Interview with Brian Goldstone, author of *There Is No Place for Us: Working and Homeless in America*: “In America right now, a low-wage job … is homelessness waiting to happen”

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We are pleased to post an interview with Brian Goldstone, the author of There Is No Place for Us: Working and Homeless in America *(2025). The WSWS reviewed the book earlier this year and noted that it reveals*

> *the countless trap doors leading to homelessness or the virtually inescapable webs that hold millions of Americans in that condition once they are caught. … The very fabric of Goldstone’s narratives is the thousand and one injustices suffered by the working poor from employers, landlords, and state agencies and their representatives. … Goldstone constructs a damning brief.*

Homelessness is an affliction for millions, and a complex social problem. Inevitably, a serious discussion of such a question must raise questions and differences in perspective. For socialists, the right to decent housing is connected to other basic rights, the right to education, the right to healthcare, the right to a job and decent wages and working conditions—and the unified fight for such rights poses the need for an alternative to capitalism. None of these rights, in our view, can be won without ending the profit system as a whole and replacing it with socialism.

The homelessness of hundreds of thousands in the US, with millions more at risk, is one feature of a bankrupt global social order. Whatever advances were made in the postwar period through the European welfare state are also now at risk as Germany and the other powers pour billions into rearmament and devastate social programs. More than one million people are homeless in Europe, with numbers growing due to employment, poverty, rising housing costs and migration.

The disproportionate percentage of African Americans “pushed” into homelessness in cities like Atlanta is the product of the brutal history of US capitalism, rooted in inequality of every kind. It has never been able to resolve this elemental democratic problem, and makes use of racism and other poisons to divide and weaken the working class.

But homelessness is not a “racial” question. Hundreds of thousands of white, Latino and Native Americans are also living on the streets or in shelters. What would the researcher discover if he or she examined conditions in the more spread out and less visible crisis in the suburbs and smaller towns, where more people live in their vehicles, “double up” or are able to rely on relatives?

These are questions that need further investigation. Goldstone’s book, “a powerful and valuable document,” will help generate that process.

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WSWS: A strength of *There Is No Place for Us* is that it tells compelling stories. The reader learns how homelessness really operates in the US by becoming closely concerned with Michelle, Kala, Celeste and the others. Taken together, their stories cover a great deal of ground. How did you choose your subjects for the book?

BG: When I began this project, my ambition was to represent the full range of people affected by homelessness—to include not just families but individuals, and to capture a diversity of backgrounds and circumstances. But once I started reporting in Atlanta, it became clear that this kind of demographic balancing act would have been artificial.

Although Atlanta is no longer a majority-Black city—it’s now about 47 percent Black—a staggering 93 percent of families experiencing homelessness are Black. That number isn’t incidental; it’s the product of a long history of displacement, exclusion and dispossession. If you visit a food pantry or eviction court in Atlanta, you see immediately how deeply racialized this crisis is there. What appears to be a contemporary housing emergency is, in fact, the cumulative result of an entire history of predatory capitalism. The five families I follow in the book reflect that historical reality.

At the same time, this was a multi-year project that demanded extraordinary trust and intimacy. I spent months at places like Efficiency Lodge, an extended-stay hotel where many working families languish once their credit scores lock them out of the formal housing market. I met dozens of people there, and over time certain relationships deepened. Some families invited me into their lives in a sustained way—to an extent that, in retrospect, feels truly miraculous given the pressures they were under. Ultimately, the people in the book are those who allowed me to witness their daily struggle with enough depth that their experiences wouldn’t just be understood, but felt.

WSWS: In Atlanta, as your book shows, as in most large cities perhaps, gentrification is a process that devastates sections of the working class. Could you briefly describe what you saw of that process?

BG: I think the most accurate definition of gentrification comes from the LA Tenants Union, which calls it “the displacement and replacement of the poor for profit.” That’s exactly what I witnessed in Atlanta. Gentrification isn’t simply about changing tastes, new coffee shops or shifting demographics—it’s about how land and housing are transformed

into vehicles of wealth extraction. Before an area gentrifies, it first has to become gentrifiable, and that happens at the level of city planning—or more precisely, through the collusion of urban planning and real estate capital.

Projects like the BeltLine [in Atlanta, begun in 2005], billed as public works to connect communities, became enormous generators of profit and speculation. Entire stretches of the city were remade almost overnight, rents skyrocketed and the visual fabric of Atlanta was erased and replaced.

One of the more perverse dynamics I try to illuminate in the book is that this is a homelessness crisis born less of poverty than of prosperity. It's wrong to say that people are "falling" into homelessness. They're being pushed. They're casualties of their city's "success"—victims not of a failing economy but of one that, by most conventional measures, is thriving, just not for them. And when people are pushed out of gentrifying neighborhoods, they often end up in areas that have been hollowed out by what geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore calls "organized abandonment." These places—where housing is substandard, services are stripped away, and the infrastructure has collapsed—don't just coexist alongside newly redeveloped neighborhoods. They're produced by them. They're two sides of the same process, like a balloon squeezed at one end. That's the geography of inequality that defines so many American cities today.

WSWS: The book points out that the federal minimum wage has stagnated at $7.25 since 2016. Retail, low-wage production workers and service industry workers generally do not earn a living wage with one job. Meanwhile, so-called low-cost housing—apartments, extended-stay hotels, rental houses—eats the majority of a worker's monthly wages. It seems there is actually a kind of gravitational force pulling low-wage workers towards the kinds of homelessness the book describes.

