

Demonstrators protest brutal removal of Los Angeles homeless encampment

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Since Wednesday, Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) officers and Los Angeles Park Rangers have faced off with demonstrators protesting the forced eviction of several hundred homeless people living around Echo Park Lake, the centerpiece of one of the city's oldest neighborhoods, located just west of downtown.

City officials claim that the encampments must be torn down so that the park can be closed for repairs.

Demonstrations against the park closure began early Wednesday morning. Protesters marched to a field office of Democratic City Councilman Mitch O'Farrell, who represents the Echo Park neighborhood, and remained in the area for the rest of the day.

Shortly before 10:00 p.m., LAPD officers converged on the protest while park rangers posted notices of closure, and contractors began to fence the park off. The notices stated that the park would be closed beginning the following morning and that all personal property must be removed, "including, but not limited to, tents, chairs, tables, backpacks, bags, and personal items."

LAPD Chief of Police Michel Moore announced that the homeless people living in the park could remain overnight, but no one else could enter, and everyone would have to leave the next day.

Officers issued a dispersal order and declared the demonstration an unlawful assembly. Officers formed skirmish lines to clear the protesters out of the area. They clashed with the officers, throwing water bottles and other objects. Some protesters launched fireworks, while officers fired "less lethal" munitions and attacked the crowd.

One protester, Isaac Scher, reported in an interview with the *Los Angeles Times* that an officer swinging his baton with "a blind fury that was horrifying," similar to

"baseball bat swings" with a "full windup, as if it were a 70 mile per hour fastball down the middle," broke his arm. He added that the emergency room doctor referred to the injury as a "classic case of nightstick fracture," a phrase doctors use to refer to a fracture sustained when a person raises an arm defensively to block a baton blow.

On Thursday morning, the LAPD issued a statement advising that they received two reports about minor force used by officers that did not result in injury, while the department's Force Investigation Division claimed to have not heard about Scher's injury. Later, LAPD Captain Stacy Spell responded to an inquiry from the *Los Angeles Times* regarding his allegations with the claim that the department was launching an investigation.

Protesters gathered again on Thursday afternoon near Councilman O'Farrell's office and continued to demonstrate late into the evening. Shortly after 8:00 p.m., the LAPD again declared the demonstration an unlawful assembly and fired at least three 37-millimeter foam baton rounds, one 40-millimeter eXact iMPact sponge round, and six 12-gauge shotgun "bean bag" rounds, according to a statement issued from the LAPD Twitter account Friday afternoon. Both an LAPD marked vehicle and Councilman O'Farrell's office were vandalized.

The police indiscriminately rounded up 182 individuals for their supposed "failure to disperse" from the constitutionally protected demonstration. Several National Lawyers Guild on-site legal observers were detained but later released without charges after identifying themselves.

Journalists covering the demonstration were also arrested. "It's an absurd conflict of interest" for police to arrest journalists reporting on their conduct, Jonathan

Peltz, a reporter for Knock LA, a nonprofit newsroom affiliated with the progressive activist group Ground Game LA told the *Los Angeles Times*. Julian Andrews, a TV cameraman in the field with Spectrum News reporter Kate Cagle and another colleague, said the actions of the LAPD—who led Cagle away and zip-tied her hands minutes before a planned live shot—were “unbelievable.”

“They knew she was a reporter. We were cameramen trying to do a story. We weren’t causing any disruption,” Andrews told the *Los Angeles Times*. “I was honestly shocked. I couldn’t believe it.” Cagle was later released, as was James Queally, a *Los Angeles Times* reporter, who also was detained and zip-tied. Queally called the experience “maddening.”

Councilman O’Farrell announced that 200 homeless people had been moved from the park into temporary housing. By Friday morning, there were two individuals remaining in Echo Park who refused the offers of temporary housing. According to an LAPD Tweet, both were arrested for violation of “Los Angeles Municipal Code sections 63.44 (B) (26) (d) Prohibition on erecting a tent in a City park and 63.44 (B) (7) Prohibition on using park areas or facility for a purpose contrary or inconsistent to its specific or designated purpose.”

This is not the first time Echo Park has been the center of controversy, as large protests emerged in January and February last year when the city took similar actions to evict the homeless. Now that the homeless have been removed, Echo Park has been formally closed, and there is no timeline for when the repairs will be completed and the park reopened.

The Echo Park homeless camp has become a flashpoint due to the increasingly aggressive removal of encampments that have mushroomed throughout Los Angeles as the result of the growth of immense social inequality and soaring housing costs. In prior sweeps, the homeless were temporarily displaced so that the area could be cleaned before the residents were allowed to return.

The new approach is to permanently remove encampments, but placing homeless people in temporary shelters amounts to a band-aid placed on a bleeding wound that requires acute hospitalization. It does nothing to resolve the root causes of homelessness in the capitalist system.

A January 2020 count by the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority reported that there were more than 66,400 homeless people living in Los Angeles County alone, including more than 41,000 people within Los Angeles city limits, both figures were up by more than 12 percent from the previous year.

The housing of Echo Park homeless people in hotels and motels is temporary. It is only a matter of time before they are kicked back out onto the streets and left to fend for themselves. Homelessness is a dire issue that needs a highly structured, permanent solution as opposed to temporary measures that do not provide any long-term assistance.

With the imminent threat of increased foreclosures and evictions due to the economic situation that many Americans have been facing due to the COVID-19 pandemic and pitiful response of the federal government, a massive increase in homelessness is looming.

This has exposed the failures of the capitalist system, which continues to place the protection of profits over human rights and lives. All workers and unemployed, housed and homeless, must form neighborhood safety committees to oppose the violent attacks on the homeless by the state and fight for safe, secure housing as a guaranteed social right.



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