

Chicago mayor approves first migrant tent camp as political crisis boils over in city council

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The administration of Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson has approved the city's first migrant tent camp in the Brighton Park neighborhood, after running roughshod over the concerns and objections of local residents. The migrant crisis, largely the result of the Democratic Party's general hostility to working class asylum-seekers and refugees, has exposed deep divisions in the party which controls the city over how best to dispose of them.

The tent camps will be migrant detention centers in all but name, with security contractor GardaWorld constructing and closely monitoring the migrants residing in them. In September, a specialist with the United Nations-affiliated International Organization for Migration (IOM) warned the city council's Committee on Immigrant and Refugee Rights that camps were a "last resort" and risk becoming permanent.

The city signed a lease on October 26 with the property owners of a former industrial site for \$91,400 per month. The site's ownership is connected to city contractor Sanchez Paving in suburban Markham, owned by Otoniel Sanchez. Neighbors for Environmental Justice (N4EJ), a Chicago-based group, has raised concerns about the safety of the site, which once hosted a zinc smelter and a diesel fuel storage tank.

While city officials have claimed they will perform environmental testing they have already signed the lease and are quickly proceeding with construction. Anthony Moser of N4EJ said to the *Chicago Sun-Times*, "If they haven't finished testing for contamination, why are they digging up the site?"

More than 20,000 asylum-seekers have arrived in Chicago since August of last year, the majority sent on

buses by fascistic Texas Governor Greg Abbott. A large percentage of these migrants are from Venezuela, who have fled the economic destruction of that country by US sanctions. Around 12,000 of these people are living in city-run shelters, many of which are repurposed schools, park field houses and other makeshift buildings. Some 3,300 are residing in police stations and airports, mostly the former.

Many of the police stations housing migrants are so over-capacity that they have developed makeshift tent encampments of their own using tents and blankets donated by volunteers. Chicago has already had snow and freezing overnight temperatures, which the migrants sleeping in the tents, including young children, have had to endure, in some cases experiencing this kind of weather for the first time in their lives.

A migrant named Alejandro who spoke to Block Club Chicago said that even wearing multiple jackets, "It's better than nothing, but it's still not enough. And I'm an adult. I can't imagine how the kids are feeling it." A spokesman for Rush University Medical Center told the *Chicago Tribune*, "I know we've seen a concerning rise in cases associated with colder weather. I'm told upper respiratory issues are particularly concerning and providers in the field have had to send several kids to hospitals because of trouble breathing. They are, of course, concerned that colder weather will make the situation worse."

The Johnson administration suggested the official tent camps, alternately referred to by the administration as "winterized base camps," would be in place before cold weather arrived. However, Johnson cynically responded at a news conference last Wednesday, "It

snowed, but winter is not here yet. And so my goal is still to make sure that we have base camps before winter.”

On Friday, residents living around the proposed site filed a lawsuit to block the building of the tent camp, citing the site’s contamination, following a number of protests over the past several weeks. In one incident on October 19, city council member Julia Ramirez was escorted by police out of a crowd of protesters at the site, after what she characterized as an assault.

At a supposed “community meeting” on October 25 at Kelly High School, residents lined up out the door, with many ultimately being turned away due to exceeding capacity, despite there being available seats. Ramirez claimed to have been left in the dark over the Johnson administration’s plans, and said she “did not have aldermanic prerogative in this.” In other words, she is unable to block it. Echoing the feeling of many attendees at community meetings in Chicago, one speaker at the meeting asked, “What’s the point of having a meeting if you’re just going to do what you want?”

Many speakers and residents supported the idea of sheltering migrants, with one noting, “It’s inhumane to have people living in cloth tents.” But the opening up of large migrant shelters has stoked anger about the social devastation that has been the result of decades of austerity and lack of social investment. The anti-democratic nature of the Johnson administration, following that of former mayor Lori Lightfoot, has allowed anti-immigrant sentiment to fester and be manipulated by the most right-wing forces, including Democratic Party members of the city council.

A Friday special city council meeting called by council members Ray Lopez and Anthony Beale ended in the Monday resignation of Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) member Carlos Ramirez-Rosa as Johnson’s floor leader and as chair of the council’s powerful zoning committee. Lopez and Beale had called the meeting to discuss placing a referendum on the next election ballot about whether to repeal Chicago’s sanctuary city status. Removing the sanctuary city status would allow the police department to officially work with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in arresting migrants for detention and deportation.

Ramirez-Rosa, in a bid to keep the meeting from

reaching a quorum, evidently blocked alderman Emma Mitts from entering the room and threatened three others—Nicole Lee, Felix Cardona, and Chris Taliaferro—that if they entered he would stall any zoning items for their wards.

While anti-democratic maneuvering around the quorum is common in the Chicago city council, this are usually relegated to less visible meetings. Ramirez-Rosa’s actions allowed Lopez and Beale and their allies in the city council’s Black Caucus to put on a full court press over the weekend to call on Ramirez-Rosa, the so-called “dean” of the council’s Democratic Socialist Caucus, to resign. Many of these council members, as well as the media who supported their efforts in pushing Ramirez-Rosa’s resignation, were supporters of Paul Vallas in the mayoral election, and were no doubt pleased about the opportunity to sideline one of Johnson’s major allies.

All of the factions of the Democratic Party stand exposed in the migrant crisis. Johnson and his allies in the DSA are proceeding with the construction of tent camps in a clear bid to discourage asylum-seekers from coming to Chicago, while Beale and Lopez would move to aggressively deport migrants and expose them to the predations of ICE. The number of asylum-seekers in Chicago could easily be housed in hotels and other accommodations, but like every other crying social need, this is blocked at every turn by the capitalist system.



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