

Death of humanitarian aid worker on the streets of Ottawa highlights homelessness crisis in Canada

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As temperatures plummeted during one of the coldest winters in recent years, Marceline “Maman” Tawembi, a 69-year-old grandmother, tragically died on the streets of Ottawa, Ontario, on January 10. While the immediate cause of death was hypothermia, she was ultimately a victim of the growing homelessness crisis in Canada’s national capital.

For Tawembi’s family—who mourn the loss of a woman whose efforts as a humanitarian aid worker helped found schools for girls in her native Congo—and for the hundreds of thousands experiencing homelessness across Canada, her death is yet another reminder of the brutal reality workers and the most vulnerable face daily.

This tragedy underscores not only the human cost of homelessness, but also the systemic failure of the capitalist system to provide the most basic of social needs for workers. The Trudeau Liberals, hirelings of big business, the union-backed New Democratic Party (NDP) and the union bureaucracies bear chief responsibility for the devastating policies of public spending austerity, wage “restraint,” and massive tax cuts and subsidies for the corporate elite that have destroyed social programs over the past 40 years and created the conditions for the homelessness epidemic.

In Ontario alone, homelessness has increased exponentially over recent years, exacerbated by the ruling elite’s “profits before lives” response to the COVID-19 pandemic. A report by the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO) estimated that 81,000 people in the province are currently homeless—equivalent to the population of a mid-sized city like Peterborough or Sarnia. This marks a 51 percent increase since 2016 and a 25 percent increase since 2022.

There are an estimated 1,400 homeless encampments throughout Ontario, according to figures in an earlier AMO report. These encampments are built haphazardly by homeless people due to the absence of any social services to help them, and lack many of the most basic necessities for human life. To address the crisis, the AMO stated that the province would need to spend an estimated \$11 billion within the course of the next decade to build 75,000 affordable housing units, with an estimated \$2 billion in the same period allocated to housing encampment residents.

Far from being limited to Ontario, this is a national—and indeed international—crisis. This was underscored by the tragic death last month in Detroit of two children, aged two and nine, who were sleeping with their mother in their van parked in a casino parking lot when the gas ran out in sub-zero temperatures.

The number of homeless people in Canada is often cited in media reports as at least 235,000. This figure, however, is based on data published by the Homelessness Hub almost a decade ago in 2016. This was well before the COVID-19 pandemic, the US-NATO war on Russia and associated explosion of military spending at the expense of social

programs and the inflation crisis and decline in real wages produced by the government-backed interest rate increases imposed by the Bank of Canada.

The real number of homeless people is therefore certainly much higher. The Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness (CAEH) places the number closer to 300,000, with chronic homelessness surging by 40 percent in some regions since the start of the pandemic.

The homelessness crisis is an indictment of the capitalist profit system. Housing is treated not as a social right but as a commodity, with financial speculation and government-backed market policies ensuring that the working class bears the brunt of the affordability crisis. As rents soar, wages stagnate and inflation erodes living standards, more and more workers are being pushed into poverty and homelessness. This can be seen by the phenomenon of the “working poor,” a term used to describe workers who rely on food banks and other charitable services to make ends meet even though they have a job.

The root cause of homelessness is not a lack of housing but capitalism’s relentless prioritization of profit over human need. The financialization of housing—where homes are treated as investment assets rather than places to live—has resulted in skyrocketing rents, gentrification, and mass “renovictions.”

A considerable body of evidence notes the correlation between the increase in homelessness with the corresponding increase in rental costs. For instance, a report authored by the North American editors-in-chief of the *International Journal on Homelessness*, Nick Falvo and Ali Jadidzadeh, commissioned by Infrastructure Canada (now Housing, Infrastructure and Communities Canada since June 2024), states that a 1 percent increase in monthly real rent for affordable housing leads to a 1.36 percent increase in admissions to homeless shelters in Ontario and a 2.47 percent increase in total admissions to homeless shelters in Western provinces.

Rent inflation is systematically outpacing wage growth. The average rent in Canada reached \$2,100 in January 2025—a 16.4 percent increase over three years. The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA) reported that in major cities like Toronto and Vancouver, a full-time minimum-wage worker would need to work 138 to 141 hours per month just to afford a basic two-bedroom unit, leaving nothing for other necessities like food, utilities, and transportation.

A 2024 report by Food Banks Canada found that half of Canadians struggle to afford daily necessities, with those earning under \$50,000 per year disproportionately affected. Published at the end of August 2024, the Food Banks Canada report, in conjunction with Statistics Canada and the Canadian Social Survey, found that in the spring of 2024, half of all Canadians were finding it difficult to meet daily expenses.

A crisis decades in the making

All of the established parties bear responsibility for the current disastrous situation and have no intention of doing anything to change it.

The response of the federal Liberal government to the homelessness crisis has been to throw money at private developers and issue platitudes about its commitment to housing as a “human right.”

