

VIOLENT ENCAMPMENT EVICTIONS AND THE AFFORDABLE HOUSING CRISIS – TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN



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Since the summer of 2021, the City of Toronto and the Toronto Police Services have violently removed encampment residents from city park spaces. The result of those militarized evictions has left many of those encampment residents, and their supporters, jailed, injured, and traumatized – and has divided our city between those who applauded the evictions, and those who condemned them.

It was revealed on September 17th that the City has spent almost \$2 million on clearing three encampments – Trinity Bellwoods Park, Alexandra Park, and Lamport Stadium. In spite of this, only 8% of encampment residents have made it into permanent housing since April 2020. A significant number return to live in encampments after entering shelters or shelter hotels. Disturbed by the violent nature of these evictions, Councillors Josh Matlow and Mike Layton – most recently on October 1st – put forward a motion to have a public inquiry to the violence of these evictions, but the motion failed to pass at City Council.

Many are approaching encampments as a property rights problem instead of looking at it through the lens of housing as a fundamental human right. Many see encampments as a public nuisance instead of extending compassion and empathy to those who are unhoused – due to no fault of their own.

In fact, the explosion in encampments is just one of many acute symptoms of the ever-expanding crisis of affordable housing, which is itself a product of ruthless policy decisions by Liberal and Conservative governments at both the federal and provincial levels. The result of these decisions? Over the last 25 years, we have seen the wholesale elimination effective rent controls, slashed funding for affordable, social and public housing, and the massive explosion of speculation, privatization, financialization and condo-ization of the residential real-estate market.

While this Labour Council fights for the decent living and working conditions for all and extends our solidarity to unhoused people and encampment residents, *encampment evictions are being cynically used to distract attention from the core issue*. Violently evicting people from encampments doesn't build supportive and affordable housing nor does it make shelters safer. The real issue is the crisis of affordable housing, which federal, provincial and municipal governments continue to ignore.

We know that racially marginalized and Indigenous residents, newcomers, and people with mental health challenges are disproportionately impacted by the current housing crisis, and are overrepresented among encampment residents as a result.

Just as we demand dignity and respect for workers in the workplace *from the employer*, so do we demand *of our governments* that poor, marginalized and un-housed members of our community be treated with dignity and respect – and be included in the fabric of our society – by housing them adequately.

Adequate housing is essential to one's sense of dignity, safety, inclusion and ability to contribute to our neighbourhoods and communities. Without appropriate housing, it is often not possible to get and keep employment, to deal with mental illness or other disabilities, to integrate into the community, to escape physical or emotional violence, or to keep custody of children.

Our solidarity with encampment residents, and those who are unhoused, is linked to our solidarity with frontline workers who work with those living in encampments. The only way to ensure both park residents and frontline workers are kept safe and treated with respect and dignity is to demand

immediate action to address the underlying affordable crisis. As workers—and as a city—we should not be divided in our approach to this fundamental human rights issue.

Affordable housing is key. But over the past 25 years, government elimination of effective rent controls and the massive financialization of the rental housing market by REITs, hedge funds, pension funds and multinational corporations has driven a tsunami of rising rents, mass evictions and the elimination of tens of thousands of affordable rental units in Canada. Meanwhile, low interest rates, increasing speculation and huge government subsidies to developers have led to the razing of working class housing, the explosion of over-priced condo towers and the continuing sprawl of low-density housing in unsustainable suburbs. It's time to demand that governments put affordable housing back on the agenda.

The solution is clear. We need to shift the balance from for-profit, market-based rental housing, and towards the provision of social housing through co-ops, government-owned public housing, and non-profit organizations. These types of housing do not need to continuously jack up rents in pursuit of profit. We need a return to the collective vision of the 1970s when both the federal and provincial governments supported an impressive building program of non-profits, co-ops and publicly owned housing that funded more than 600,000 good quality affordable homes across the country.

The Government of Canada, through CMHC, has launched the Rapid Housing Initiative (RHI). It is a \$1 billion program to help address urgent housing needs of vulnerable Canadians, especially in the context of Covid19, through the rapid construction of affordable housing. While this is a good start, \$1 billion is a drop in the bucket of the affordable housing shortfall. What we need is a massive, long-term investment by all levels of government in an expanded and sustained national affordable housing strategy.

Labour Council resolves to:

1. Reaffirms our commitment that housing is a fundamental human right, and demands that all levels of government immediately commit to a fully-funded national affordable housing program.
2. Demand that municipal governments stop their violent evictions of encampment residents, and lobby their provincial and federal counterparts to implement a comprehensive plan to build permanent affordable housing.
3. Demand that provincial and federal governments immediately develop a program to fund and build permanent, affordable social housing, including public housing, co-ops and other supportive and not-for-profit housing alternatives.
4. Call on every affiliate to join our efforts in calling on governments to house everyone adequately. Homelessness is a violation of human rights.