

Thousands rally in defense of the homeless in New York

By Alan Whyte
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Thousands of people rallied Sunday in lower Manhattan against Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's attack on the homeless in New York City. The Union Square protest focused on the mayor's twin policies of demanding that the homeless work or be excluded from public shelters and his recent crackdown against homeless people sleeping on the streets.

Organizers estimated that 5,000 people from all over the city, including large numbers of homeless people, attended the rally. Protesters carried signs including, "Housing Is A Human Right" and "Rudy: Help The Homeless," and chanted denunciations of the Republican mayor and his policies.

The demonstration was organized by the Coalition for the Homeless, and was held to coincide with the twentieth anniversary of a State Supreme Court decision that established the legal right to shelter. The executive director of the coalition, Mary Brosnahan, said, "On any given night, there are 23,000 people in the municipal shelter system. We want Giuliani to turn away from this misguided assault on the right to shelter and his dragnet on the street."

Other speakers included homeless advocates, religious leaders and Democratic politicians. The Rev. Bob Cassels condemned the mayor's work-for-shelter ultimatum and the use of welfare recipients in low-paid workfare jobs. He said, "It is evil to cast the homeless into jails. It is evil to take children from mothers' breasts. It is evil to enslave workers with slave wages and conditions with no hope of a good job with a living wage, condemning the poor to homelessness."

Protesters had planned to spend the night in Union Square park, camping out in cardboard boxes and makeshift tents, but city authorities warned organizers that anyone who tried to sleep in the park or put up tents or boxes would be arrested.

Before the rally Mayor Giuliani held a press conference outside the upscale FAO Schwarz toy store to defend his policies. He condemned the protesters for seeking "a special immunity for the homeless people" from criminal arrests. He denied that a police sweep of the homeless was taking place, and said that only homeless people who had committed crimes were being arrested. In reality, the police have accosted 1,674 homeless people because they appear to be vagabonds, sleeping or loitering on the streets. Since November 22, 160 homeless people have been arrested, compared to 100 since the beginning of the year.

The police action followed an attack on a woman office worker by a man presumed to be homeless. The mayor and the news media, led by the *New York Daily News*, then sought to whip up a witch-hunt atmosphere against the homeless to justify the crackdown.

The protesters also expressed their opposition to the mayor's work-for-shelter program, now scheduled to begin December 13. A number of speakers said this policy would lead to the further break-up of families, citing the Giuliani administration's threat that if parents in a shelter refuse to work, the city may seek to remove their children and place them in foster care.

Advocates for the poor are also deeply concerned that this new procedure will create the conditions for women to be subjected to sexual harassment at the shelters. If a female homeless person refused to submit she could find herself written up for refusing to work or not doing satisfactory work, and then be forced to leave the shelter. These kinds of abuses have affected women in the Work Experience Program, which compels welfare recipients to work for their benefits.

There were two more demonstrations against the Giuliani administration following Sunday's protest. About 50 people rallied in City Hall park on Monday

night against the mayor's policy of jailing the homeless, and 10 demonstrators were arrested when they set up tents to spend the night as homeless people are forced to do. They were charged with "unlawful camping" and holding a demonstration of more than 20 people without a permit.

On Tuesday morning another demonstration, organized by Housing Works and other groups, was held to protest the city's policy of cutting off welfare benefits to recipients who fail drug tests. About 20 protesters were arrested when they chained themselves in the office of the Human Resource commissioner. About 25 more protested on the street outside the office.

There is a growing revulsion towards the glaring inequalities in New York City and the reactionary social policies pursued by both political parties. It is estimated that 330,000 homeless people have been in the city's shelters at one point or another over the last 10 years, as skyrocketing rents have made apartments unaffordable and budget cuts have gutted funding for public housing. During this same decade the New York Stock Exchange has reached record levels and the city's financial elite have found new and exotic ways of spending their incredible wealth, including on multimillion-dollar dwellings in Manhattan.

The city's political and business establishment are well aware that these conditions are producing widespread anger and opposition, but they are incapable of providing any progressive solution to the social crisis. In Giuliani they have found one of the crudest defenders of big business, a politician who criminalizes the poor and seeks to stamp out all forms of social protest.

On Tuesday the mayor singled out the protesters at the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle for denunciation. In a speech before business leaders at the exclusive 21 Club, the mayor said the protest "indicates the remaining damage that Marxism has done to the thinking of people. You know, we have it in the city, and the influence that it's had on universities and thinking and the idea of class warfare." Asked later to explain his remarks, the mayor told reporters that he was analyzing "the whole notion of class warfare, which really comes out of the teaching of Karl Marx, trying to divide people into different classes."

No city more clearly demonstrates the class divide in

America as does New York. While the mayor may hope to intimidate his critics with red-baiting, he is really giving expression to the fear, shared by his Democratic counterparts, that social opposition in the future will coalesce into a challenge to the political and economic monopoly of the rich.

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