The passing of the National Housing Strategy Act (NHS) in 2019 enshrined into law what was touted as a “human rights based approach” to housing. It was claimed that housing would become a human right, as is (theoretically) guaranteed under international law, particularly article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), adopted by the United Nations in 1966. Canada ratified ICESCR in 1976, but it has always remained a “policy goal” for a distant future that never arrives.

The Reaching Home program, which ostensibly targets homelessness under the umbrella of the NHS, has issued many press releases in recent months. Accompanied by laudatory press coverage in the Liberal-aligned media and their satellites, it is widely celebrated that the “whole of government approach” is working.

Under the aegis of the program, the federal government is allocating \$4 billion to reduce chronic homelessness by 50 percent by 2026-27. Lost in the flurry of spending announcements in press releases, however, is the fact that these are market-based measures that will primarily boost the bottom lines of housing developers and property companies.

The federal budget for 2024 emphasizes market-based solutions, exemplified in schemes such as the Apartment Construction Loan Programme, which provides private developers capital to build rental homes. Often only a tiny proportion of those homes that are built need to be “affordable,” a designation that is in any case relatively meaningless for large numbers of people because “affordable housing” in bureaucratic government speak is determined by exorbitant average local rents.

The government also boasts of its \$1.5 billion Canada Rental Protection Fund and a Co-operative Housing Development Program, but these initiatives ultimately rely on market mechanisms, providing subsidies and loans to private developers rather than addressing the systemic failure of the housing market. Equally geared towards the market as a solution, the reforms to the Canadian Land Corporation (CLC) will enable the government to sell public land for \$1 to developers.

During the 1990s, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney’s Conservative government and the Liberal government led by Jean Chretien, which enforced the largest social spending cuts in Canadian history, abolished federal support for affordable housing construction. By this point, Premier Bob Rae’s NDP government in Ontario had already halted provincial funding for public housing projects, handing all responsibility to the private sector. Other provinces followed suit. The emphasis shifted towards leaving housing to the private sector, with policies specifically designed to cater to market-based solutions.

Every government since has continued similar housing policies. The public housing stock has thus declined dramatically, in tandem with an explosion of social inequality and an increase in poverty among workers. Over the past decade, social spending has been sacrificed to fund a massive expansion of Canadian defence spending and huge bailouts for the corporate elite during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The trade war unleashed by US President Donald Trump, which has prompted Canada to adopt retaliatory tariffs that are backed by the entire political establishment, will further impoverish workers on both sides of the border through price hikes.

As the global capitalist crisis deepens, the Canadian government will inevitably cut “discretionary” funding, such as funding to address the homeless and housing crisis, as it arms in preparation for a third world

war chiefly with its rivals Russia in the Arctic and China in the Pacific, to assert itself in the struggle for markets and resources.

The Trudeau government has been adamant about reaching the 2 percent target for military spending agreed to by NATO members. A recent PBO report notes that to reach this target, it would have to double defence spending from \$41 billion in 2024-2025 to \$81.9 billion in 2032-2033. These costs will fall on the backs of the working class.

The criminalization of poverty and homelessness

Rather than addressing the root causes of homelessness, capitalist governments have turned to repression. Across Canada, police are violently dismantling encampments, arresting those who have nowhere else to go. In Ontario, Bill 242 grants police the power to arrest homeless individuals in public spaces without a warrant. Ontario mayors have proposed invoking the “notwithstanding clause” of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms to strip the homeless of their democratic rights and facilitate a crackdown on encampments without a court challenge.

In British Columbia, the NDP’s so-called “public health” approach mirrors the draconian measures of right-wing governments, using involuntary hospitalization as a means to remove the homeless from view.

The criminalization of poverty is not an accident—it is a class policy. The same ruling class that refuses to build affordable housing has no hesitation in expanding police budgets and deploying state violence to suppress the symptoms of their own economic system. This is part of a broader trend of authoritarianism, as governments break strikes and repress any form of working class resistance.

These untenable conditions are already engendering protest. Advocacy organizations such as ACORN and tenant unions have organized local demonstrations drawing attention to Canada’s housing crisis. In cities like Toronto, Vancouver, Ottawa, Hamilton and Montreal, workers—who are directly impacted by skyrocketing rents, renovictions, and inadequate public housing—have mobilized through protests. These demonstrations, often organized by people facing eviction or forced displacement, underscore growing frustration with the current social and political setup.

However, the solutions put forward by the myriad advocacy groups, many of whom have close ties to the union bureaucracy or the NDP, focus on rent controls, an end to renovictions or legislation that restricts the amount of affordable housing stock that can be purchased privately.

What is needed are not palliative reforms for a social system that is careening towards the abyss, but a fighting perspective for the working class. Homelessness cannot be solved within the framework of capitalism. The only real solution is a socialist transformation of society, in which housing is treated as a fundamental social right rather than a commodity.



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