

Las Vegas, Nevada city council passes punitive anti-homeless ordinance

Jacob Crosse
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The Las Vegas, Nevada city council passed “Bill 2019-36,” a cruel anti-homeless ordinance, on November 6 by a 5-2 margin. The measure makes it a “misdemeanor to camp or sleep in the public right-of-way, such as a sidewalk or street, downtown and in all residential areas if space is available at the Courtyard Homeless Resource Center.”

Those subject to the ordinance penalties can face a \$1,000 fine and/or up to 6 months in jail for the crime of trying to survive. The bill is being implemented in two phases with the ordinance going into effect on November 10 minus the penalty provisions which will be enforced beginning on February 1, 2020.

The provision, “if space is available” is a cruel joke, as homeless shelters throughout the city are already at capacity. Of the facilities available, many do not accept pets, possessions or have strict limits on when one is allowed to enter or leave. The only facility that is open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, the aforementioned Courtyard Homeless Resource Center, will be able to house “optimally 800 people by 2021,” according to a slide show the council presented to the public.

According to a recent study conducted by security.org, Las Vegas has the seventh highest homeless rate out of all US cities, with approximately 273 homeless individuals per 100,000 people. According to the city council’s own statistics, “more than 6,500 individuals or families” in the city lack stable or consistent housing, with 67 percent of this vulnerable population forced to sleep outside.

In addition to numerous encampments and “tent cities” Las Vegas is host to a network of drainage tunnels which up to 1000 people call “home” at any given time. Those forced to go underground reside in squalid conditions, subject to being swept away by flash floods, police harassment and gang violence.

The anti-homeless measure was passed despite the overwhelming majority of workers, students and advocates who attended the meeting voicing their opposition to the vile bill. The ordinance provides no funding or additional resources for sanitation, medical, counseling, transportation services or housing to the nearly 15,000 Nevadans which the Nevada Homeless Alliance expects will experience homelessness this year. Of those who are homeless in the Las Vegas metropolitan area, 22 percent are unaccompanied children.

Despite being given only two minutes to speak, those who did overwhelmingly voiced their opposition to the proposed criminalization of poverty. Inside and outside of the chambers, chants of, “Homes not handcuffs,” “poverty is not a crime,” and “Hey-hey, ho-ho, the war on the poor has got to go!” rang throughout the public hearing as Mayor Carolyn Goodman frequently stopped the session, cut off speakers’ microphones and berated her constituents.

Over the nine hour session, multiple speakers pointed out the backwardness of the bill, especially the law enforcement penalties guaranteeing that those arrested will have a criminal record, making it that much more difficult to secure housing or a job.

Rejecting the sentiment of the overwhelming majority who attended the meeting and demanded a no vote the council made clear whose interest they serve.

In a blog post dated October 29 published on the official Las Vegas government website it was noted that 83 percent of the membership of the Downtown Las Vegas Alliance, a consortium of “70 business, non-profit and civic leaders,” supported the bill. These “leaders” include executives and representatives from businesses such as Lyft, Zappos, The Bank of Nevada and several casinos.

In a self-indictment, Goodman, who succeeded her husband Oscar Goodman as mayor, noted that the city has not made any gains in 20 years on the homeless crisis. According to Goodman, the ordinance “is flawed, but it is a start.” The officially non-partisan mayor scoffed at those who advocated that the city provide adequate housing, retorting that the city “doesn’t have the resources” to address the housing or homeless crisis.

The state of Nevada has a chronic shortage of low income housing, with only 19 available units for every 100 low income families searching for housing. According to rentjungle.com, as of October 2019, average rent for an apartment in Las Vegas is \$1,156, which is a 15.6 percent increase from last year when the average rent was \$1,000.

While there is never money for schools, housing or education under capitalism, the spigots are open for multibillionaires and their fanciful desires. The National Football League team the Oakland Raiders, owned by multi-millionaire Mark Davis, will be relocating to Las Vegas in 2020. The move will include the brand new 71,000 capacity Allegiant Stadium. The nearly \$2 billion domed stadium will be financed through a \$650 million Bank of America loan and additional increase in hotel taxes, totalling \$750 million.

The day before Las Vegas’ anti-homeless measure passed, almost all of the major Democratic presidential candidates took an opportunity to grandstand on Twitter and hypocritically denounce the bill. Nevada, as one of the early primary states, is already under a barrage of political advertisements and weekly visits from the representatives of big business, Wall Street, and the military industrial complex.

Three of the candidates, Julian Castro, Cory Booker and Kamala Harris supported similar ordinances banning people from sleeping outside or on sidewalks earlier in their political careers.

Particularly noxious was former Vice President Joe Biden’s tweet, in which he touted his work in the Obama administration stating that, “Like we did in the Obama-Biden Administration, we should focus on providing housing first and work to find long-term solutions to end homelessness.” This is the same person who oversaw, along with Obama, the largest transfer of wealth from the working class to the ruling elite in the

history of the country to prop up Wall Street, rendering millions of Americans homeless during and after the Great Recession.

The truth is the ruling class has no “long-term solutions” to the housing crisis. It is advantageous for capital to have a “reserve industrial army” as Karl Marx noted, ready to replace an “inefficient” worker at a moment’s notice. The only solution to adequate housing, education, transportation, healthcare, or access to art or culture requires a socialist perspective to reorganize society to meet human need, in opposition to current social order which puts profits above all else.



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