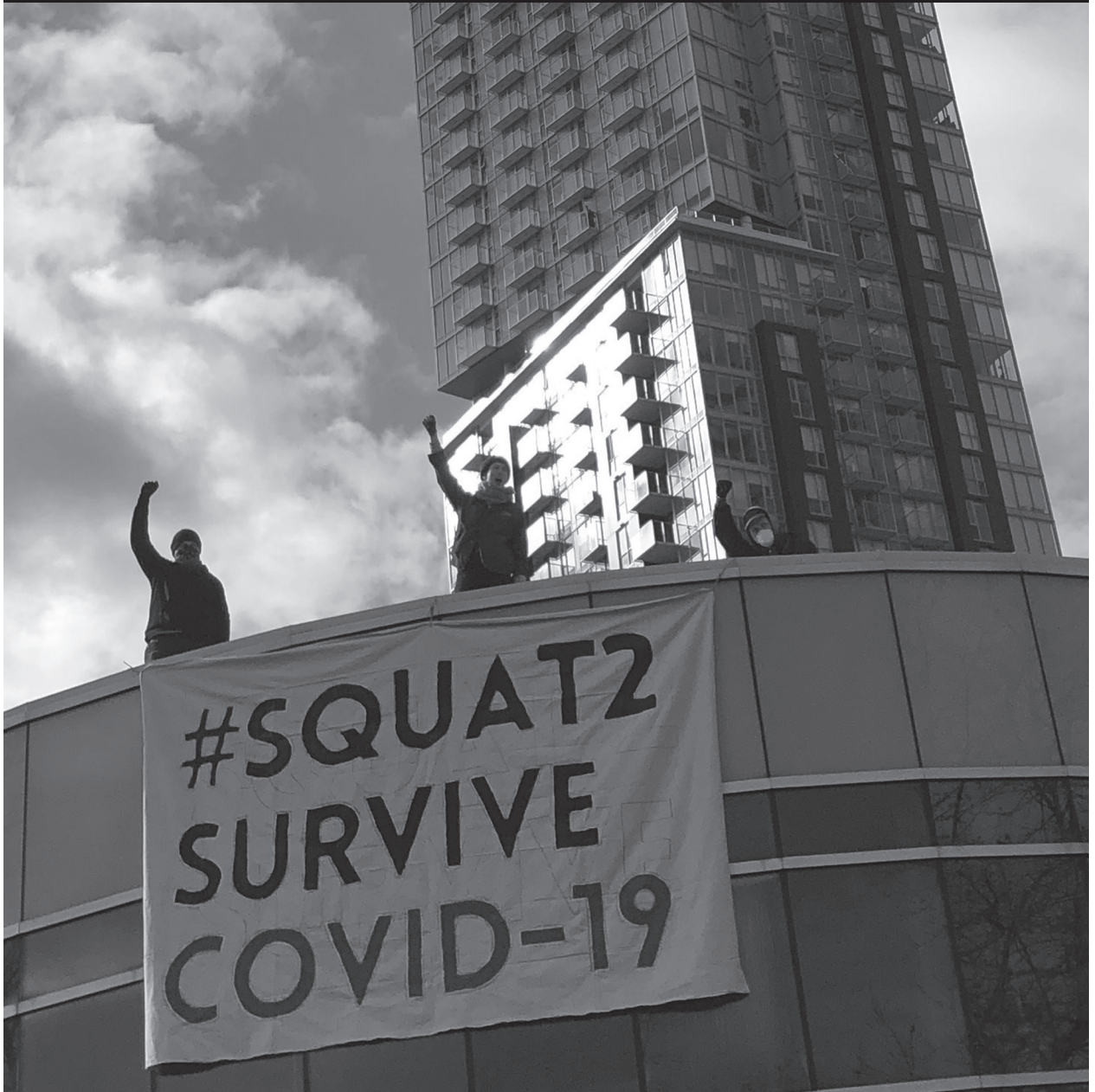


SQUAT 2 SURVIVE

bulletin no. 1, april 3 2020



a volcano publication

<http://thevolcano.org>

NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

We have not been able to publish the Volcano in months. In a way that's not a bad thing because we have a good reason: we have been too busy in the streets! The new decade began with the generation-defining Wet'suwet'en solidarity movement and now it continues with the impetus to resist the COVID-19 pandemic. We know that it's in the streets that we build our subaltern community power. But without

reflection, analysis, and critique, we will not be able to learn from our mistakes and build from our strengths. So we are glad to be able to get some published thoughts out and share them with our communities. We hope that a full newspaper will be coming soon! Stay tuned, stay safe, and stay strong and smart. - Volcano

