

Nine arrested in San Jose, California anti-eviction protest

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More than 100 tenants and advocates, organized by the Regional Tenant Organizing Network, blocked eviction hearings at the Santa Clara County Superior Court in San Jose, California Wednesday morning, protesting the displacement of renters during the coronavirus pandemic.

Protesters blocking the courthouse entrance effectively shut down the court in the morning hours before being violently removed by County Sheriff's Deputies. Nine protesters were arrested on the charge of disrupting court operations. In a video on Twitter that gained over 19,000 views in a few hours, a protester is seen being dragged violently away from the crowd by a squad of deputies.

Despite the ongoing pandemic, intensive care units nearing capacity, over 400 daily COVID-19 deaths in California alone and the extension of a federal eviction moratorium by the Biden administration, evictions continue apace throughout the state.

In the heart of Silicon Valley, the home of Facebook, Alphabet/Google, Apple, Netflix and Tesla, impoverished workers are being kicked onto the street while being told to "stay home" to slow the spread of COVID-19.

There were at least 527 evictions in the Bay Area from the start of the statewide coronavirus lockdown on March 19 through the end of December, according to data collected by KQED and CalMatters from sheriffs' offices in the Bay Area's nine counties. At least 145 of those evictions—the most of any county in the region—took place in Santa Clara County. Tenants' attorneys say that figure is an undercount, since most tenants leave or get locked out before law enforcement ever gets involved. There are 25-30 eviction proceedings every week in Santa Clara County, which may or may not result in immediate eviction.

Chad Bolla, one of the organizers of the event, explained "Tenants throughout the Bay Area are being evicted as many landlords are taking advantage of the loopholes in the County, State, and Federal moratoriums,

and the spike in COVID-19 cases can be directly linked to evictions."

Under California's COVID-19 Tenant Relief Act of 2020, or AB 3088, which expires on January 31, renters can prevent eviction by paying one-quarter of back rent accrued since Sept. 1, 2020. A new State bill, SB91, was introduced on Monday that extends this deadline to June 30. The bill also allocates \$ 2.6 billion, providing 80 percent of the rent losses between April 2020 and March 2021 to landlords if they choose to forgive the remaining 20 percent and not pursue evictions. If the landlord does not agree to forgive unpaid rent, the program would still pay 25 percent of rent in arrears.

According to an analysis published on January 20 by the Bay Area Equity Atlas and the Housing Now! California coalition, 1.1 million California tenants were behind on rent at the end of 2020. That's nearly 1 in 5 renters statewide, including more than 37,000 households in Santa Clara County. Those tenants owe an average of \$4,651 for a combined total of \$173.5 million. The total estimated outstanding rent for California stands at \$ 3.7 billion.

Public Counsel, a pro bono law firm, tweeted that "Amid #Covid19 tenants need FULL rent debt relief. Rather than guaranteeing relief to all struggling tenants, #SB91 leaves the fate of vulnerable tenants in the hands of landlords."

"This plan leaves tenants to the 'luck of the draw,'" Christina Livingston, executive director of the tenant advocacy group Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment, told the *Los Angeles Times*. "If a tenant has a landlord who wants them to stay, they will get this federal rent assistance. If the tenant is unlucky enough to have a corporate landlord who wants to flip the building, or a racist landlord who doesn't like them, they won't receive the relief."

While the media have praised Biden's executive order

to extend moratoria on evictions and foreclosures to the end of March, the protest at Santa Clara—and the violent police response it elicited—sheds light on the true nature of the Democratic Party’s response to the growing eviction crisis.

Jennifer Kwart, a spokeswoman for Assemblyman David Chiu (D-San Francisco) was quoted by the *Los Angeles Times* explaining that under the executive order signed by Biden, tenants must pay all back rent owed at the end of March in order to avoid immediate eviction. Through SB-91, California’s Democrats are attempting to forestall the immediate eruption of mass homelessness while avoiding any significant interference with the profit interests of landlords.

Debra Carlton, executive vice president of state public affairs of California Apartment Association, pointed to the importance of the subsidy for most landlords, telling the Associated Press, “Without this money, many landlords are at risk of losing their rental units.”

Landlords may lose their property, and indeed support must be provided to small-scale landlords to ensure they financially survive the pandemic, but an evicted tenant could easily lose their life. Several academic studies have documented how the horrifying reality of losing a home in the middle of a pandemic exacerbates sickness and death.

A November study, still awaiting peer review, by UCLA’s Fielding School of Public Health, linked the lifting of eviction moratoriums in 27 states to 433,000 new COVID-19 cases and 11,000 deaths. The researchers attributed those cases to an increased spread of the virus, the result of people searching for new housing, doubling up with friends or family, or becoming homeless.

Another study published by the National Bureau of Economic Research in January found that uniform moratoriums on evictions and utility shut offs through November of last year could have saved 164,000 lives lost to COVID-19. The report laid out a sobering assessment of how the drive for profit has taken needless lives: “We find that policies that limit evictions are found to reduce COVID-19 infections by 3.8% and reduce deaths by 11%. Moratoria on utility disconnections reduce COVID-19 infections by 4.4% and mortality rates by 7.4%. Had such policies been in place across all counties (i.e., adopted as federal policy) from early March 2020 through the end of November 2020, our estimated counterfactuals show that policies that limit evictions could have reduced COVID-19 infections by 14.2% and deaths by 40.7%. For moratoria on utility disconnections, COVID-19 infections rates could have been reduced by 8.7% and deaths by

14.8%.”

Echoing the horrors cited by such studies, and pointing to the contradictions in the policies and palliatives touted by Newsom, Biden and the Democratic Party, Betty Gabaldon, a tenant organizer at Wednesday’s protest, told KQED News, “Evictions are deadly, they’re telling us to stay home to fight COVID, but how are we going to do it if they are kicking us out?”

California is home to some of the richest people on the planet. Elon Musk, the richest man on Earth, increased his fortune 5-fold as 2 million people succumbed to COVID-19 around the world. In May 2020, Gavin Newsom collaborated with Musk to prematurely reopen the Tesla factory, resulting in several documented infections and likely many more, as statistics are not available. Newsom, with an estimated net worth of \$20 million, speaks for the capitalist class that Musk belongs to, which has insisted throughout the pandemic that nothing can be done that impinges on profits.

Workers facing eviction and infection must form rank and file neighborhood committees to fight for their rights for housing and safety. The well-being of the mass of society must be placed above the profits of a few. These committees must be guided by the understanding that the Democratic Party represents the wealthy. To put an end to evictions, workers must organize independently of and in opposition to all factions of the Democratic Party, in unity with educators, healthcare workers and other workers across the country and internationally who are fighting for a rational and humane response to the pandemic.

We encourage all those interested in forming rank and file committees to oppose evictions to contact the WSWS today. We will help link these struggles to the growing rebellion of the working class in the United States and internationally.



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