

Florida legislature passes bill criminalizing the homeless

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The Florida Senate this week passed a bill banning the homeless from sleeping or setting up camp in public spaces. If signed into law, as expected, by fascist Republican Governor Ron DeSantis, it would represent the most expansive attack yet on the democratic rights of the most vulnerable layer of society.

The new law would require municipalities to remove the homeless from public spaces. If a city government fails to do so, it would allow individuals, business owners, and the state attorney general to sue that city for failing to enforce the new restrictions.

It would also establish the option for cities to set up designated encampments, where the homeless population in that area could be concentrated, supposedly to provide public services to them in an organized fashion. The bill's provisions would require the homeless camps to be approved by the Florida Department of Children and Families and provide a minimal level of infrastructure, such as restrooms and running water.

Individuals would be restricted to living for a year in the proposed camps, and alcohol and drug use would be banned. Camps would be prohibited under the new law if they could be shown to bring down the value of surrounding properties or endanger public safety, and those municipalities which could prove that establishing camps would create an "undue financial burden" would be exempt.

The bill does not provide a direct source of funding for the camps, other than the \$30 million allocated in the most recent state budget—out of a total of \$117.46 billion—for cities to provide services to the homeless.

The new law's provisions are contradictory by design. On the one hand, it requires law enforcement to conduct an ongoing crackdown on the homeless, forcing them from public spaces, arresting them if they

fail to comply, and establishing an overall legal framework for a permanent campaign of harassment.

On the other hand, the only legal option for the homeless would be forced relocation to one of the proposed camps, the establishment of which would be virtually prohibited by the property value provision of the bill.

If one of Florida's large cities was able to build a camp, it would only increase the poverty, misery and violence that characterize homeless life.

Official figures place the number of homeless individuals in Florida in 2023 at 30,809. This figure, however, is based on a one-time annual counting of the homeless throughout the state, an imprecise method that most experts agree vastly undercounts the total number of homeless.

Nevertheless, comparing previous surveys is instructive. The same count in 2022 totaled 25,959, 18.7 percent less than in 2023.

As with many of the other pieces of reactionary social engineering introduced by the Florida legislature in the recent period, the anti-homeless legislation was authored by a right-wing think tank, in this case the Cicero Institute. Similar measures have also been championed by Peter Thiel, the far-right billionaire and Trump supporter, and Joe Lonsdale, another billionaire who was an early donor to DeSantis' failed 2024 presidential campaign.

The law is also shaped to increase the power of the Republican-led legislature over the state's largest cities, whose mayors and city councils are predominately led by the Democratic Party. It is part of an overall strategy dubbed "pre-emption" by its proponents, that aims to undermine the ability of cities to pass legislation opposed by the far right.

According to *USA Today*, other proposed legislation

would “ban local heat safety requirements for outdoor workers, speed-up local permitting, impose term limits on county commissioners, ban local governments from flying ‘Pride’ flags in support of the LGBTQ community, and blunt local efforts to slow urban sprawl by imposing new limits on land-use plans.”

Other laws passed in the recently concluded session would loosen restrictions on employing teenage workers, ban educators from including “identity politics” in their lesson plans and prohibit children younger than 16 from using social media.

This follows last year’s session, when the legislature enacted a series of laws that banned abortions after 15 weeks, loosened gun control restrictions and expanded the death penalty, among other measures aimed at elevating Governor DeSantis’ national profile in the lead-up to his bid to unseat former President Trump as the 2024 Republican nominee for president.

The bill passed the Republican-controlled Senate by a vote of 27-12, with lawmakers split along party lines. Though various Democratic lawmakers predictably denounced the bill, they too have no progressive solution to the problem of homelessness, not because they lack a majority in the legislature, but because like the Republicans they are a capitalist political party that represents the interests of the ruling class. Homelessness, along with crime, drug abuse and other social ills, flow directly from the system of capitalist exploitation.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, these social ills have increased, visibly, throughout the US. This has been exacerbated by the exploding costs of food, rent and other necessities that have pushed the poorest and most vulnerable layers of the population onto the streets. Everywhere the increase in social misery is evident.

Simultaneously, trillions of dollars have been allocated by the US Congress to fund the US-NATO proxy war in Ukraine against Russia, sponsor the genocide of the Palestinian people by the Zionist regime in Israel, and protect the fortunes of the ruling class when the capitalist system was near collapse in the early days of the pandemic.

The contradiction is obvious: There are plentiful resources to permanently end poverty, homelessness and hunger, but they are controlled by a social class that benefits directly from these conditions. This

contradiction can only be resolved in a revolutionary struggle by the working class against the system of capitalist exploitation in the fight for socialism.



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