Portland billionaire attacks city's homeless

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14 December 2017

With last month's publication in the opinion section of *The Oregonian* of an anti-homeless rant by Columbia Sportswear president and CEO Tim Boyle, an effort has begun to shift the response to city's the homeless crisis to a more open policy of criminalization.

Days after Boyle's op-ed was posted, Portland's Democratic Mayor Ted Wheeler, who has been barred by multiple court decisions from using sit-lie laws which ban sitting or lying on sidewalks or in other public spaces, side stepped the issue by implementing an eight-block "pedestrian use zone," restricting the use of sidewalks to pedestrians and mobility devices only.

The mayor's bureaucratic maneuver effectively accomplished the aim of sit-lie laws: excluding the homeless from an area. This fact was emphasized by Wheeler's assigning implementation of the measure to the Portland Police Bureau rather than the Transportation Department. The eight-block zone manages to encompass Boyle's Columbia Sportswear downtown flagship store.

While Wheeler has issued statements and tweets insisting that "homelessness is not a crime" and "it's irresponsible to conflate homelessness and crime." However, the duplicitous content of these progressive-sounding phrases was revealed by an article in the *Guardian*, which noted that Boyle wrote his op-ed at Wheeler's urging. "[I]n Boyle's telling, [Wheeler] is hoping to gain momentum to get more police on the streets." Wheeler's office Tuesday demanded a "correction" of this statement by the *Guardian*, denying any such request to Boyle.

However, in an interview with Oregon Public Radio on December 6, Boyle asserted that Wheeler had asked his help in promoting the view that "we need more police on the street in Portland." He went on to say that he volunteered to "help him do that." Boyle's op-ed piece makes clear his solution to homelessness is to criminalize the victims.

He wrote, "Wheeler has put forward a proposal to the Portland City Council to add 80 police officers. Frankly, based on our employees' experiences, we would suggest even more support for the Portland police, but Wheeler's proposal is an important step and something that deserves prompt support."

Boyle, with a net worth of nearly $2 billion, was a significant donor to Wheeler's election campaign. He took the opportunity provided by the intransigently right-wing *Oregonian* to, indeed, conflate homelessness with crime, at one point describing thefts from employees' cars as "our laptop donation program."

Since then, he has attempted to deny that his opinion piece—in which he threatened to move his Sorel business out of the city—was anti-homeless. However, his reference to "individuals camping in our doorway" cannot be interpreted as anything but hostility to homeless people. Boyle's specific and immediate call for deploying increased numbers of police against the homeless on Portland's streets contrasts sharply with the vague and completely vacuous "liberal solution" he offered in a follow-up article in the *Oregonian*. "We cannot solve all problems, and we will likely never address all the needs related to homelessness, but as Oregonians we can make meaningful progress if our leaders (business, government, non-profits and others) have the will to do so," he wrote.

The latest "point in time" count of homelessness—conducted nationally every two years—shows that Portland's homeless population has increased by 10 percent from the 2015 count. Notorious for carrying out the count in January, when most homeless seek whatever accommodations can be had in order to avoid freezing in the winter weather, the count nonetheless shows a shocking number of 4,177 homeless.

In the midst of skyrocketing housing costs, alongside

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stagnant and low-wage jobs, both Section 8 and Public Housing lists are shown as closed on the Home Forward web site. In cold bureaucratic language, it informs those unfortunate enough to be ill-housed or homeless that "Home Forward (HF) is not accepting Public Housing waiting list applications at this time. This waiting list was last open for specific properties for three days in June 2016. There is no notice of when this waiting list will reopen." The same canned message was repeated for Section 8 housing.

The City Council's answer to homelessness is to implement market-based principles—normally an approach associated with the Republican right. According to Portland's *Homeless Challenge* magazine, "'We can't just put people in housing,' says Commissioner Saltzman. 'It wouldn't be sustainable. We have more of a balanced approach.' The best solution, Saltzman believes, is getting real-estate developers to set aside units for low-income people." A "balanced approach" that harmonizes well with the lack of regulation over rent increases and evictions. Oregon law prohibits the imposition of rent controls.

A report by the Oregon Employment Department illustrates the growth of social polarization, alongside homelessness. "The fastest growing sectors, over the last ten years in the Portland region, are low wage jobs ($21,000 for the average hospitality position) and the high wage jobs ($133,000 for the average high tech manufacturing position), growing at 18 percent and 13 percent respectively." The author, Christian Kaylor, added, "It's a classic tale of economic divide. And that divide is growing."

According to *Forbes*, there is one other billionaire in Oregon in addition to Boyle, Phil Knight of Nike. His worth is $28.2 billion. The cost to fully resolve Portland's homeless crisis over the next 20 years is estimated at $500 million per year, or one third of the combined wealth of these two individuals. Meanwhile, the combined wealth of the three richest billionaires, Jeff Bezos (Amazon), Bill Gates (Microsoft) and Warren Buffett (Berkshire Hathaway) exceeds that of the bottom half of the US population.

Currently, the city is encouraging the homeless to find shelter as nighttime temperatures plummet to below freezing levels, in order to avoid the nation- and worldwide scandal that plagued Portland at the beginning of the year. In the first ten days of 2017, four homeless people and one newborn froze to death as the Democratic Party-dominated City Council failed to anticipate and make plans for the readily predictable disaster.

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