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The Volcano
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RCMP EVICT SURREY'S HOTHOUSE SQUAT BUT CANNOT STOP THE #SQUAT2SURVIVE MOVEMENT

Listen Chen



Hanging a second banner: "Invest in our communities / Divest from the police!" (Red Braid)

On April 1st 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, dozens of poor and homeless people and supporters took over the vacant North Surrey Recreation Centre. With support from Red Braid Alliance for Decolonial Socialism, they launched the "Hothouse Squat" and called on others to join the #Squat2Survive COVID-19

movement.

The "Hothouse" squat made a political and legal claim: that warehousing poor people in COVID-19 hothouses like shelters and modular housing is a death sentence, and they have a right to take over vacant buildings to stay safe from the deadly pandemic. The squat argued that

forcibly displacing poor, unhoused people back into streets, shelters, and decrepit, rundown modular housing would be a violation of their Section 7 Charter rights, which ensures the right to “security of the person.” But instead of allowing the courts to decide how to interpret the Charter, Canada’s highest law, the Surrey RCMP sent in 15 police officers and a police dog to evict the squat with force.

The Hothouse Squat tested the waters and found an unsurprising truth: in Canada, poor and unhoused Indigenous and working class people have no rights. But the #Squat2Survive movement’s claim that the lives of the communities most vulnerable to dying from COVID-19 matter more than private property is just as strong today as it was yesterday, and the lessons of the Hothouse Squat can only make future squats stronger.

“It’s a death sentence for us”: Housing as a frontline defense against COVID-19

Some of the Hothouse Squatters live in supportive modular housing units. Some are formerly unhoused, now renting their own place. A couple are staying in local shelters, and more than a couple can’t even get into shelters and are sleeping on the streets most nights. Stephen said, “I slept on the front porch of this rec centre last night and almost froze to death. Us at the bottom here, who are more susceptible and more at risk [of contracting COVID-19]—they leave us out to feed us to the wolves.”

One of the demands of the #Squat2Survive movement is for the Province to immediately requisition empty hotel rooms to house anyone in need of shelter, where they can actually practice socially distancing. With shelter beds dwindling across the province as service providers shut their doors to new intakes, poor and underhoused people are in desperate need of adequate housing. Within minutes of the

“#Squat2Survive COVID-19” banner dropping from the roof of the recreation centre, three homeless people asked how they could join the squat, because they had nowhere indoors to sleep.

In a letter supporting the Hothouse Squat, Pivot Legal Society explains that the Provincial government’s declaration of a state of emergency gives Minister of Public Safety and Solicitor General Mike Farnworth the power “to provide unsheltered and inadequately housed people with self-contained units immediately.” The Province’s Emergency Program Act empowers the state to “acquire or use any land or personal property considered necessary to prevent, respond to, or alleviate the effects of an emergency or disaster.” Pivot explains that if Farnworth will not act, then Provincial Health Officer Bonnie Henry could do the same thing using the Public Health Act.

Minister Farnworth and Dr. Henry refuse to use the powers available to them to move thousands out of dangerous shelters and temporary modular housing and into empty hotel rooms and apartments. Red Braid organizer Ivan Drury said, “It’s not a question of ability. The government has the power to put people in hotel rooms. What does it mean that the BC NDP can house people in hotels and are not? It means they do not consider it necessary to house the homeless. They do not think stopping the spread of COVID-19 in low income communities is necessary.”

COVID-19 thrives on neoliberalism

While members of the white, middle class public are getting increased access to resources like Employment Insurance and housing subsidies, poor people’s access to survival resources is shrinking. And the few resources the BC government is offering, like housing and shelter where self-isolation is possible,

continue to be cordoned off with gatekeeping policies and a neoliberal distrust of the poor.

