

Police arrest twelve activists demanding housing for the homeless in Olympia, Washington

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On Sunday, Olympia police forcibly evicted 45 homeless activists from the Red Lion Hotel, and 12 people were arrested on burglary and trespassing charges. According to the police, the homeless activists had “forcibly occupied” and attempted to “take over the hotel” and an employee was said to have been assaulted when they tried to close the door.

The activist group Oly Housing Now (OHN) had booked 17 rooms for the homeless and said they would stay there until Thurston County arranged for permanent housing. The activist group demanded that Thurston County Health Department apply for Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) funding to shelter the county’s homeless.

Police raided the Red Lion Hotel as it was getting dark on Sunday evening. Freelance reporter Shauna Sowersby reported as the arrests were being made, “One person [was] brought out in cuffs as police continue to evict people. For reference, there are MANY more police officers here than the day far-right rioters stormed the WA state Governor’s mansion, just blocks up the road.”

Sowersby was referring to the events at Democratic Governor Jay Inslee’s mansion on January 6, the date of Trump’s attempted coup in Washington D.C., in which far-right militia forces jumped the fence and occupied his lawn.

A statement put out by OHN explained, “FEMA provides counties 100% funding for houseless people who are over 65 years old or at high risk of contracting COVID to stay in non-congregate shelter. Not only would this save lives by getting people off the streets, but it would also support local businesses by giving hotels money during challenging economic times.” They added, “Failing to use this money would be irresponsible for both public health and the local economy.”

Thurston County’s Homeless Coordinator, Keylee Marineau, went to the Red Lion hotel on Sunday and talked with the activists. She said afterwards, “We’re actively pursuing avenues to understand how the homeless-specific funds for FEMA work.”

Before calling the activists’ methods “unproductive,” Democratic Mayor Cheryl Selby said, “Making sure our unhoused residents have access to safe and affordable housing has been Olympia’s priority for more than a decade. Olympia has led on responding to homelessness, on coordinating shelter and other basic needs.”

Contrary to the claims of Democratic Party politicians, the housing crisis and homelessness have only worsened over the past decade. The homeless population in Olympia has increased every year, and as of February 2020, before the COVID-19 pandemic began growing out of control, the per-capita rate of homeless people was 15 out of every 1,000 residents. The severity of the homelessness crisis has dramatically escalated due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Other activist groups in the state, such as Tacoma Housing Now (THN), are also protesting the handling of the housing crisis. THN undertook a similar occupation-style protest on December 25, 2020, in which the group occupied the Port of Tacoma Travelodge to demand emergency pandemic housing.

THN noted at the time: “While the City of Tacoma claims to provide hotel vouchers for houseless people, nobody we’ve talked to has ever seen these mysterious vouchers. Since the City is failing to house everyone in the middle of a world-historical pandemic, we’re housing people instead.”

On January 30, the organization gathered trash from homeless encampments and dumped over two hundred bags of it in front of an unelected city manager’s house,

issuing demands for trash collective services and housing for the homeless population.

Upon learning about the Oly Housing Now arrests, THN expressed solidarity, stating, “We are sorry to report that the Red Lion is being raided right now. Homeless people are being evicted into the rain in the name of profit. Capitalism is the problem and the end of capitalism (and the police who protect it) is the only solution.”

Similar actions are being launched throughout the US in response to the indifference of the ruling class to the growing homelessness crisis triggered by the pandemic. On January 27, protesters in San Jose, California surrounded the courthouse and blocked eviction hearings at Santa Clara County Superior Court. Nine demonstrators were arrested by sheriff’s deputies while protesters chanted, “Fight, fight, fight! Housing is a human right!” The protest was organized by the Regional Tenant Organizing Network which demands better protections for tenants with lost wages and unemployment. Tony Samara, the program director at Urban Habitat, told the *Mercury News*, “The fact that evictions are occurring during a pandemic is unconscionable.”

In Kansas City, Missouri on January 28, protestors blocked the doorways of the Jackson County Courthouse and claimed to have “disruptors” inside the building to block eviction hearings. Evictions were being resumed after having been paused by Presiding Judge J. Dale Youngs after sheriff’s deputies shot and injured a man while serving an eviction order in Blue Springs in early January.

The protestors demanded a suspension of all evictions while the COVID-19 pandemic continues. One of the protesters, Jenay Manley told Fox4KC, “People are getting evicted in the middle of the pandemic. People can’t afford the rent right now. And assistance is not doing nearly enough. And tenants are constantly being evicted during a pandemic, making the numbers higher and literally killing people. We know every eviction is an act of violence.”

In Detroit, the Detroit Eviction Defense and Detroit Will Breathe protest groups held a demonstration on Saturday, January 16 in defense of Whitney Burney whom they said was illegally evicted after spurning her landlord’s advances. The mother of four children was evicted in December with the help of Detroit police officers.

In Portland, Oregon, the Kinney family was forcibly evicted from their Red House by Multnomah County sheriffs in September of 2020. Activists have gathered at

the home since the eviction to protest predatory lending and gentrification development, as well as the eviction during the pandemic of a family who owned the home since 1995 when William Kinney, Jr. bought it from his parents. In December, the police and sheriffs evicted residents and confronted protesters at the Red House on Mississippi Ave. while arresting seven people. The conflict escalated and saw police retreat and 200 activists reoccupied the property. On December 8, Mayor Ted Wheeler told the police to “use all lawful means to end the illegal occupation” and stated, “there will be no autonomous zone in Portland.”

With almost 3.7 million global COVID-19 cases reported in the last week, the pandemic shows no signs of letting up. The pandemic has deepened the social crisis, contributing to a staggering rise in income inequality, poverty, and death amongst the working class. While the wealthy have added hundreds of billions of dollars to their coffers, millions of workers have been laid off or lost their jobs after their employers’ shutdown and are unable to pay their rent or bills. Evicting people in the middle of winter during this pandemic is not just unconscionable, it is homicidal.

The pandemic has exposed the nature of capitalism which places protecting profits over protecting human lives. The Democratic and Republican parties defend this system, whatever their tactical differences may be. They will continue to respond to rising social opposition not by granting concessions, but with repression.

We call on workers and the unemployed, including those who have been evicted from their homes, to form neighborhood safety committees to fight against evictions and for housing as a basic human right. These committees must be independent of and hostile to the Democrats, Republicans, and all their political satellites. Rather than turning to the ruling class, these committees must turn to the masses of educators, healthcare workers, logistics and manufacturing workers, and beyond, as part of the fight to meet the needs of the working class and end this pandemic. Safe housing is a basic social right and a scientific necessity for bringing the pandemic under control. The fight against evictions is the fight for socialism.



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