

Luxury apartment complex in London uses spikes to deter homeless

By Paul Stuart
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Owners of a luxury apartment complex in the south London borough of Southwark provoked a public outcry after they installed a medieval-looking bed of metal spikes 1.5 inches high near its entrance. Its purpose was to block homeless people, including a mother and child, from seeking shelter there.

This was only one callous expression of a systematic effort to remove from the sight of the financial aristocracy the social consequences of their vast accumulation of wealth. In the last three years homelessness has increased by 75 percent in London. Each night nearly 6,500 thousand people sleep rough in the capital and this is only an estimation made by overstretched housing charities.

The brutal measure was exposed by a member of the public who passed the entrance each day on his way to work. Noticing the rows of spikes, he photographed them and posted them online. An online petition demanding their removal was signed by more than 120,000 people in just a few days. As a result the spikes were eventually removed on Friday.

One resident of the flats said the spikes appeared overnight, recalling, “I didn’t know what they were at first. I thought they were a design feature. When I realised I thought it was a strange and brutal idea. It’s like they are treating people like animals by putting down the spikes, similar to the ones used to deter pigeons. I’ve lived in this area for some time and there is a lot of homelessness and other problems—these spikes are a form of persecution.”

According to one former homeless man writing in the *Guardian*, the emergence of homelessness in this part of London was the outcome of measures taken to shift the homeless from around Waterloo, a central district of the capital.

The protest against the spikes helped reveal that

similar measures are a common practice across Britain and internationally. The supermarket chain Tesco has promised to remove a similar bed of studs at its Regent Street store in central London. The manager admitted that public hostility had been growing for some time.

Dan Lockton of the Helen Hamlyn Centre for Design described the shift in demand for architectural design by the elite. “The original goal was a lot more pro-public,” he said, “but these new features are part of a range of strategies that perceive the public as a threat and treat everyone as a criminal.”

After reporters descended on the luxury flats in Southwark, the most reactionary sections of the media, who demand such a brutal response to social misery, came to the fore. The *Daily Mail* reported that a Mark Hicks, who has lived in the building for a year, said, “I think they’re a very good idea. We used to come back and find drunk homeless people in the doorway, which is not very nice at all. If it stops that, it’s great.”

Another resident declared, “There is a huge problem with rough sleepers here... It’s about time something has been done about this... In any case, they aren’t really spikes—they’re not sharp. I’m sure someone could put a blanket over them and sleep here if they wanted to.”

The cynical effort of London Conservative Mayor Boris Johnson to distance himself from this specific measure should be treated with contempt. He described the measure as “self-defeating.” While the bed of spikes has been removed, Johnson’s administration, in alliance with Conservative and Labour Party controlled London borough councils, will ruthlessly press ahead with socially cleansing the working class from central London.

Katharine Sacks-Jones, head of policy and campaigns at homelessness charity Crisis, said behind the vast

increase in homelessness “are real people struggling with a lack of housing, cuts to benefits and cuts to homelessness services to help them rebuild their lives.”

The staggering increase in homelessness is the direct outcome of the deepening impact of the global economic crisis, the extortionate rise in house prices, the attack on welfare provision and housing benefit, and the sustained assault on wages.

The brutal treatment of the homeless has highlighted the savage levels of inequality that are a direct outcome of Johnson’s and the previous Labour Party London Assembly administration of Ken Livingstone’s courting of the financial aristocracy. While the homeless are treated as pariahs, the *London Evening Standard* recently reported that London’s elite are throwing lavish parties on a scale that would make F. Scott Fitzgerald’s fictional character *The Great Gatsby* blush.

On top of this the super-rich and wealthy property tycoons have bought up huge areas of London that are allowed to lay empty. The Standard described parts of the wealthy borough of Kensington and Chelsea as a “Ghost town” where 1-in-50 properties are long-term empty. It is called “buy to leave.” The chairman of the national estate agents association said, “You walk down any street in Chelsea and there are very often very few lights on.”

Southwark is a Labour Party-led council. They refused to take any action against the property owner, hiding behind a statement that it is a private dwelling and out of their jurisdiction. Peter John, a Labour Party councillor and leader of Southwark Council, cynically feigned concern about the presence of the spikes at a protest at the block. “There are no powers I can exercise in order to get rid of the spikes, it’s on private land,” he said. Shrugging his shoulders he added, “But there are a million and one solutions to stop rough sleeping. It’s the aggression of these spikes sticking out of the ground—I mean, just put some plants there.”

John’s council has implemented every austerity measure required of them by the government, exacerbating the social crisis. Last year, Southwark was the scene of huge queues outside magistrates courts, as the council sent out summonses to the poorest residents over council tax arrears.

The *Independent* reported that Labour Party headquarters at Millbank in London has a “row of

uncomfortable, bumpy stones” at the front, designed to prevent the homeless sleeping there. The Labour Party used the same argument of Southwark council that Millbank is not their building and they have no control over what the owners decide to do with it. However, they cite no record of even discussing the issue with the owners.

The main function of the London Assembly is to transfer wealth from the working class to the upper-middle class and financial elite and to forcibly suppress any opposition. To this end, Johnson authorised the London Metropolitan Police this week to purchase three water cannon for the first time on British mainland. The cannons, once signed off on by Home Secretary Teresa May, will be added to a growing array of weaponry directed against popular protests.

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