

California Highway Patrol evicts homeless families on Thanksgiving eve

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27 November 2020

Sparking anger and outrage in Los Angeles and across the US, up to 100 police with the California Highway Patrol (CHP) were recorded violently evicting dozens of homeless families the night before Thanksgiving and throughout the following evening. CHP troopers were filmed beating protesters leading to dozens of injuries, while over 20 were reportedly arrested.

Several homeless families moved into vacant publicly owned homes in the East Los Angeles neighborhood of El Sereno Wednesday morning. Citing Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom's November 21 shelter-in-place order, issued in response to skyrocketing COVID-19 cases in the state—nearly 18,000 cases were reported on November 23—activists and families with Reclaim and Rebuild our Community (RRBC) decided to take up residence in the abandoned homes, currently owned by California Department of Transportation. In their November 25 statement the group wrote: “This action is a last resort because the system has failed all of us ... by creating this housing crisis which has worsened with COVID and the economic crisis.”

While estimates vary, with several reports completed before the onset of the pandemic, roughly 155,000 people in California are estimated to be homeless on any given night. In their press release, RRBC notes that the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority estimated that as of June 2020, 66,436 people in the city were homeless.

After announcing their intentions to reclaim a fraction of the more than 170 vacant homes owned by the government department, known as Caltrans, dozens of people, including children as young as three months old and seniors over 70 years old moved into the homes Wednesday morning.

After several hours an initial group of roughly 30

CHP troopers in riot gear showed up Wednesday evening to begin evictions, however over 100 community members and protesters formed protective lines around the homes to face police and demand that they leave.

Outnumbered, the police were forced to back off before returning roughly two hours later with more cops equipped with batons, assault rifles and a battering ram to continue the evictions. After deploying tear gas, the police began arresting protesters as they moved from house to house. Over angry shouts from protesters and screams from children, police used a battering ram to break down a home and then carried a hogtied child out of the house, before arresting her and the rest of her family.

After watching police evict families from their recently reclaimed homes, Claudia Lara, a member of RRBC, told the *Los Angeles Times*, “...it is inhumane. It's really irresponsible. Housing is a human right, and all families deserve to have safe shelter, especially during the global pandemic.”

Caltrans spokesman Matt Rocco released a statement justifying the forced removal because the vacant homes were, “unsafe and uninhabitable.” The statement confirmed that, “Caltrans requested the CHP remove trespassers so that the properties can be re-secured and boarded up.” The CHP has refused to comment on their brutal eviction actions.

The homes have been subject to an over 60-year legal battle between residents and the state. They are located along the 710 freeway corridor and were acquired by the state via taxpayer dollars and eminent domain beginning in the 1950s as part of a now abandoned highway expansion. Residents of the working class El Sereno neighborhood continued to live and pay rent to Caltrans even as the legal battles between residents and

Caltrans continued for decades.

Once the project was formally abandoned in 2018, renters who had been living in the properties for over 18 months were supposed to be given the first opportunity at repurchasing the homes from the state. This has failed to materialize for hundreds of families who have been denied an opportunity to submit an offer due to purposeful bureaucratic red tape and Caltrans-created hardships designed to force residents out.

As part of the state's attempts to evict remaining tenants, for decades Caltrans has refused to conduct repairs and maintenance on the rented homes, while at the same time requiring tenants to constantly reapply for low-income leasing contracts. Tenants have reported that Caltrans frequently claims to "lose" or "never receive" their applications, justifying rent hikes of up to 10 percent every six months. As part of the state's contract, in order to sell the properties, Caltrans is liable for any and all repairs needed in order for the homes to pass inspection. Decades of purposeful mismanagement on the part of Caltrans slumlords means repairing the homes and then selling them would cost more than simply demolishing them.

The criminal actions by Caltrans, enforced by the "special armed body" of police, demonstrate that the issue is not the lack of housing, but the capitalist system, which subordinates all aspects of society to the profit interests of the ruling class. According to 2017 US Census data, there are over 100,000 vacant homes in Los Angeles, over 30,000 more than what is required to house every single person in the city, while six public agencies, including Caltrans and the Los Angeles School District, collectively own 14,000 vacant properties in the city.

Despite the rampaging pandemic, where over 19,000 in California have died to date, government officials are winding up a government grant program, Project Roomkey, which transferred federal funds to local hotels to provide housing for the homeless. Despite protecting thousands of people from COVID-19, and innumerable other social ills, by providing readily available shelter, due to deliberate congressional inaction, funding for the program has begun to dry up, causing hotels to stop participating in the program. According to the California Department of Social Services, by mid-November nearly 30 percent fewer hotels were participating in the program compared to

August.

"It's the worst time to do this," said Bob Erlenbusch, executive director of the Sacramento Regional Coalition to End Homelessness in an interview with Politico. "These are obviously extraordinary times, and it's starting to get cold, it's starting to rain a little bit, then you've got a pandemic raging out of control combined with flu season. And then you're really going to turn people out into that environment? It's just inhumane."

Tomoquia Moss, founder of All Home, told Politico she predicts between 10 and 20 percent of Roomkey residents will exit the program without anywhere to go, leaving up to 5,000 people unsheltered.

The scenes of brutality that played out in El Sereno over the last 48 hours will be repeated throughout the country unless urgent action is taken. The loss of millions of jobs, coupled with the expiration of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention eviction moratorium at the end of December, according to a new report issued by the National Low Income Housing Coalition, has left an estimated 6.7 million households facing eviction in the next couple of months, amounting to some 19 million people.

The working class in the US and the world over is facing an emergency. Urgent measures must be taken to stop the spread of the pandemic and save thousands of lives, including by providing safe housing for everyone. The resources to do this already exist, they are simply being hoarded by a greedy, venal, ruling class. Their ill-gotten wealth must be expropriated by the working class fighting on a socialist program to democratically reorganize society to meet human need rather than the demands of private profit.



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