

California governor to collaborate with Trump against the homeless

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Last week, California's Democratic governor Gavin Newsom delivered his yearly state of the state address. The address was unique in that the governor focused almost the entirety of his remarks on one issue, the state's growing homeless crisis.

Newsom proclaimed, "Let's call it what it is, a disgrace, that the richest state in the richest nation—succeeding across so many sectors—is failing to properly house, heal, and humanely treat so many of its people. Every day, the California dream is dimmed by the wrenching reality of families, children and seniors living unfed on a concrete bed."

The governor's remarks made clear however that the homelessness crisis will not be tackled through building affordable housing, or providing mental health services, drug addiction treatment and food assistance, but by providing real estate speculators with a more deregulated construction market to reap immense profits off the crisis.

Moreover, an even more ominous aspect of the homelessness plans is a joint initiative by the Newsom and Trump administrations to repurpose government buildings never meant for human habitation into massive homeless shelters. In his address, Newsom mentioned 286 such state properties including National Guard armories which could be used for homeless "solutions."

California, the largest state in the US, also has the largest number of homeless people. The latest count by the Department of Housing and Urban Development listed 151,000 homeless throughout the state in 2019, a 16 percent increase over the prior year.

The number of unsheltered homeless in California, defined as those who regularly slept in exposed outdoor conditions or in abandoned buildings increased by 21 percent during the same period. Nationwide, people with chronic patterns of homelessness, those who are regularly homeless over extended periods of time, increased by 9 percent over the previous year.

Homelessness has in fact quickly become the social issue Californians are most concerned about, according to recent polls. Twenty percent of Californians listed homelessness as their top issue, whereas only 6 percent said the same in 2018.

The homeless crisis has also spread from concentrated urban areas to the suburbs and even rural parts of the state. Nearly half of respondents to a poll conducted by the Public Policy Institute of California said they regularly saw tents and encampments erected by the homeless on the streets and in the neighborhoods where they lived.

The immense increase in the homeless population and poverty takes place alongside an enormous rise in the fortunes of the state's super-rich. California has more billionaires, 163, than any other state. Only two countries, the US and China, have more billionaires than California, while the wealth of these 163 individuals, who could all comfortably fit on an average commercial airline flight, exceeds the Gross Domestic Product of all but 24 countries in the world.

The Democratic governor began his political career under the tutelage of this social layer and has unfailingly represented its interests. In his youth, Newsom cultivated particularly close ties to the Getty family, heirs to the Getty oil fortune. His first prominent political act as member of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors in the early 2000s was the "Care not Cash" initiative. "It put him [Newsom] on the map politically," Richard DeLeon, professor of political science at San Francisco State University told KQED. "It certainly put a spotlight on him."

That initiative went to the ballot box in 2002 when the homeless population in San Francisco had reached peak levels. At the time, there were more than 8,640 homeless residents on a given night in the city. The housing crisis was immediately the result of the dot-com boom, which

saw average city rents rise to around \$3,500 per month in today's dollars.

Regardless of the boom's effect on skyrocketing housing costs, it in fact only served to intensify a decades-long assault on affordable housing at both the state and federal levels. To cite only a few figures, between 1978 and 1989 the Federal housing budget shrunk from 7 percent of the total national budget to only 0.7 percent. During the same period, poverty rates across the state doubled as result of the decimation of the manufacturing industry all along the West Coast. By 1986, only 16 percent of housing units in Los Angeles County were considered affordable.

Newsom's initiative in the early 2000s involved a public relations campaign including television advertisements portraying the homeless problem as the result of outside vagrants coming to the city for free money. The initiative reduced the monetary aid homeless residents received each month from a maximum of \$410 to just \$59. In exchange, a portion of program enrollees received a bed at a shelter or a room in a single occupancy hotel. While the homelessness rate in San Francisco is currently only slightly smaller than 2002 levels, the city has saved millions on spending thanks to Newsom's efforts.

Last October, now Governor Newsom vetoed a bill brought to him by the State Senate which over five years would have transferred \$2 billion in funds meant for public education to provide affordable housing.

As has since become clear, however, Newsom vetoed the bill not out of concern for education funding, but instead to clear the way for a partnership with the Trump administration in criminalizing the homeless.

After Trump arrogantly declared in December that California "must call and 'politely' ask for help" on homelessness, Newsom did exactly that. In a January letter, the governor wrote, "We welcome the Administration's recent attention and focus on the national crisis of homelessness. I hope we can jointly develop a federal-state-local strategy to utilize the assets you have put on the table, in partnership with city and county governments throughout the state."

At an event held on February 13 at the University of Southern California, Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Ben Carson made clear that the state should work to encourage the growth of housing by reducing, if not outright eliminating, zoning and density restrictions for new construction.

The secretary's suggestions have now fully been

adopted by the governor in his state of the state address.

Newsom said, "as we continue with these emergency [housing actions], we must eliminate roadblocks to housing and shelter. Last year, because of your leadership, I was proud to sign two important bills. One streamlined the permitting process for navigation centers statewide. The second exempted all shelters and homeless housing from environmental review in Los Angeles. This year, let's expand that law and extend it to all homeless shelters and supportive housing statewide."

Trump himself visited a vacant federal office building near Los Angeles International Airport, the local Federal Aviation Administration building, last September. While the administration has kept the reasons for the visit secret—the real estate company in escrow for the building told the *Los Angeles Times* it too had not been given either advance notice, nor a reason for the event—it was widely interpreted to be part of the president's plans for rounding up the state's homeless population.

Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti, a Democrat, cynically tried to dismiss the president's visit as nothing more than a hollow attempt at provocation. "The playbook out of this White House has been to try to sow fear even when they get nothing done, whether it's with immigrants, now maybe with homeless individuals."

The president, in fact, has gotten much more than "nothing done" when it comes to immigrants. In addition to unleashing fascistic border patrol and ICE agents to terrorize immigrant workers in cities and towns across the US, the administration has set up a network of modern day concentration camps, making the US home to the largest immigrant detention system in the world. More than 50,000 are detained in these centers every night subjected to physical, psychological and sexual abuse.

Similar conditions are now being prepared for the nation's homeless. The housing of the homeless in government buildings in conditions more like prisons than homes, can only take place as the result of a massive police crackdown on existing encampments, many of which are already underway. This dangerous state of affairs has been made possible through the full complicity of the Democratic Party with the Trump administration's anti-homeless and anti-immigrant agenda.



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