

# Response to the Poor: Cops

Fifth Estate Collective

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The response of Detroit's city government to the crisis of the homeless is what the poor can always expect: the cops were set on them! With the cutoff of the General Assistance welfare program (see accompanying article), entire buildings housing state aid recipients were emptied, the residents unceremoniously thrown out in the cold, rendering thousands homeless overnight.

On October 29, about 70 former aid recipients occupied a long-vacant and neglected public housing complex building with the intent of squatting there and restoring the facilities. The corrupt and inefficient city administration of Mayor Coleman Young had just forfeited \$14 million in federal funds for its failure to increase public housing occupancy.

Instead of welcoming people desperate for shelter and willing to improve the premises, the city sent in a squad of 100 cops to evict the homeless. Over 250 homeless activists and residents of the grim housing project met the military formation with chants of, "Ruff, ruff, ruff! Who let the dogs out?" The cops arrested eight for breaking and entering the unused apartments.

The large contingent of cops used in the arrests and the presence of the police chief, numerous high ranking officers and officials from the Mayor's office, all indicated, the city had no intention of allowing the homeless to create their own solutions to their plight.

Unable to live in the most logical places—empty city-owned homes—the homeless, through the auspices of a large coalition of housing groups, secured big tents and erected them on the property of a generous apartment owner close to the public housing project. Numerous men and women began to call the tents their home until the city, with a speed heretofore unheard of in such matters, declared the tent city to be a health and fire hazard and sent the cops in to dismantle the structures. More arrests.

Sympathetic neighbors watching the scene said they wished they could get the city to move as rapidly on the complaints they had filed about their dwellings, but which were never investigated or acted upon.

The tent city inhabitants had already dubbed their settlement, Englerville, after the state's governor who had initiated the cuts which had left them homeless, and it was clear the mayor of Detroit didn't want such a potent political symbol interfering with the "image" of his fiefdom.

It was heart wrenching to watch these men and women, already the wretched of the earth, chased from their rough structures clutching all their belongings, now rain soaked, in plastic bags. Those miserable tents were their homes. It mattered little that the police chief, the city officials and most of the cops involved in the evictions were black like most of the homeless. The institutions established to protect the class structure function repressively regardless of the race or gender that staffs them.

As we finish this issue in mid-December, it was ten degrees last night and there are two inches of snow on the ground. The city claims no one will be without shelter, but this means the crowded, dismal, dangerous and demeaning homeless shelters.

Heartless conservatives, smug and secure in their warm homes, always say with a shrug, "The world doesn't owe you a living." How about a home? Does it owe you a roof over your head? No, and because it doesn't, is one

more reason why it must be destroyed and replaced with one where we all owe each other a lot. Not a “living” in the capitalist sense, but a life in an authentic human community—something that capitalism, with its palaces and its plunder, can never provide.



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