When poor Indigenous people go to the hospital, doctors often refuse to prescribe drugs because they racially profile them as “drug-seeking.”

Policies that restrict access to resources reinforce the neoliberal policy of treating poor people as “resource-seeking,” as if they are using the public health crisis to access housing and social supports that are not rightly theirs. Rather than treat the pandemic amongst the poor, the government treats the poor as an untrustworthy, undeserving population, whose access to life-saving resources must be arbitrated individually.

While some cities, like Vancouver, have announced that they are setting up emergency shelters, Red Braid organizer Isabel Krupp pointed out that, “laying out mats on the floor of an empty auditorium makes no sense when there are thousands of empty hotel rooms across the province.” And in order to access the emergency shelter, poor people must first prove that they are already sick by seeking a nurse’s referral.

Tana Copperthwaite, who is a former shelter and tent city resident, explained, “If you put 40 people in one big room and one person gets

sick, you all get sick. So it’s a death sentence for us. We need to be able to get into hotel rooms, apartments, empty housing—somewhere we can be safe and practice social distancing.”

Colonialism + COVID-19 = Death!

But housing, on its own, is not enough to shield our communities from the worst dangers of COVID-19. COVID-19 is as much a social phenomenon as it is a biological virus, which means that how it spreads, who it infects, who dies, who lives, and the impact of public health precautions is determined by structures of power like imperialism, colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy.

It’s easy to see that Canada’s response to COVID-19 prioritizes, first and foremost, the profits of banks, bosses, and landlords. As a poor people’s movement, #Squat2Survive opposes the government’s bailout of capitalists and landlords. But the danger of using “poverty” as a category to understand the impact of COVID-19 is that it doesn’t capture how as a white supremacist, capitalist, colonial, and imperial

nation, Canada only recognizes white, cisgendered, settler, home-owning, straight, male citizens as members of the “public.” To unite and fight COVID-19, the #Squat2Survive



#Squat2Survive squatters regrouping after the eviction of the Hothouse Squat (Red Braid)

movement has to assert its power as made up of *mixed* communities of Indigenous and working class people of different genders and races, with different relationships to the nation of Canada.

The Hothouse Squat's Indigenous Women Warriors's founding declaration, "Colonialism + COVID-19 = Death," argues that having Indigenous-only spaces is crucial within the #Squat2Survive movement. For Indigenous people, the struggle for health and survival is intimately tied to a struggle for sovereignty against occupying Canada. They point out that for poor, underhoused, homeless, and displaced Indigenous people, social distancing can only amount to isolation, and is a continuation of Canada's long colonial attack on Indigenous kinship. Against Canada's racist and colonial public health policies, the Women Warriors assert that "our family is not an inventory of possessions a man has as the head of the household. Our family includes all our people."

Maggie, a homeless squatter who is from the Katzie nation, said, "I have huge concerns about COVID-19 and how Aboriginal people are being left out. Considering that half the homeless population, especially in the Downtown Eastside, are Aboriginal, something should be done. I'm speaking from my own perspective, for my children and their future."

Having Indigenous-only spaces, as well as women-only spaces, within our squats form the heart of the #Squat2Survive movement's collective power against colonial, capitalist, patriarchal Canada.

Police force and our tactics of counter-force

The Hothouse Squatters left the North Surrey Recreation Centre chanting, "Squat to survive!" and "Kill COVID, not us!" They gathered in front of the building for an impromptu press

conference, telling the media that this was the first—but not the last—squat to defend our communities from Canada's deadly mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Hothouse Squat made a claim that is both political and legal. Isabel Krupp explained to reporters after the eviction of the squat, "Our political claim is that people's lives are more valuable than property." Within Canada, the contradiction between life and property is always present, because settler colonialism and capitalism place the interests of property owners against the interests of Indigenous people and subaltern working class people. But the COVID-19 crisis makes these contradictions all the more stark. The Hothouse Squat demonstrated that unhoused people clearly do not have access to the resources they need to follow self-isolation protocols, but by breaking property law and using vacant space, they can collectively improve their safety.

