

Democratic California Governor enacts executive order to break up homeless encampments

Isla Anderson, David Brown
29 July 2024

On July 25, California Governor Gavin Newsom issued an executive order “to move urgently to address dangerous homeless encampments,” by directing state agencies to remove encampments from state lands, such as state parks, beaches, highway overpasses, and the areas underneath them. Newsom announced the brutal crackdown just four days after endorsing vice president Kamala Harris’s campaign for president, and it is a harbinger of the intensifying right-wing attacks workers can expect from the Democratic Party during the election campaign and beyond.

The housing crisis in California has been sharply escalating over recent years, with the number of homeless growing by 40 percent over the past five years. Housing prices and rents have remained well beyond the reach of ordinary families, driving the state to have the highest functional poverty rate in the US.

California has been dominated by the Democratic Party, with the legislature under their control continuously since 1997, and only one Republican Governor (Arnold Schwarzenegger) since 1999. It is this party that is responding to the growing social crisis in the state with police repression.

Under Newsom’s order, authorities must provide only a 48-hour notice to homeless people living on public land before they clear a site, and must store the belongings of the inhabitants for sixty days. Municipalities are not directly required to abide by Newsom’s anti-homeless executive order; however, the Newsom administration has threatened to withhold \$1 billion in state funds from cities that do not comply.

Newsom’s executive order was made possible by the US Supreme Court’s recent, reactionary decision in *City of Grants Pass, Oregon, v. Johnson*, which allows

municipalities to clear homeless encampments even when cities do not have an adequate number of beds in homeless shelters to provide to the displaced.

The high court’s ruling is crucial for Newsom, because a 2023 review by the Public Policy Institute of California showed that there were only 71,000 shelter beds in the state compared to 181,000 homeless. The decision becomes effective at the beginning of August, and many of California’s major cities have announced their plans to abide by Newsom’s draconian executive order.

Democratic Mayors across the state have announced their support of Newsom’s plan.

- San Francisco mayor London Breed announced that the city will begin “very aggressive” sweeps of homeless encampments.

- Oakland Mayor Sheng Thao released a statement praising Newsom’s executive order: “I do believe that what the governor has done today is a step forward in the right direction,” adding “We’ve been doing this work already. Since taking office, we cleared the largest encampment in Northern California, and that is Wood Street.”

- San Jose Mayor Matt Mahan jumped at the opportunity to clear homeless encampments. “We’re eager to work with the state to responsibly and quickly remove encampments from state property in San Jose, especially those adjacent to neighborhoods and in dangerous areas along our freeways and on- and off-ramps. we appreciate Governor Newsom’s order, signaling that the state is also ready to solve this crisis with both compassion and urgency.”

Newsom’s war on homelessness has received bipartisan support across the Golden State. Republican

Fresno Mayor Jerry Dyer has taken the hardest stance in the state, announcing, with the support of three city council members, local legislation that bans homelessness punishable by a misdemeanor offense that carries up to a \$1,000 fine or one-year imprisonment. If given final approval on August 15, the Fresno Police Department will be allowed to arrest any person who sits, lies, or sleeps on public property, regardless of bed space in local homeless shelters.

The effort to criminalize homelessness in California is even more barbaric when the unconstitutional overcrowding of the state's prisons is taken into consideration. Beginning with the "War on Drugs," California saw a rapid surge of its prison population, with Democrats using law-and-order demagoguery to enact right-wing legislation, including mandatory minimum sentences and three-strike laws. The Uniform Determinate Sentencing Act of 1976 was signed by Governor Jerry Brown, setting the stage for further mass incarceration of poor and working-class Californians.

In 1994, the Democratic majorities in both houses of the state legislature passed a "three-strikes" bill signed into law by Republican Governor Pete Wilson. Between 1980 and 2019 the state's prison population grew five-fold, from 25,000 to 125,000.

According to a 2019 report by the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, nearly three-fourths of all prisoners in the state had sentence lengths based on those two laws. The state's notoriously overcrowded prisons are currently under federal receivership due to the unconstitutionally "cruel and unusual" conditions caused by overcrowding.

In this historical context, Democrats and Republicans alike see homeless people as so much human debris to be swept out of sight. In September 2022, Newsom signed the CARE Act, opening new mental health civil courts dedicated to coercing people referred by police, first responders and family members into treatment.

The bill was widely denounced by human rights groups for failing to provide needed services and instead providing new mechanisms to institutionalize people for legal behavior. Human Rights Watch at the time wrote that the bill "aimed at facilitating removing unhoused people from public view without actually providing housing and services that will help to resolve homelessness."

By displacing and arresting people living on the streets, California Democrats hope to sweep the most visible symptom of the failure of the capitalist system under the rug. California has an estimated homeless population of 180,000. Meanwhile, in 2022, California had over 1.2 million vacant housing units.

Rather than addressing skyrocketing rents and a cost of living crisis which is driving thousands onto the streets, California Democrats have routinely joined their Republican colleagues in support of police repression.

During Vice President Harris' tenure as California Attorney General, her office adopted right-wing law-and-order policies restricting transgender inmates' right to medically necessary gender-affirming healthcare and forcing them to reside in prisons that did not match their gender identities, often landing them in the torturous conditions of solitary confinement for their "safety." A centerpiece for her tenure as San Francisco district attorney was campaigning for criminal penalties for the parents of truant school children.

Despite recent lip service claiming otherwise, Harris maintains a hard-line stance in support of Israel's genocidal campaign against Gaza, claiming that the genocidal state has a right to defend itself. The Democratic party is rallying behind Harris's law-and-order politics, as demonstrated by Newsom's executive order.

The criminalization of homelessness and poverty is a product of the capitalist system. There are more than enough vacant housing units in California to house every homeless person within the state. A socialist society would allow for the enormous number of unoccupied houses in the state to be put to social use instead of private profit, eliminating homelessness. Capitalist rule, however, will never support the state's most vulnerable populations. Only the political organization of the working class on an international socialist basis can fight the attack on democratic rights and eliminate poverty.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact