

Homeless crisis continues in Seattle, across Pacific Northwest

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20 June 2021

There were an estimated 11,751 individuals experiencing homelessness in Seattle-King County, according to the official one-night count in January 2020. Forty-seven percent of these persons were unsheltered, the third highest homeless population in the country after New York City and Los Angeles.

Citing the risk of COVID-19, Seattle will not be doing its annual unsheltered homeless population census this year. Outdoor camps have proliferated throughout the last year as shelters have been forced to downsize and create social distancing. But without an official count, the region will not know how many more people are living on the street until mid-2022.

Such conditions are echoed elsewhere in the Pacific Northwest. In Portland, Oregon, there were at least 4,000 people experiencing homelessness at the end of 2019, a count which has not been updated in part thanks to the pandemic. Oregon as a whole has an estimated 14,600 homeless people, while Washington has more than 22,300.

Amid this escalating social crisis, a group of businesses has focused on forcing Seattle to further crack down on the homeless population under the nameplate of the organization Compassion Seattle.

The primary goal of Compassion Seattle in changing the city of Seattle's charter, whatever the claimed aims of its defenders, is to enshrine sweeps in the city charter with an official declaration that "there is no right to camp in any particular public space." Efforts are ongoing to get an amendment to that effect, Charter Amendment 29 (CA29), on the ballot for Seattle's November elections.

If adopted, the amendment would be catastrophic for the city's homeless community. By declaring there is "no right" to eke out a meager existence where they can, it would mandate the city and its police forces to

clear out homeless encampments wherever they are found on a regular basis. In a city which only has shelters for about half its homeless population, thousands would essentially be forced to live on the run or move out of the city altogether.

Little else is laid out concretely by Compassion Seattle. It calls for 2,000 units of permanent or emergency housing within one year but says nothing about how that will be funded. The only funding the amendment actually requires would come from Seattle's \$1.6 billion general fund (the discretionary portion of the city's \$6 billion budget). Under the amendment, Seattle would need to allocate 12 percent of that to a new "Human Services Fund," which is actually only a small increase from the 11.2 percent of Seattle's general fund already allocated toward homeless services.

Moreover, such an increase would likely require cuts in other areas of city services aside from the Parks and Recreation Department's budget, which the amendment specifically separates from homeless services to keep the parks clear of encampments.

Compassion Seattle was originally proposed by former City Council member Tim Burgess, who has a history of promoting criminalization of homelessness. In an email to the local alternative media publication *The Stranger*, Burgess addressed the resource issue, saying that the mayor and council could redirect existing revenues and suggested they could use "the new JumpStart tax revenue that will begin flowing next year if the tax survives the legal challenge." Burgess is openly opposed to Seattle's JumpStart tax on the incomes of the wealthy, which just survived a lawsuit against it by the Chamber of Commerce. If it survives appeals, collections will begin next year.

Another top-tier supporter of CA29 is George Petrie,

CEO of real estate mogul John Goodman's Goodman Real Estate. Goodman has done battle with his low-income tenants, doubling their rents and serving evictions without informing them of their right to Tenant Relocation Assistance, resulting in tenants protesting outside his yacht marina in 2014. Goodman also invested in defeating a pro-affordable housing city council candidate in 2015.

Seattle Mayor Democrat Jenny Durkan has always been a promoter of sweeping encampments, essentially chasing homeless people across the city, even after the CDC stated that ceasing this practice could help lower the risk of COVID-19 transmission. King County has to date suffered more than 111,000 cases of the pandemic and at least 1,600 deaths.

Kshama Sawant, a leader of Socialist Alternative and member of the Seattle City Council, professes to oppose the sweeps, and recently stated, "Compassion Seattle is presenting the billionaires way to fight homelessness." But she has proven her willingness to work closely with the Democratic Party in Seattle throughout her tenure on the Seattle City Council and welcomed the endorsement of local Democrats in 2019. She is also now a member of the pseudo-left Democratic Socialists of America, a faction of the Democratic Party, the same party to which Burgess and others victimizing the homeless belong.

Much of the ongoing housing crisis in Seattle, even before the pandemic, has been caused by a sharp rise in mortgage and rent prices that have far outpaced rises in income. Moreover, according to a pro bono study by consulting firm McKinsey & Company presented to the Seattle Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce, since 2010, King County has lost a total of 112,000 housing units affordable to households earning below 80 percent of the area's median income.

The study also noted how little it would take to end homelessness in the city. "Using a conservative set of assumptions, ending the homelessness crisis in King County would therefore cost between \$4.5 billion and \$11 billion over ten years, or between \$450 million and \$1.1 billion each year for the next ten years. To put it another way, ending homelessness in King County would require spending three to five times the approximately \$260 million currently spent locally on homelessness and [extremely low-income households] housing in the region."

Or rather, this would be less than 6 percent of the net wealth of Jeff Bezos, CEO of Seattle-based Amazon.

The Compassion Seattle amendment should also be seen as a warning to workers across the country. In less than two weeks, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's mandated moratoriums on evictions is set to end on June 30, which will put approximately 11 million renters nationwide at risk of eviction, many of whom are facing the prospect of homelessness. If Seattle's Charter Amendment 29 passes, those homeless people forced out of Seattle will be facing increased police repression, and homeless people everywhere else in the country will face the same threat as cities across the country follow Seattle's example.

Such dangers clearly show that no section of the ruling class can realistically present a serious effort to address the housing crisis in Seattle or anywhere else. While the resources exist within society to provide everyone with a home and a decent standard of living, this can only be achieved through an independent struggle of the working class against the capitalist politicians and the corporate interests they serve, and for the socialist reorganization of society.



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