Red Braid, the group that initiated the #Squat2Survive movement, says that the COVID-19 crisis and the contradictions it exposes makes Canada's property law vulnerable to a legal claim called a Charter challenge. Canada's laws are built to defend the colonial and capitalist social order, and enshrine property as a fundamental value. The foundation of this legal system is the Charter, and any law that the courts decide contradicts the Charter is struck down. The legal claim of the #Squat2Survive movement is that enforcing trespass, and therefore Break and Enter laws, against people seeking shelter from the imminent danger of COVID-19 would contradict Section 7 of the Charter.

After being evicted from the Hothouse Squat, organizer Isabel Krupp explained to the media:

What we saw happen when we took over

the building was that police entered the building because not all of the doors were secured. Police entered into the building and disregarded the Charter claim we were making. They disregarded poor, homeless, Indigenous peoples' Charter right to security of the person. It's up to the courts, not the cops, to decide where the "balance of convenience" lies between enforcing trespass law and unhoused peoples' Charter rights. The City and RCMP moved in and evicted us to stop us from making that legal claim. They decided that they had the force they need to take over the building and evict the people who were in there seeking shelter, security, and the ability to keep themselves healthy. The message that the cops and the City of Surrey sent is that poor people don't have rights in this country.

The rapid RCMP eviction of the Hothouse Squat shows the #Squat2Survive movement that the police and governments will use force to block poor people from making a Charter challenge against trespass and property law. Krupp explained, "The cops didn't let the courts make that decision. Police got into the building because we didn't do a good enough job barricading the doors." The Hothouse Squat relied on the legal protection of a Charter claim and did not defend the squat with physical barricades, which showed that subaltern movements cannot rely on the colonial and capitalist apparatus of law for protection. Even during a deadly pandemic that threatens the lives of millions of people, police will not hesitate to violate the Charter of Rights and Freedoms to defend property.

The lesson is that the next squats in the #Squat2Survive movement should consider tactical questions beyond the law, like choosing a building that can be barricaded and defended

against the police, because if they can get in, they will evict people and rob squatters of the opportunity to take a Charter challenge to court.

Canada has left us no choice: Squat to survive!

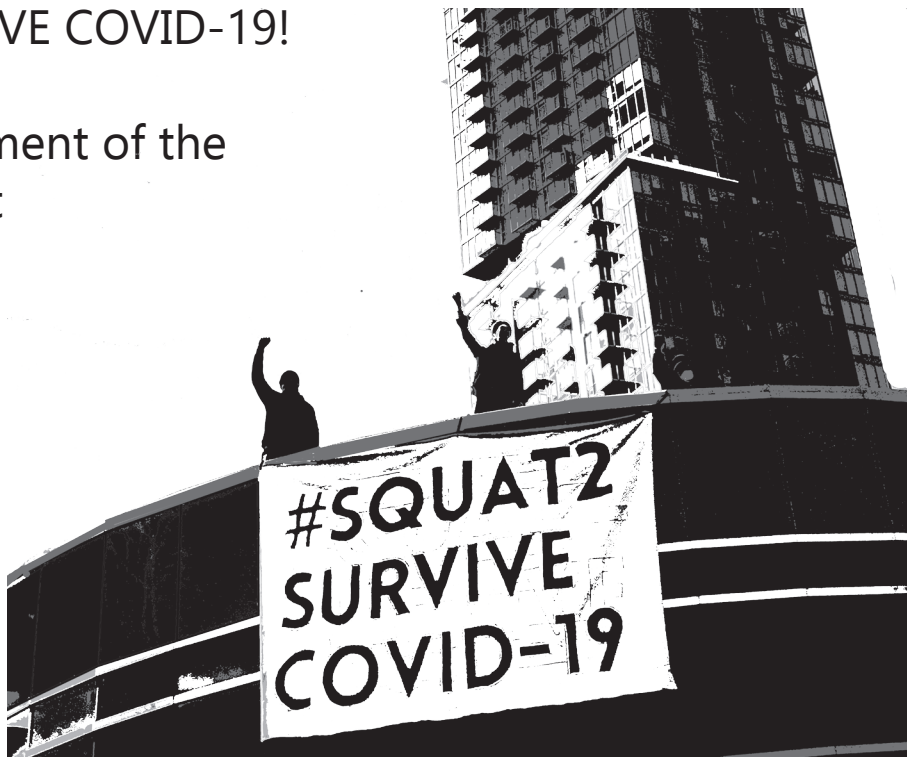
Roberto is a Mayan man from Guatemala who had slept outdoors the night before the squat, and who was evicted back to sleep on the streets again. Sitting inside the warm and dry building that police were preparing to make vacant again, Roberto said, "We fight together for our rights, to live and survive!" After being evicted, Stephen called out to bystanders coming to and from the SkyTrain station, "This is just the beginning, we're only starting this fight and we hope that others will join us. All you people in the street, get together and take over a building or an empty house!"

The Hothouse Squat was evicted, but the #Squat2Survive movement is unstoppable.

#SQUAT2SURVIVE COVID-19!

Founding statement of the Hothouse Squat

April 1, 2020



We acknowledge that the Hothouse Squat is on the unceded and occupied territory of the Kwantlen, Katzie, Qayqat, and Kwikwetlem nations. The Hothouse Squat is not making a claim to title or ownership of the lands under the 104th mall; we pledge to use this vacant building and lands in a good way, for the collective benefit of our low-income and health-threatened communities.

Today we are opening the Hothouse Squat as a home and a safer place to protect our unhoused and underhoused communities against the danger of infection and death by COVID-19.

COVID-19 is particularly dangerous for unhoused and underhoused communities because our pandemic did not begin with this virus. Our pandemic is colonialism, which is a global system of land theft that displaces and dispossesses Indigenous peoples all over the world, and within Canada's borders.

COVID-19 stacks on top of the long pandemic of colonialism, hitting Indigenous peoples in cramped reserve housing, and threatening to kill Indigenous peoples who colonialism has cursed with tuberculosis and COPD, diabetes, and asthma; intergenerational diseases of poverty.

COVID-19 piles on our long pandemic of capitalism that values profit over people and calculates our lives and deaths on a balance sheet that accounts us as expendable, and our communities as sacrifice zones. Minimum wage service workers who can't take days off bring the infection back to our families packed into 1 bedroom apartments. Poor people who don't have savings or incomes or homes can't even recognize the danger of the virus because it is coexisting with so many other dangers.

The outbreak of a highly contagious virus

that kills people with compromised immune systems and lung conditions is a moment of crisis within the long pandemic that Canada visits upon us.

We are occupying a vacant building because Canada has left us no choice.

Our communities are left on the streets where we cannot eat because COVID-19 health orders have shut down food services and where we cannot sleep because COVID-19 has closed and frozen shelter beds. But police and bylaw officers still push us out of doorways and further into huddled danger.

Our communities are locked up in homeless shelters and modular housing buildings that are becoming COVID-19 hothouses. If one person in the shelter shows symptoms, the shelter policy is to send that one person to isolation and leave the rest of us packed in, shoulder to shoulder. Shelters protect the public from the homeless, they do not protect us from the virus.

We are making the claim that displacing us from the Hothouse Squat, and every squat to come within the #SQUAT2SURVIVE movement would violate our Section 7 Charter Right to security of the person. The Hothouse Squat makes us safer than the street, shelters, and modular housing because here we have access to enough space to socially isolate. Here we can follow the recommendations of the health authority more completely than in any other place available to us under Canada's disastrous mismanagement of the crisis.

If governments or police force us out of our squat and back into streets where we can't eat or sleep, and cramped, unhygienic shelters, they would be taking away our ability to protect ourselves, putting unhoused and underhoused people in danger of infection with COVID-19, with a high likelihood of death.

The #SQUAT2SURVIVE movement is not a protest movement. Unhoused and underhoused communities are resisting the society that is treating us as a public health danger in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic that makes us, more than any other community, more likely to die from viral infection. We hope that the Hothouse Squat in Surrey will be a spark in the tinderbox of pandemics that poor, Indigenous, unhoused, and underhoused communities refuse to weather any longer.

#SQUAT2SURVIVE movement demands:

- 1. Homes now:** The Province must use its emergency power to take (not negotiate-for) and use hotels to house every person in shelters, on the streets, in temporary modular housing, SRO hotels, overcrowded reserve and urban Indigenous housing, and for all women and children fleeing elevated violence during the COVID-19 home isolation conditions. Requiring health referral and obvious symptoms for admission to low income safe centres is a setup that is organizing a widespread outbreak in poor communities.
- 2. Stop policing the crisis:** Allow immediate access for anyone who wants to enter hotels and government-run emergency shelters, but do not force anyone inside. Stop all enforcement of bylaws and criminal code laws that criminalize poverty, homelessness, drug use, and sex work.
- 3. Health care and safe supply for all:** Make a safe supply of opiates and stimulants, as well as feminine hygiene products, pregnancy tests and birth control, diapers and baby wipes, and Hormone Replacement Therapy medications available at pharmacies without prescription and without cost.

4. Economic support for the poor: Make welfare and disability \$2000/ month to match the temporary federal emergency service EI package and make the upgraded EI package accessible to everyone not already on social assistance, including temporary foreign workers and non-status people, and people who work in illicit and informal economies.

Here in Surrey we are using a vacant community centre that was shuttered by the city as part of its aggressive, Surrey City Centre gentrification plan. The City Centre Plan aims to eradicate the neighborhood's homeless and poor communities in order to make way for high rise condo and office towers.

On top of the four #SQUAT2SURVIVE demands, we are calling for the conversion of the long-empty mall on 104th, owned by real estate speculators in Arizona, and the North

Surrey Recreation Centre, owned by the City of Surrey and planned to be gentrified into high end retail and more university space, into 100% social housing.

There are empty hotels all over the Province that could immediately, under the Province's state of emergency declaration, take and use these hotels to house anyone on the streets or in a COVID-19 hothouse. In Surrey, three large hotels with a total of over 500 rooms—Civic Hotel, Sheraton Vancouver Guildford, and Ramada by Wyndham—are closed, and another 900 hotel rooms are currently unoccupied. We demand that the Province make use of these empty spaces to help prevent the spread of COVID-19 in communities most vulnerable to death.

COVID-19 + COLONIZATION = DEATH

Founding statement of the Indigenous Women Warriors of the Hothouse Squat

April 1, 2020



Sadie Morris / Ma Maa Tea (Nuu Chah Nulth & Irish)

We are a group of poor Indigenous women from the Nuuchah Nulth, Gitksan, Cree, and Mi'kmaq nations. We have been displaced from our home territories by colonization and want to be good guests on the territories of other nations where we live. We acknowledge that the Hothouse Squat is on the unceded and occupied territory of the Kwantlen, Katzie, Qayqat, and Kwikwetlem nations.

We want to begin by saying that the colonization

hasn't stopped; COVID-19 is just the newest crap on the block. It's not just one virus, it's one more virus that Canada has brought to us.

We were clean. We were healthy. We were indeed warriors. The food we ate wasn't tainted. And now the colonizers come in here and mess up our lives. As poor Indigenous women, our lives and bodies are etchings of how Canada rips us apart: by poisoning our blood.

When settlers moved west, they brought viruses that killed us and then their doctors quarantined us so that our genocidal sickness would not inconvenience white Canadians. Today Canada is again isolating us because of a virus that they brought to us.

Look how the government responds to the virus: their response is to break up our communities, not to help us. The Health Authority says that we must isolate, but for Indigenous people, isolation is death. They say we must stay in our homes but we don't have homes.

We're supposed to have interaction; we're supposed to be with each other. But our people live on the streets where police roll up and

move us along if they see a group of Indigenous people together. We live in so-called supportive housing where we're not allowed visitors, not allowed to see our children.

Our street family is our kin. When we talk about family and blood, we don't mean the white nuclear family, with just 2 parents and children. Our family is not an inventory of possessions a man has as the head of the household. Our family includes all our people. The colonizers are always trying to break up our families, to cut us off from everything: from our heritage, from our kin.

BC Housing says that because of COVID-19 we can't have visitors, but what colonizers call visitors, we call kin. Our unhoused relatives live on our couches and floors. When they ban visitors it hurts us. It hurts us to sleep on the streets, and it hurts us to know our relatives are on the streets.

The cops are telling people to go isolate. But if we listen to the police and run and hide in abandoned buildings all on our own then we will die alone there from overdoses.

We help each other. We don't isolate. If you need help, I'll help you. We don't go mine-mine-mine-mine. Our survival depends on our kinship networks, our kin. They say it's necessary for our survival of COVID to be alone, but being alone is threatening our survival as poor Indigenous people.

To survive COVID-19, we have to keep on protecting Indigenous spaces. We have to protect our physical spaces where we can see and care for each other. We have to defend all our relations against being controlled by building managers, surveilled by police, and killed by colonizer violence.

The Warrior Women of the Hothouse Squat are

holding down COVID safe space for Indigenous people because our struggle for health and survival is our struggle for sovereignty against Canada's colonial invasion.

One month ago, we were planning rallies in defence of Wet'suwet'en sovereignty. We were defending the land against mining companies. Today we are rallying for the sovereignty of our people and our people's bodies again. We are defending our kin against another virus that Canada has brought us.

In the Hothouse Squat, we can create sovereign Indigenous space, space for our family to be together and support each other, while also being safe from COVID-19. We need to have native space to survive. Canada is refusing us that space.

COVID-19 is frightening. To fight it, we want to stay together as family and friends; to be there for each other. We want homes now for all our family. We want no surveillance. We want health care in Indigenous ways, without the racism and colonial paternalism. We want to sit in the sun.

If you have your family beside you when you pass away, you are free to move on with no bad feelings. It's good to be together to the end. Being together is the medicine we need. Family is medicine.

The decolonized world we imagine is where we can be with our family and kin, with our people, safe, and healthy. Some of us feel like a life where you're safe and happy and have everything you need is the afterlife. But our spirits are the most powerful. Our spirits are here and in the spirit world all at once; with those we have passed and those still here. With our spirits we can change the world.

COVID-19 IS GENDER VIOLENCE AND THE #SQUAT2SURVIVE MOVEMENT CREATES SAFER SPACES

Founding Statement of the Hothouse Squat Women's Wing

April 1, 2020



Anti-demoviction rally at Burnaby City Hall, Nov 2019 (Red Braid)

Homeless and low-income women have established a wing in the Hothouse Squat as a space for women's community, solidarity, and collective struggle against violence and patriarchal power and to end gender violence that has increased during the COVID-19 crisis.

We acknowledge that the Women's Wing of the Hothouse Squat is on the unceded and occupied territory of the Kwantlen, Katzie, Qayqat, and Kwikwetlem nations.

Today we worked with poor men in our communities to open the Hothouse Squat

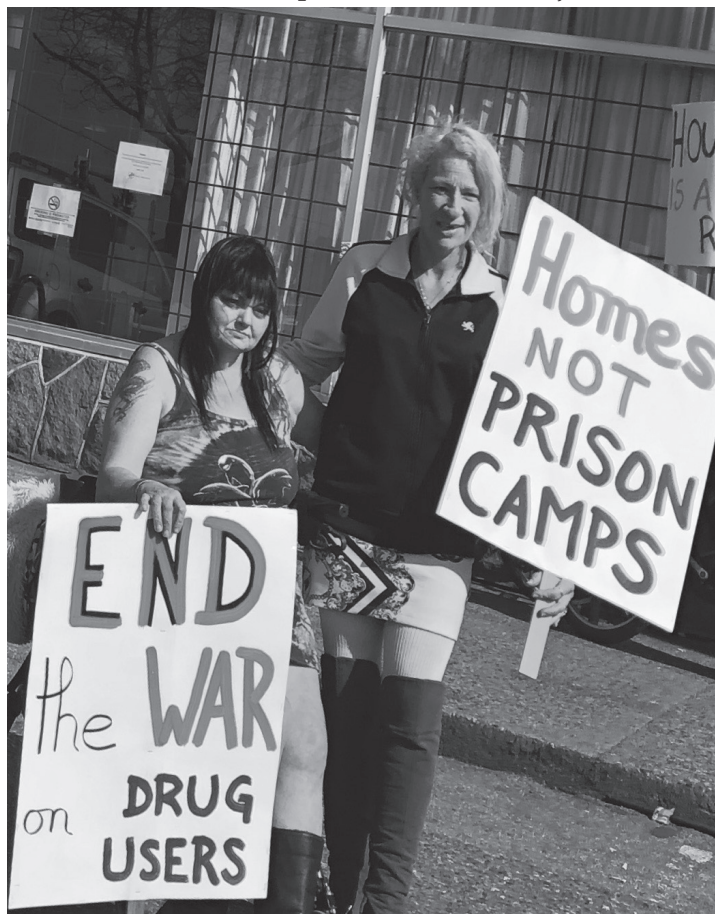
as a home safer from the danger of infection and death by COVID-19. We established the "Women's Wing" of the squat as a place where women, trans, and gender non-conforming people can be safer from patriarchal domination and violence. Our fight for homes safe from this global pandemic is linked to our fight for homes safe from gendered violence. Like everything else in our lives, COVID-19 is gendered.

