

British Home Secretary Proposes to Criminalise Homelessness

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Suella Braverman, the United Kingdom's (now former) Home Secretary, had introduced a series of proposals aimed at restricting the use of tents by homeless people in urban areas. These proposals, which had been disclosed by insiders within Whitehall, were purportedly in response to the growing numbers of rough sleepers on the streets of the UK.

However, the scope of Braverman's recommendations extended even further, encompassing the establishment of a new civil offence intended to deter charities from distributing tents for free to those who are sleeping rough. Charitable organisations would incur fines under these plans if the tents they provide are found to cause any manner of nuisance. These proposals were pitched as potential additions to a criminal justice bill that applies to England and Wales, forming part of the government's legislative agenda that was unveiled in the King's speech on November 7th, however, they had been removed before the speech and Suella Braverman has since been dismissed as home secretary.

The justifications for such measures were given by Suella Braverman herself:

"We cannot allow our streets to be taken over by rows of tents occupied by people, many of them from abroad, living on the streets as a lifestyle choice"... "Nobody in Britain should be living in a tent on our streets. There are options for people who don't want to be sleeping rough" ... "What I want to stop, and what the law-abiding majority wants us to stop, is those who cause nuisance and distress to other people by pitching tents in public spaces, aggressively begging, stealing, taking drugs, littering and blighting our communities" ... "British cities will go the way of places in the US like San Francisco and Los Angeles, where weak policies have led to an explosion of crime, drug taking and squalor".

As we can see, she regards homelessness as a "lifestyle choice" and a result of "weak policies". This is "common sense" to capitalist politicians divorced from the reality of the countries they govern. In fact, it is the result of a system that separates the ownership of means of production from those who work on them, who otherwise own nothing but their own bodies that can be used to make a living.

A system that thereby makes human labour power a commodity to be bought and sold on a market. And just like all commodities, the laws of supply and demand apply to it. So, the ruling class can cheapen the price of labour by having a reserve army of the unemployed. And because the workers have no other means of paying rent or putting food on the table, unemployed workers (as well as workers whose wage has been driven down below a liveable level), or those otherwise unable to work due to disability are often consigned to a fate of homelessness.

Previously Great Britain had a fairly robust social security system where it was possible to live on unemployment benefits. In contrast, now that Britain's position in the world imperialist system has slipped and continues to slip, and the militant labour movement that fought for these benefits has been reduced to a fraction of its former strength, these benefits have slowly shrunk to the point where its no longer possible to secure the basic necessities for life with them. In fact, we have outlined in detail the effects of this and the increasing destitution in the UK. That is why in the UK, where there is no shortage of work to be done, we still have millions of unemployed.

The primary stated focus of these proposed legislative measures was targeting tents that generate disturbances or issues, such as blocking shop doorways. While Braverman's proposals aimed to solve the issues of rough sleeping and its associated challenges which are certainly social ills that need to be addressed, they would obviously not do so and instead tread on a path similar to the antiquated 1824 Vagrancy Act, which historically punished rough sleeping and begging and is still mostly in effect today. It is worth noting that the current conservative government had, last year, previously committed to repealing what remains of the 1824 Vagrancy Act according to "humanitarian interests".

However, as we can see, not only do they seek to repeat it, but the decline of capitalism will inevitably cause them to follow more and more in the barbaric spirit of the Vagabonds Acts of the 1500s and Elizabethan "Poor Laws". For reference, these laws subjected the homeless to the punishment of public whipping, enslavement and led to the execution of 72,000 destitute people. The nascent bourgeoisie and feudal aristocracy of the UK did not know what to do with the rapidly increasing dispossessed peasantry for whom there was not enough waged labour or accommodation in the cities.

Unable or unwilling to see the social cause of vagabondage in their own actions as a class, and in line with the principles of their liberal ideology, they saw the "crime" of homelessness as the fault of the individual homeless. Now, the imperialist bourgeoisie places blame for the rapidly increasing social ills caused by their decaying socio-economic system on the individuals suffering from these ills.

Suella Braverman is now no longer the home secretary, however, the factors that led to her making these proposals remain; namely that she is merely an instrument for the class rule of the capitalists. Her comments were too openly hostile towards the poor, too blunt and on the nose, and against the bourgeois "respectability" of British society. However, the fact that she was fired only means that it is still too early for the capitalists of Britain to shed their "democratic" and "respectable" facade in their slow march towards fascisation; the open terrorist dictatorship of finance capital.

As demonstrated, homelessness and begging are phenomena perpetuated by the capitalist system. Punishing the victims of this system and the charities trying to help them, forced into this undignified mode of existence is not only futile but abhorrent and misanthropic. As proven by history, the execution of 72,000 of them did not either temporarily or permanently eradicate homelessness and vagrancy in the UK. However, in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the transition to a more historically progressive socio-economic formation where the means of production are owned by society as a whole - socialism - did eradicate these phenomena by supplanting its material basis - capitalism.

By viewing housing as a right and not a commodity to be bought and sold and profited upon, the USSR was able to provide shelter for all its citizens. Even after the devastating Second World War, where the Soviet Union suffered unprecedented destruction, it was able to quickly construct mass housing projects during the 1950s-70s.

Source:

<https://www.ft.com/content/ccf9c260-a98a-4b89-b604-4fa19a9f6a7c>

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