

Police expel homeless advocates from Los Angeles City Hall

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On Tuesday advocates for the homeless protested a Los Angeles City Council meeting that approved a measure that prohibits homeless people to be within 500 feet of sensitive facilities, schools, libraries, parks and daycare centers. The measure extends Municipal Code 41.18, which in 2021 banned sitting, sleeping, lying or otherwise obstructing the public right of way in 300 Los Angeles locations.

The protesters rallied in front of City Hall and filled the seats at the council meeting carrying signs denouncing the ordinance and demanding to be heard. Rather than providing a platform for the protesters, armed police were called in by the Democratic Party-dominated council with the pretext that the protest had become an “illegal assembly.” The demonstrators were expelled, and one protester was arrested. This was the second Tuesday of protests at City Hall over this issue with the demonstrators demanding the abolition of measure 41.18.

The measure passed by a vote of 11 to 3.

The extended measure, which effectively bans homeless people from even sitting on the sidewalks or benches in 20 percent of the city, including city parks, was justified as a way of protecting children by several of its proponents. “This is definitely not about solving homelessness. It never was. It’s about protecting children,” said Democratic Councilmember Mitch O’Farrell.

Los Angeles Unified School District Superintendent Alberto Carvalho accused homeless people of exposing their bodies in front of children. In the past, Carvalho has described himself being homeless in his youth, claiming that he understood their circumstances. “I’ve seen elementary schools with conditions that none of us as parents would find acceptable for children. Individuals with mental illness, some of them

absolutely unclothed, shouting profanities in the listening ear of children,” declared Carvalho in a previous City Council appearance.

“Our students are already traumatized with social-economic issues,” said Democratic Councilmember Joe Buscaino. “They should not be exposed to sex acts. They should not be exposed to open drug use. They should not be exposed to psychotic behavior.”

During the discussion, there was a total disregard for the fate of homeless children.

“What this legislation does is it moves people around from block to block, from district to district,” Ashley Bennett, one of the demonstrators outside City Hall, told CBS Los Angeles.

Martha Escudero, whose family used to be unhoused, said that instead of giving them more rules, people living on the street need more compassion.

“That really is not keeping anyone safe,” she told CBS. “Especially unhoused children. They’re putting them in darker corners where they’re obscure, and then they are more prone to violence and death.”

The Los Angeles metropolitan area is experiencing an explosion in homelessness, making it the epicenter of the crisis in California and the US.

The Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority’s “Preliminary Estimation of Homelessness in LA County” for this year reports that on any one night, there are 83,347 homeless people on the streets and in shelters in Los Angeles County. This does not include the Los Angeles County cities of Long Beach (6,000), Pasadena (1,200) and Glendale (400), which bring up the total to more than 91,000. The same report indicates that about 224,203 individuals are homeless at least one day during the year. This is the largest homeless population for any metropolitan area in the US. Only 9 percent of Los Angeles County’s homeless have access

to shelters of any kind.

Of Los Angeles's homeless, 34,898 (42 percent) are considered "chronically homeless," defined as people who have been on the streets for one year or more, or who have had four "episodes of homelessness" in the last three years, and who have one or more disabilities. These include mental illness, substance abuse, amputations and other physical conditions. Approximately 55 percent of the chronically homeless have three or more disabilities.

About 12 percent of the homeless are under the age of 18, while 24 percent are older than 55. Twenty percent belong to 2,800 homeless families. By ethnicity, a disproportionate percentage of the homeless are African American at 39 percent, another 29 percent are white, and 25 percent are Latino.

While assurances have been given that homeless persons occupying forbidden spaces will be given time to move their belongings and help in accessing shelters or hotel rooms, those promises are never kept. A brutal example was provided in March 2021 when 193 homeless residents were savagely expelled from their tent camp in Echo Park Lake, west of downtown Los Angeles. The camp residents had established a homeless village, with the assistance of community organizations, that included a vegetable garden and job and apartment hunting services.

The initial eviction date, January 2020, was postponed due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. When the eviction was finally decided on 10 months later, the residents were given a 24-hour warning.

Hundreds of protesters risked arrest after descending on the park to protect the encampment. On the evening of the eviction 400 police officers in riot gear accompanied by sanitation trucks descended on Echo Park Lake to evict the residents and fence in the park, allegedly to "renovate" it. In the face of protests, police arrested reporters and human rights observers and injured some of the protesters.

Law enforcement officials reportedly shot one protester with a rubber bullet and broke the arm of another, according to the local news site Knock L.A., before kettling the crowd. Police ultimately fenced in the people who remained in the park, preventing them from leaving that night.

The prevalence of COVID-19 infections among the homeless is high relative to the rest of the US

population. The highest single 7-day rate of positive COVID-19 tests for the entire US population between the months of June and October 2020 was 7.8 percent. For the homeless the COVID positivity rates were 9-12 percent for that same time period. Since homeless persons have little or no access to clinics and are often older adults or have underlying medical conditions, they face even more severe health consequences due to COVID-19.

In Los Angeles County (excluding Long Beach and Pasadena) there have been 20,430 COVID-19 cases and 355 deaths among the homeless since the pandemic began, according to county authorities, a figure that is considered an undercount, given the ups and downs in the homeless population and the extent of unreported data.

One of the homeless advocate groups present at City Hall last Tuesday was the "Services Not Sweeps Coalition." The group's Facebook page raises demands such as: an end to daytime "tents down enforcement" and sweeps by the police, no towing vehicles in which homeless live, provide daily access to bathrooms and showers, provide proper sanitation and garbage removal. In addition, it is demanding an end to tenant evictions and to increases in rents and decent housing, not warehousing, to prevent people from being on top of one another.

To fight for these goals, the group is proposing that people pressure their city and county representatives "every day" until they "do their damn jobs." It is an illusion that these pressure tactics will accomplish anything. As with the pandemic itself, homelessness requires a socialist solution, including the imposition of rent controls and a massive investment in housing and public health services by a government of the working class.



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