BG: One of the central arguments of the book is that in America today, having a job—even two or three jobs—is no guarantee that you'll be able to afford a home. The phrase "working homeless" sounds contradictory, indeed scandalous, because it upends everything we've been taught to believe about the relationship between work and stability.

Yet for millions of people, wages have become so divorced from the cost of living that employment and housing precarity go together. Today there isn't a single state, city, or county in this country where a full-time worker earning the local minimum wage (which is often higher than the federal minimum wage) can afford a modest two-bedroom apartment. Since 1985, rent prices have outpaced income gains by 325 percent. Twelve million renter households now spend more than half their income on rent and utilities. For them, the slightest setback—a car repair, a medical bill, a missed paycheck—can be catastrophic.

This is the gravitational force you describe: an economy that pulls working people toward the edge of homelessness. The danger for most Americans isn't that they'll lose their jobs, but that their jobs will never pay enough, never provide enough hours, never offer enough stability to keep them housed. We see a similar pattern in some of the richest, most rapidly developing cities: unemployment is low, corporate profits are soaring, and yet the people who make those economies run—teachers, grocery clerks, home health aides, warehouse workers—are being priced not only out of their communities, but out of housing altogether. That's why I argue that in America right now, a low-wage job—increasingly gigified or contracted out and stripped of basic benefits—is homelessness waiting to happen.

WSWS: Have you maintained contact with any of the subjects of the book? If so, have any of them been able to escape homelessness in a permanent way?

BG: Yes, I've remained very close with several of the families. We still talk frequently, celebrate birthdays, talk through whatever's happening in their lives. These relationships didn't end when the reporting did; they've continued, and I'm deeply grateful for that. But I can't say that there's been a happy ending. Long-term stability has proven elusive. Even for those who have managed to get into an apartment, there's a constant fear that the smallest setback could push them back into homelessness.

That kind of precarity is exhausting; it shapes every decision, every hope. There were times I wished I were writing a novel, because then I could have given these stories a different conclusion. But this is reality.

WSWS: One of the most chilling aspects of *There Is No Place for Us* is the gradual revelation that homelessness and poverty are themselves an industry. From grocery stores that buy food stamps for 50 cents on the dollar to extended-stay hotels that are owned by Wall Street investment firms like Blackstone, low-wage workers appear to be caught in an extortion racket. Can you recount your discovery of how the profit motive plays a role in perpetuating homelessness?

BG: One of the most astonishing discoveries for me in reporting this book was realizing that, at every turn in these families' journeys, there were entire business models designed to profit from their hardship. We talk a lot about the "housing crisis," but what we're really living through is the financialization of housing: the transformation of homes into financial instruments and people's instability into a source of profit.

One family in the book, Maurice and Natalia and their children, rented an apartment in a complex owned by a Nashville-based private-equity firm. When they fell a few days behind on rent, an eviction notice was filed automatically by software; there was no one to call, no one to explain their situation to. The company didn't care if they stayed or left; demand was so high that another tenant would replace them immediately, and the court costs would simply be added to their bill.

What I found even more revealing was what happened after they lost their apartment. The family moved into a cramped room at Extended Stay America and paid more than twice what they'd paid for their old two-bedroom. And yet during the pandemic, when most hotel chains sat empty, Extended Stay remained 80 to 90 percent full, generating hundreds of millions in revenue.

Blackstone and Starwood Capital took notice and bought the chain for $6 billion. So yes, as James Baldwin wrote, it is "expensive to be poor" in America. But what these families' experiences lay bare is the flipside: how extraordinarily lucrative this precarity has become. The scarcity that defines so many people's lives isn't an accident; it's been turned into an asset class.

WSWS: In the book, you advocate for a reform policy called social housing. What is social housing, and what changes to the current system would its implementation require?

BG: Social housing is essentially a public option for housing. It's a model that takes homes permanently off the speculative market and treats housing as an essential public good. The private market, left to its own devices, will never be incentivized to build or maintain housing that's affordable to those who need it most. Simply loosening regulations or subsidizing developers won't change that. Under a social housing system, homes can be owned and operated by municipal governments, nonprofits or limited-equity cooperatives, but rents are tied to income, not to market demand. The idea is to guarantee stability rather than higher and higher profits.

We know this works. Finland has virtually ended homelessness by building tens of thousands of social housing units on publicly owned land. In Vienna, two-thirds of residents live in high-quality public housing and spend about a fifth of their income on rent and utilities. Implementing something similar here would require a massive recommitment of public investment at every level—federal, state, and local—as well as legal mechanisms to remove land and housing from the cycles of speculation that have defined U.S. housing policy for decades. It would also mean reimagining public housing itself. Imagine if America's public housing hadn't been starved of funding and stigmatized for decades? If it hadn't been set up to fail? Combined with higher wages and stronger tenant protections, this is the clearest path, I think, to making the human right to

housing a reality.

WSWS: Do you have a new project in the works?

BG: Right now, my focus is still on getting the message of *There Is No Place for Us* out into the world. The crisis it examines hasn't abated; in fact, it's only deepening. The Trump administration seems intent on pouring gasoline on the fire. And of course I realize how hopelessly out of touch, even utopian, it can sound to be talking about a "right to housing" at this moment—when an already threadbare safety net is being shredded, and when criminalization, banishment, and the disappearance of homeless people has become official government policy. But that's precisely why it feels so important to insist on it.

At some point, I'll turn to the next project. I've been thinking a lot about America's mental health system, and about how many of the same dynamics—privatization, austerity, abandonment—run through that system as well. But for now, I'm still inside this book.