

Shooting at San Diego shelter highlights the rise in violence against the homeless

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On Saturday, January 14, a drive-by shooter fired numerous shots into a downtown San Diego, California homeless shelter operated by the nonprofit Alpha Project organization. About 100 people were in the large tented facility at the time of the shooting, which took place shortly before 11:45 p.m. Luckily no deaths or injuries occurred, but the shelter was damaged.

According to San Diego Police Department public information officer Lt. Adam Sharki, the case is under investigation, with detectives looking for witnesses and evidence.

The assailant fired at least seven shots with bullet holes found on panels covering a chain-link fence facing the street, one of which struck the air conditioning unit causing a leak, and more bullet holes were found on a large aluminum duct on the shelter's southern outer walls. Police confirmed that one bullet nearly penetrated the wall of the shelter where it could have struck a person.

While the incident is being investigated, there is every reason to believe the violent act was a hate crime directed against the city's growing homeless population. A survey by the Downtown San Diego Partnership in December 2022 found 1,839 people either sleeping on the street or in their cars in the city's downtown area, up from 1,706 the previous month.

This month's shooting was the second directed against the Alpha Project within the five years since the downtown San Diego shelter opened.

In December 2019, just over a month after opening, a shooting resulted in the death of a security guard right outside of the shelter's walls. At the time of the 2019 incident Bob McElroy, president and CEO of the Alpha Project, told the *San Diego Union Tribune*, "After Ernie (security guard) was murdered, we asked for armed security there at that corner and never got it."

Unsurprisingly, the latest shooting has left staff members fearful, with several refusing to show up to their Sunday evening shifts, according to the *Union Tribune*.

The San Diego shooting occurred less than one week after

art gallery owner, Collier Gwin, in San Francisco's North Beach neighborhood aggressively hosed an elderly homeless woman with water in the cold weather. Video of the incident went viral earlier, sparking outrage over the discriminatory assault against homeless people. Due to the outcry, Gwin now faces misdemeanor battery charges and was arrested, with the case remaining an open investigation, according to the *Los Angeles Times*.

The San Francisco and San Diego attacks are part of a larger trend in discriminatory acts and hate crimes against the homeless in California and throughout the United States.

According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, at least 1,657 unhoused people were the victims of violence perpetrated on them for the sole reason that they were homeless between the years 1999 and 2015. The same report cites that of 199 attacks against homeless persons from 2014 to 2015, the largest share of these crimes happened in California (43 attacks).

Everyday life is becoming increasingly dangerous for the homeless in the US, who bear the brunt of the social crisis, including the impact of extreme weather due to global warming which includes the recent record-breaking storms across California that created many deadly floods as well as rising costs of food and housing.

In San Diego alone, annual homeless deaths increased a staggering 7 percent from 2021 to a total of 574 deaths, 28 more than the 536 last year, both significantly higher than 357 the year before, indicative of larger trends.

According to Crosstown LA, the Los Angeles Police Department recorded the murder of 85 homeless in the city in 2021, the highest on record and more than double the number recorded in 2019. While the homeless are just 1 percent of the city's population they accounted for 21 percent of all murder victims in 2021.

In addition to violence against the homeless, homelessness itself is also skyrocketing. According to the Regional Task Force on Homelessness, there was an 89 percent rise in newly homeless families in shelters in San Diego County from 2019 to 2021. This task force reports that 15,327

people sought homeless services for the first time in the span of the last 12 months, which is significantly more than the 11,861 formerly homeless who moved into housing.

Based on a CalMatters analysis of the federal government's point-in-time count conducted in early 2022, the number of unhoused people in California increased by at least 22,500 since 2019, to 173,800. In the entire US there are at least 582,462 homeless people.

These numbers are significant underestimates since they are based on a physical and visual headcount of homeless people sleeping on the streets and in shelters on only one given night. This method is called "point-in-time count" and is required by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development and is attached to federal funding for homeless initiatives, despite the fact that this results in a significant undercount.

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Many of the millions in the US who find themselves in constant economic insecurity, homeless or on the edge of homelessness are currently employed, but their low wages keep the basic necessity of housing out of reach.

According to wage data from May 2020 from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, at least 27 million US workers do not earn enough to afford their basic necessities, such as health care, food and rent. The typical city in California has a 38 percent higher cost of living than the average US city, according to the 2020 Cost of Living Index, and San Diego is one of the most expensive cities in California to live. Many workers in San Diego find themselves moving to Tijuana, Mexico, which is located right on the other side of the US-Mexico border, and commuting to work in order to avoid homelessness.

The capitalist ruling class and their politicians are unable and unwilling to solve this crisis. Instead of treating the epidemic of homelessness as the crisis it is, the government attempts to make it appear less rampant through cosmetic solutions such as criminalizing tents, creating infrastructure specifically designed to make life harder for the homeless, and banning people from sleeping on public property or in their vehicles.

Meanwhile, the financial interests of developers and speculators are thoroughly protected by both the Democrats and Republicans. California, a stronghold of the Democratic Party, has some of the highest rents in the entire world. The massive \$4 billion investment deal between the Democratic Party-dominated UC Regents and the predatory Blackstone Group, the largest landowner in the country, is only one example of class interests of the capitalist politicians who benefit from the housing crisis while offering only lip service about their homeless "initiatives."

This past week, Democratic mayor of San Diego, Todd Gloria, published an editorial in the *San Diego Union Tribune* on his homelessness plans, in which he failed to even mention the shooting. "Over the past two years, we've made an additional 658 shelter beds available—a 61 percent increase," the mayor boasted. To see the scope of how inadequate this number of new beds in a two-year framework is for the size of this crisis, one only needs to look at the number of homeless deaths in San Diego County over the past two years, which is well over 1,000.

While Gloria and the rest of the Democratic Party leadership cynically claim to be helping the homeless, they ignore how last October his office directed police to crack down on this vulnerable population by reinstating the policy of removing people's tents from downtown streets during daylight hours. Already facing abuse from police, these mandates only further exacerbated this abuse.

With capitalism in an increasingly sharp crisis, the ruling class places the burdens of this crisis on the working class and the poor. Increased homelessness and poverty are a predictable consequence of the decades-long cutting of social and mental health services, declining living standards, bailing out the ultra wealthy in every economic crisis, and the Federal Reserve's policy of raising interest rates to place the burden of the economic crisis on the working class, in the Fed's own words, expecting to bring "pain" to the working class and poor.

The reality is that millions of workers in the US are on the brink of homelessness, being only one significant medical bill or life event away from not making rent, with many on their way to becoming unemployed. This past week alone saw the jobs massacre throughout the tech industry resulting in the loss of 40,000 jobs, which is just a taste of what is to come with regard to mass layoffs as the global economy is plunged into a deep recession. Capitalism provides not even the guarantee of the most basic necessities of life to the working masses in the US or throughout the globe. The fight for a mass, international working class movement for socialism is the only solution.



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