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Resisting Eugene's War On the Homeless

Forcing the city to do something on homelessness

A local activist wrote, “The city is crushing the homeless faster than we can save them.”

Another tells me the city’s homeless camp sweeps are escalating and making it impossible for the unsheltered homeless to live. The city’s goons give people in the non-legal camps 15 minutes to gather all their stuff and move. If they don’t move fast enough the possessions they need to survive are taken from them and dumped, and they are given tickets they can’t pay. The volunteers who are trying to help them are also ticketed and hauled into court. Some are jailed.

A small group of these helpers, pushed beyond endurance by the constant homeless camps sweeps, briefly disrupted a recent Eugene City Council meeting, carrying signs and chanting “stop the sweeps.” For their pains, some of these gentle idealistic young people are being charged with crimes. Because nothing kills like overkill, right?

The head witch, Eugene Mayor Lucy Vinis, will not tolerate any opposition and wants any objectors punished. The previous mayor, Kitty Piercy, said, “We cannot jail ourselves out of homelessness.” Vinis apparently didn’t get the memo.

The present shelter system, run by nonprofits and largely funded by the city, works for only about a third of the homeless. The city claims it doesn’t have the money to expand it, while funding pet

projects like rental housing working-class people cannot afford to live in, the ballpark the voters fortunately shot down, subsidizing downtown so the business people can make money, building on the old EWEB property, etc.

The shelter system has failed for the majority of the homeless. Expanding it is not going to happen — it costs too much — and it’s not the answer.

We have told the City Council that the only solution is to designate places where the unsheltered homeless can set up self-managed camps, with the city providing porta potties and trash service, which would be cheap, and otherwise leaving them alone.

The city won’t designate such places because, as one activist said, “then they would go there.” The council answers only to comfortable privileged middle-class homeowners and business people who want the homeless out of their sight, and will not listen to us.

Disruption

The only way we can stop the city from ignoring us is to force them. Eugene needs a homeless resistance movement. Right now most of the homeless and their helpers are frozen in fear, so it will take new leadership. We have had such leaders before — SLEEPS and Eric Jackson — but nothing since 2018. The SLEEPS leaders left Eugene, while Eric Jackson died homeless. Both were successful in pushing the

city into providing new shelter.

Resistance does not imply property destruction or violence. The main tool of all these movements has been disruption, such as the homeless protest camps of SLEEPS and Jackson. It has been used forever to fight abusive authority — unions, the civil rights movement, anti war campaigns, etc.

Disruption works best when it’s targeted. You study your enemy, in this case the city, and figure out what are its vulnerabilities, its weak points. I suggest targeting downtown, which the council has some kind of sentimental attachment to, even though most of it no longer serves a purpose. One city councilor said it’s the “beating heart of the city.” The city has no heart, beating or otherwise.

Downtown merchants have tried for years to chase out the homeless. In 2018 they blocked a downtown shelter. The Eugene Chamber of Commerce actually told the council it doesn’t want any more affordable housing downtown, just market rate apartments with renters who have money to spend. If we disrupt downtown we push the business people to put pressure on the city to do something.

There are many ways to do this, most of which are legal. I could suggest many tactics to anyone interested in doing it, but with a little imagination you can easily figure them out yourself. Or just study previous efforts.

What we can’t do is do nothing and let the city continue to destroy people.

Lynn Porter has run the local Homeless Action page on Facebook since 2010. He has been an activist for over 30 years, working on various issues with different groups. He’s 84, working-class poor and lives in subsidized housing, without which he would be homeless.

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