling came after a 2014 decision which struck down a vehicular living ordinance ban in Los Angeles.

The overturn repeal made its official induction in the April 17 Public Safety and Livable Neighborhoods

Committee meeting. The new ordinance would severely restrict where those living in their cars could park, prohibiting parking within 500 feet of a public school or place of residence between 6 p.m. and 6 a.m. Exceptions would be made for colleges and universities and the city has opened three "safe" parking lots which can accommodate a few hundred vehicles.

San Diego and cities across the state of California have experienced an uptick in vehicular homelessness, especially in the wake of the 2008 recession. According to the Public Policy Institute of California, the state hosts a quarter of the country's total homeless, with 130,000 officially counted or 33 per 10,000 residents, the highest in the nation.

High rent costs and stagnant wages have been at the crux of the homelessness crisis, with the cost of a single-bedroom apartment rental in San Diego averaging around \$1900 a month as of last December. A two-bedroom rental hovers at \$2500, a 13 percent increase from the year prior.

According to the Regional Task Force on Homelessness' 2018 Point in Time Count approximately 1,300 people live in their cars in San Diego County, with about 8,500 people experiencing homelessness daily. These statistics do not include those living full time in RV's or in public shelters.

The move to crack down on vehicular homelessness in San Diego is part of the continued assault on the homeless throughout California. Berkeley, California's city council voted in late March to outlaw RV overnight parking in the city. Similar overnight bans and ordinance laws have come into effect in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Anaheim within the past year.

In the press conference announcing the initiative to overturn the repeal of the parking ban, Mayor Faulconer stated, "If you are living out of your vehicle because you have nowhere else to go, we want to help you. At the

same time, residents and businesses have a right to clean and safe neighborhoods. We will not allow conduct that takes advantage of San Diego's generosity and destroys the quality of life in our communities."

The mayor buffered his repeal effort by stating that he will increase funding for the safe parking programs that allow some to legally park overnight in lots across the city or the 200-300 person tents which have been temporarily erected by emergency protocols. These measures are only a drop in the bucket in the face of the increasing numbers of homeless.

Faulconer has been at the forefront of the attacks on the homeless which helped create the conditions for the horrific January 2017 Hepatitis A crisis that resulted in deaths of at least 20 people, a public health emergency not seen in the United States in decades.

The entirely preventable outbreak was caused by the lack of sanitation and social welfare programs. The response by city officials was ruthless mass sweeps on the homeless. Tens of thousands of dollars were spent on the installation of sharp rocks under freeway interstate overpasses to prevent encampments. The Hepatitis A crisis was used to justify increased criminalization and in 2018 police arrests on the homeless tripled as finances towards police units to break up homeless encampments expanded.

The ongoing homeless crisis in San Diego is an expression of the social conditions that prevail for the most vulnerable layers of the working class under capitalism. Stagnant wages, unaffordable housing, and cuts to public health services have created untenable situations for hundreds of thousands throughout the US.

The response by the ruling class to the homelessness crisis has been to build up the repressive arms of the state. In 2017, Faulconer approved an increase in funding for the San Diego Police Department by 30 percent through 2020 with aim to hire 200 more police officers, bring the total number on the force to 2,000 by December next year.



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