

# Migrants forcibly evicted from protest encampment in New York

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The forcible expulsion of about two dozen immigrant men, mostly from Latin America, encamped outside the Watson Hotel in Manhattan by the New York City Police Department (NYPD) on the night of Wednesday, February 1, shines a light on the brutal treatment of homeless immigrants by the administration of Democratic mayor Eric Adams.

The immigrants, asylum seekers, originally numbering about 1,000, who had been housed at the hotel by the city, had earlier been told they would be removed and sent to a makeshift shelter at the Brooklyn Cruise Terminal in the Red Hook section of Brooklyn, which already holds about 600 migrants.

At first, some of the Watson residents agreed to move. But when they traveled to Red Hook and saw the conditions there, a number returned to the hotel, where they were refused re-entry, forcing them to camp on the sidewalk despite freezing temperatures.

More than 40,000 migrants are reported to have arrived in the city since last spring. As of late January, more than 27,800 spent the night either in the city's regular homeless shelters or in facilities specifically for migrants.

The Red Hook facility is located in a 180,000-square-foot, warehouse-like building reportedly with a maximum capacity of 1,000, that immigrants and supporters have described as totally inadequate, cold, with limited access to showers and toilets, residents sleeping head to toe on cots without sheets, no privacy and limited ability to secure their personal possessions. Conditions are ripe for the transmission of COVID-19 and other diseases.

These facts are of no concern to the Adams administration, whose representatives described conditions at Red Hook as nearly idyllic. It has implementing draconian policies not only against

immigrants but all of the city's homeless population. According to city representatives, the move from the Watson to Red Hook was to make way for immigrant families with children at the hotel, but follows a string of moves to makeshift, totally inadequate facilities.

News accounts report that the police, members of the Strategic Response Group, NYPD's riot squad, used a sound cannon to harass the campers and that their belongings were taken and thrown into a garbage truck. Also, bicycles in a rack in front of the hotel were confiscated. This is doubly egregious since many of the migrants have found work as food delivery workers, among the most exploited sections of the city's workforce. The bicycles are essential to their livelihoods. Furthermore, the move to Red Hook, which has limited subway access, would have taken them, and others who had found various employment, far from their work area.

The Cruise Terminal site replaces an even more abysmal facility on Randalls Island, which consisted of tents set up in a flood-prone area with extremely limited access to the rest of the city, overseen by a contingent from the New York National Guard, reminiscent of a concentration camp. It was closed shortly after opening in response to intense public criticism.

New Yorkers have a legal right to shelter. However, Mayor Adams has stated that he believes the migrants do not fall under that regulation. He also claimed that the problem of migrants refusing to move to the Cruise Terminal was created by "agitators." For their part, the migrants have expressed frustration at being used as political pawns, shipped from places like Texas and Florida by right-wing governors to be dumped in northern cities and then shoved from one makeshift shelter to another.

In a shameless publicity stunt, Adams spent Saturday night at the Cruise Terminal facility. This empty gesture does nothing to address the serious complaints of unhealthy, dangerous and concentration camp-like conditions to which hundreds of the migrants staying there are subject.

The mistreatment of these migrants is just one example of the huge crisis of homelessness in New York City and around the country that has been intensifying for years before the recent arrivals.

A total of more than 77,000 people spent the night in the city's homeless shelters at the time of the police action at the Watson. That number has steadily increased in recent years, rising by more than 30,000 from just a year ago. Many more live on the street, officially recorded at 3,439 as of last June, undoubtedly a gross undercount, refusing to stay in the city's overcrowded and dangerous shelters.

Mayor Adams, a former NYPD captain, ran on a law-and-order platform and has undertaken a brutal campaign against the city's homeless. He has vowed to demolish the homeless camps that exist throughout the city, repeatedly sending police and sanitation workers to dismantle encampments. A campaign has also been mounted to roust the homeless who sleep in the subways. Adams has made vague and insubstantial promises to find additional housing for the homeless, but nothing has materialized. The expiration of pandemic-related protections against evictions is driving even more poor residents onto the streets.

Meanwhile, the wealth of the city's financial and corporate elite is growing by leaps and bounds. However, these riches, a fraction of which could easily provide decent housing for all of the city's homeless, are sacrosanct. To the contrary, the Adams administration is launching budget-cutting attacks against the city's working class, including the privatization of health care of retired city employees and cuts to the public education budget.

Attacks on the city's homeless did not begin under Adams, but are a continuation, in even more overt form, of the victimization of poverty by the ruling class and its representatives. More than 6,000 actions against homeless encampments were undertaken during the last year of the administration of Bill de Blasio, Adam's predecessor, also a Democrat.

In a further effort to "sanitize" the city by removing

the unsightly reminder of the huge economic gulf between its rich and poor, which offends the sensibilities of its elite, Adams has initiated a campaign of involuntary hospitalization of the homeless who are deemed mentally ill at the discretion of the police rather than medical professionals. This amounts to criminalization of mental illness, an initial step reminiscent of the kind of eugenic cleansing practiced by the Nazis. In any case, the "treatment" these individuals receive is likely to be brief and inadequate, as multiple independent studies have indicated (e.g., Fact Check on Homeless and Mental Health Care, Coalition for the Homeless, February 2022).

Under capitalism, especially in a period of growing crisis, poverty and homelessness are an inevitable consequence of a system based on exploitation and the inequality it produces. The solution of the ruling class is not to address the root cause of that inequality, which would mean attacking the fundamental mechanism of exploitation. Rather, it is to resort to increasingly brutal forms of repression. This cannot be ameliorated by reform but can only be ended by elimination of the system itself.



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