

Los Angeles businesses press for expulsion of downtown homeless

By Nick Davis and Rafael Azul
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The Central City Association, an organization representing 300 downtown Los Angeles businesses and wealthy investors, is pushing for legislation to banish the homeless from skid row. The legislation would establish, among other things, an anti-encampment ordinance, a permanent LAPD (Los Angeles Police Department) outpost in the area with a fast-track downtown police court and a police street-crime patrol to catch drug dealers and other criminal suspects. Included is proposed legislation to enforce existing laws against public urination and audits of the Los Angeles Homeless Agency and individual service providers.

If enacted, thousands of skid row residents would in essence become criminal offenders. Several City Council members promise to begin arresting the homeless and stop church groups from providing them with food.

Earlier in the month, newly appointed Police Chief William J. Bratton, former New York commissioner of police, met with City Council members Jan Perry and Tom LaBorge and members of the Central City Association (CCA). After the meeting, Bratton deplored the number of homeless living in conditions of squalor, saying it threatens revitalization plans for the area.

Bratton was selected by Los Angeles Mayor Kenneth Hahn, who cited Bratton's experience in New York where he was notorious for criminalizing the poor, panhandlers and those sleeping in the streets. CCA President Carol Schatz is quoted as saying, "We need to address that kind of behavior because it takes the streets away from all of us."

Soon after that meeting, on November 20, the skid row section of Los Angeles was the scene of a massive pre-dawn police operation involving over 200 Highway Patrol, federal, Los Angeles Police Department and parole officers.

Homeless residents of the downtown area were ordered from their tents and lined up against the wall along with

those in the street. Frightened, crying children were shoved aside while many of their parents were subjected to harassment and abuse by the police.

Officers then hammered on the doors of low-cost hotel rooms, dragging out their occupants to be lined up outside. A hotel home for senior men was attacked in the same way. One hundred thirty arrests were made, with about 60 percent arrested on suspicion of parole violation, and 40 percent for alleged possession of narcotics or weapons.

As darkness fell the following night, the same operation was repeated, netting an additional 84 arrests. About 65 percent of those were booked for parole violations for allegedly associating with felons. Police repeatedly refused to identify those arrested, waiting 24 hours before releasing the list.

The scene was described by one resident: "There were cruisers everywhere. They jumped from cars before the car had stopped rolling, they were coming down here in packs. They lined up the men and the women too. The cops kicked their legs apart and body-searched them. They were doing it right in front of their children. All you could hear is the little kids crying, 'Are you taking my mommy and daddy to jail?'"

Dubbed "Operation Enough," police officials said they were addressing a growing problem of parole and probation violators who live among the crowds that inhabit skid row. This rationale was contradicted by virtually all of those who were subjected to it, as well as leaders of service organizations which assist the homeless.

"They went after everybody," Alice Callaghan, director of Las Familias del Pueblo, told the *Los Angeles Times*. "They stood whole lines of people against the walls. This was not a carefully targeted assault against criminals ... and if they knew about all these criminals before, why did they wait for one day to grandstand? What was the

purpose?”

According to the 2000 Census, 9,000 to 15,000 individuals live in the streets of the city of Los Angeles, with as many as 3-5,000 in a 50-square-block area called the “nickel.” For shelter, many have pitched tents on the sidewalks. The streets are lined with small cut-rate garment shops, abandoned industrial buildings and warehouses. Many of the large industrial multi-purpose buildings are the target of renovation projects to convert the space into luxury flats and lofts.

Los Angeles skid row is known to police departments nationwide as a resource for dumping unwanted people. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that police cars from outside counties and at times out of state have been seen by residents releasing passengers in the area. In one infamous case in 1996, police in Jacksonville, Florida put a former prisoner on a bus bound for Los Angeles.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to homeless people in downtown Los Angeles. Renee Zavala, 38, has lived in a tent on the sidewalk for two years. Her husband passed away, leaving her with five children and no source of support. Unable to support the children, she lost custody to her mother-in-law and lapsed into drug use.

“I have never worked, I was a housewife. My life was good, not middle class—I was still poor. But I had a roof over my head and my kids. I had food in the refrigerator—not rich, nor poor.

“When my husband died, I went down. I was left without anything, so I had to come down here. A single room apartment is \$750, a two-bedroom is \$850. That’s too much for me. That’s why so many are homeless. You have to have at least two or three families living in a two-bedroom apartment just to survive with their income. You’re talking about rent, lights, gas and food. You can’t live like that with only one person. You need more housing for the poor.”

Joe is a 52-year-old truck driver and former employee of Consolidated Freightways and Yellow Freight. He said, “They [the police] put me up against the wall, but I am not a wanted man so they let me go. If you didn’t have an ID, you were arrested. I was a truck driver but now I am disabled. They give you general relief that is \$219 plus \$139 food stamps; that’s it for the month. So how are you going to live? That’s why you have these people in these hotels and [the owners] make big money. It’s hard to make ends meet. That’s why there is crime.”

The population of the skid row area has exploded over the last two decades. Some who arrived as children have grown into adulthood with no other experience. The

litter-strewn streets are filled with people at all times of the day and night eking out an existence selling cigarettes and candy. The *New York Times* recently estimated that there are one million homeless in Los Angeles County. Thousands of others have doubled up with friends or relatives and are not counted as homeless.

Delbert Moore, 45, from Detroit, said, “It can happen to anybody, especially if you take things for granted. When I was working I never thought that I would end up down here. I never thought money would run out. I have been working all my life.”

In a December 3 report, the National Low Income Housing Coalition warned that a bill recently approved by the US House Appropriations Committee would “seriously damage the main federal program that helps low-income families rent housing.” According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, millions of families are living in substandard accommodations or paying too much of their incomes on housing. With tens of thousands of families on the waiting for housing vouchers, the legislation will cut \$938 million from the housing voucher program commonly called Section 8, resulting in an estimated 125,000 families nationwide losing their subsidies and facing homelessness. Los Angeles is slated to lose about 2,850 vouchers.

The Employment Development Department of California reported a net loss of 10,500 jobs for the month of November, most of these in the manufacturing sector. This contracting job market, combined with skyrocketing homelessness, is creating an explosive combination. The escalating police intimidation of the homeless in downtown Los Angeles, at the bidding of wealthy business owners and the city council members, is aimed at criminalizing the area’s poor residents—whether or not they have any place to go.

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