

New York's Mayor Eric Adams orders dismantling of homeless encampments

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29 March 2022

A task force led by police and sanitation workers dismantled a homeless encampment under the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn on Monday. The homeless were given an ultimatum to either pack up their tents and other belongings within 24-hours, or have them destroyed by the city's sanitation trucks.

The Williamsburg action is only part of a larger sweep planned for the next several weeks directed against the thousands of people who live on New York City's streets. While official statistics report nearly 50,000 in the city's overcrowded system of homeless shelters, thousands more refuse to enter the shelters because of theft, violence and the complete lack of privacy. The city's total homeless population is well over 60,000 and regularly sets new records.

New York City Mayor Eric Adams last week announced a crackdown on homeless living on the streets, promising that 150 encampments would be demolished over the next two weeks.

Adams announced the policy in an Orwellian statement: "This effort is about taking care of our people and our public spaces because no New Yorker deserves to live on the street." Adams, like his predecessors, demands instead that the homeless "deserve" to endure the prison-like conditions in the city's shelters. He made vague pledges of finding private rooms and supportive housing, but such facilities do not come close to meeting the demands of the growing crisis.

The mayor admitted that, vagrancy laws having long since been declared unconstitutional, it is not illegal to sleep on the street. "But you can't build a miniature house made out of cardboard on the streets," he said. "That's inhumane."

The homeless themselves had a different reaction.

The Gothamist website quoted Heriberto Medina, who lost most of his belongings in Monday's sweep. "The mayor says the crime rate is going up. Let's target the homeless again, like they usually do. They always target the homeless. The homeless, the homeless," Medina said. "Every day the homeless, the homeless, the homeless and instead of helping us they kick us while we're already down."

The latest sweeps against the homeless are not a new tactic. According to the advocacy group the Urban Justice Center, there were a total of 9,600 such actions between 2016 and 2021, more than 6,000 of them in the last year of the de Blasio administration.

The action against the street homeless comes two weeks after a similar initiative directed at the homeless who shelter in the city's subways. The high-profile announcements, designed to give the impression of taking action to help those in need, only succeed in making life even more miserable for the homeless as they move to new locations. Craig Hughes, a supervising social worker at the Urban Justice Center, was quoted by the *New York Times* as saying that the city had an approach that "has always been an effort to hide homelessness rather than to get people housed" and that generally "leaves people more precarious than they were beforehand."

The homeless who are targeted and criminalized are themselves a stark symptom of the unprecedented social polarization and inequality in New York City and other metropolitan centers that were touted—at least before the COVID-19 pandemic—as great success stories of American capitalism. Since they cannot and will not deal with the disease itself, the response of the political representatives of big business has always been to remove or reduce the visibility of the symptom.

The scapegoating of the homeless is stepped up under

circumstances like the recent spate of anti-Asian attacks, many of them committed by the mentally ill. In fact, the homeless are more likely victims than perpetrators. While the tabloid newspapers and the television stations scream about the dangers posed by the homeless, the city's own statistics, as tabulated by the Department of Homeless Services for the fiscal year ending last June 30, show that 22 homeless individuals were killed during that period. Occasionally a particularly violent incident is publicized, such as the recent attacks in Washington D.C. and New York that left five dead.

Advocates for the homeless have criticized actions such as the latest taken by Adams. Gothamist quotes Jacquelyn Simone, policy director at the Coalition for the Homeless: "Sweeps and policing are not the answers to unsheltered homelessness. Without expanding access to the types of shelters and housing people want and need, Mayor Adams' latest initiative will fail to address the reasons people sleep on the streets and will harm an already vulnerable community."

The dispersal of the homeless into different parts of the city is particularly dangerous under conditions of the ongoing COVID pandemic. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in its COVID guidance, has said that homeless encampments should not be removed unless private rooms can be provided. "Clearing encampments can cause people to disperse throughout the community and break connections with service providers," the guidance reads. "This increases the potential for infectious disease spread." In the first months of the pandemic two years ago, more than 100 homeless residents died of the disease in New York City.

Lip service is regularly given to the need for more homeless services, including an increase in shelters that afford greater privacy and in less crowded conditions, but action not only does not correspond to words, but generally moves in the opposite direction. Bill de Blasio was only the most recent example of a mayor who took office promising to massively reduce homelessness, only to leave office with the city's shelter population having reached a new record. It should be noted that, while the Coalition for the Homeless regularly calls for more action, it was its own long-time attorney, Steven Banks, who joined the de

Blasio administration as its social services commissioner, and presided over the growth of the crisis.

Even more fundamental, of course, than the issue of private rooms and security for the homeless, is the need for genuinely affordable housing, as well as good-paying jobs and free, high quality, social and public services such as education and health care. Such is the crisis of capitalism in the 21st century that these issues are not even raised when the homeless are once again pursued and persecuted.



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