

Tennessee state senator offers Hitler as a role model for the homeless

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According to a new report from Oxfam, half the world's population is plummeting towards extreme poverty due to inequality, rising inflation and COVID-19. The US-NATO proxy war with Russia has accelerated the catastrophe by disrupting supply chains and causing shortages of essential goods and services, while raising the threat of nuclear war.

Mass demonstrations are springing up around the world in response to the global elites' drive to impose the full burden of the capitalist crisis on the working class. The official response is to scapegoat and vilify those made destitute by the money-mad ruling class and the establishment parties that do its bidding. The most vulnerable and impoverished sections of the working class—immigrants fleeing imperialist-backed dictatorships and the horrors of war, the unemployed, the homeless—are among the first to be targeted for state-sanctioned repression.

This is the context in which Tennessee, where one in six residents lives in poverty, made homelessness illegal last week. On the eve of the passage of the bill that criminalizes the state's most vulnerable residents, fascism reared its head when State Senator Frank S. Niceley, a Republican, cited Adolf Hitler as an example of hope for the unhoused, who now face fines, confiscation of their belongings and jail time for sleeping outside.

During his April 13 speech on the Tennessee Senate floor, Niceley announced that he was going to give his colleagues "a little history on homelessness." He proceeded thusly:

In 19 and 10, Hitler decided to live on the streets for a while. So for two years, Hitler lived on the streets and practiced his oratory and his

body language and how to connect with the masses, and then went on to lead a life that's got him into history books.

The senator then attempted to balance his Hitler mythos with an artless nod to history by adding:

So, a lot of these people—it's not a dead end. They can come out of this, these homeless camps, and lead a productive life. Or in Hitler's case, a very unproductive life.

While the senator's remarks made national news, Tennessee lawmakers have been all but silent on Niceley's fascistic moralizing. Democratic State Representative Gloria Johnson appears to be the only legislator to speak out about the incident. More concerned with the optics of open praise for Hitler by a state senator than the specter of fascism looming over the state Capitol, Rep. Johnson tweeted: "I'm going to have to apologize to the universe for this guy ... not a single day passes without TN GOP embarrassing the hell out of our state."

The political pearl clutching of Johnson typifies the Democratic response to fascist rhetoric and violence in recent US history. While fanning the flames of identity politics with one hand, the Democrats cover their eyes with the other for fear of alerting the masses and endangering the social and political order that creates homelessness and enables the emergence of fascism.

The Tennessee press was similarly tongue-tied. Local television news channels covered the story in large metro areas, but Gannett-owned newspapers in

Memphis, Nashville, Knoxville and Chattanooga have not reported on Senator Niceley's speech.

Wednesday's comments were not Senator Niceley's first public invocation of the "positive" legacy of fascists and counterrevolutionaries.

Last October, after Tennessee awarded Ford Motor Company a \$900 million incentive to build an electric car plant near Memphis, the senator crowed: "The Civil War is still going, the South is winning." Niceley specifically referenced the state's history of "right to work laws" and low wages, while implicitly whitewashing Tennessee's ignominious past as part of the slave-owners' rebellion.

The senator's "history lesson" is the second olive branch to fascism by right-wing extremists in Tennessee this year. In January, Art Spiegelman's graphic novel about the Holocaust was removed from the eighth grade curriculum in a school district in East Tennessee. The school board hypocritically cited nudity and explicit scenes of violence as the reason for removing the book. But this was a transparent pretext.

The board imposed the order in violation of its own procedures, which stipulate that a book cannot be removed from the curriculum until a panel has reviewed its content. Instead, the board removed the book after one school board member, known for his extreme right-wing libertarian views on education, brought the book to the board's attention.

Tennessee's new anti-homeless law, SB 1610, expands the provisions of a previous law prohibiting camping on state-owned property to impose a ban on camping on all public property. The amended law makes camping on public property a misdemeanor punishable by a \$50 fine, community service and jail.

The vast majority of the unhoused are left with no recourse but to break the law. They are criminals by virtue of their lack of housing.

In an interview with a local news outlet, the director of Homeless and Supportive Housing in Chattanooga, Sam Wolfe, said: "If every single person experiencing homelessness in our community showed up to shelters... the reality is that there's not enough spaces for them."

Clearly, the aim of the bill is to blame the homeless for their plight rather than the capitalist system, which accepts half a million Americans living without a roof over their heads as the cost of doing business.

Scapegoating the vulnerable is a hallmark of a society in precipitous decline, as exemplified by the rise of fascism in Germany during the economic depression of the 1930s and its murderous persecution of the Jews. Laws like SB1610 recall the Nazi legislation that stripped Jews of German citizenship and declared them a separate and inferior race. By criminalizing the homeless, Tennessee lawmakers are implicitly branding them as "untermenschen," an inferior breed and public menace best left to the police to handle.

Such measures reflect the desperation of a ruling class that feels itself besieged by a rising tide of working class opposition. It has nothing to offer in response to demands for decent wages, living and working conditions. It strikes out, combining repression with ideological backwardness and filth.

The working class is the mass social force that can stop fascism in its tracks by embarking consciously on the road of socialist revolution.

Workers of all races, genders, and nationalities must demand an end to war, an end to the pandemic, and an end to conditions that allow any man, woman or child to live without shelter.



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