COVID-19 has proven particularly dangerous for women, children, and trans people. For many poor Indigenous and working class women, trans, and two-spirit people, our choice

is between isolating at home with our abusers or moving out into the streets or shelters where we risk contracting COVID-19, which could mean our deaths.

Poor Indigenous women and two-spirit people and poor working class women and trans people have more to fear than COVID-19. Battered Women's Support Services, an anti-violence organization in Vancouver, said this week that calls to their crisis line have gone up over 100% since British Columbia's COVID-19 self-isolating measures began.

In Canada, women and trans people make up well over 55% of low-paid, service sector jobs.



Eva and Tana at a February news conference releasing 5 demands to fight COVID-19, Feb 2020 (Red Braid)

We are often part-time or unemployed workers who rarely make enough money to live on our own. For those of us who can't afford to rent on our own, we are forced to make an impossible decision, either stay with our abusive friends and partners or hedge our bets against the virus in overcrowded women's shelters, if they exist or are still open in our towns or cities.

As poor Indigenous and working class women, we are taking a stand within our communities against men's emotional and sexual demands and their threats of physical violence. But we do not look to the police or social workers to arrest our boyfriends or ban them from visiting

us in our supportive housing buildings. We know it is not poor Indigenous and working class men who drive the BMWs around low-income neighborhoods at night looking to "let off steam." We know the men who pay us low-wages to clean their apartments or make them food are not part of our communities.

The Women's Wing of the Hothouse Squat is a place where we are free from the condescending and controlling social workers who steal our kids, the cops that harass, assault, and arrest us in the name of protecting us, and from the demands and violence from men in our communities. In the Women's Wing of the Hothouse Squat we can strategize how to liberate ourselves from all forms of gendered oppression and violence.

Liberation will not look the same for Indigenous and working class women because the origin and type of violence we each face is different. Violence against Indigenous women is colonial; its aim is to exterminate Indigenous peoples as a whole. Violence against

working class women is patriarchal; its purpose is to discipline women to labour in the service of men. The Women's Wing of the Hothouse Squat is a space for the liberation of Indigenous women from colonial violence and of working class women from patriarchal violence. The Women's Wing overlaps with the Indigenous Warrior Women council to make the space to do this work, and we support racialized working class women's struggles against white hegemony and trans people's struggles against cis supremacy, including in women's spaces.

We believe that if the City of Surrey or the RCMP try to displace low-income women and trans people and anyone fleeing violence and seeking safety from COVID-19 from the Hothouse Squat they would force us into positions where we would face the danger of gender violence, as well as the greater danger of contracting COVID-19. The Hothouse Squat makes us safer than the street and modular housing where we are exposed to both COVID-19 and male violence, and women's shelters where it is impossible to follow proper health precautions.

The Women's Wing has added a gender lens to the Hothouse Squat demands. When we call for homes now to take our communities out of harm's way of COVID-19, we added that vacant hotels opened for unhoused and underhoused people must also be open to all women and children fleeing elevated violence in homes on lockdown. When we say stop policing the crisis, we say that the state must stop the criminalization not only of poverty but also of women, trans, and gay and queer men sex workers, who may not be poor in the sense that our communities are poor, but whose gender and sexualities are criminalized. We fight against the danger that government organs of the public health crisis criminalize the gender and sexualities of sex workers. And we have added to the demands for health care

for all, that women need, now as ever, feminine hygiene products, pregnancy tests and birth control, diapers and baby wipes, and Hormone Replacement Therapy medications through pharmacies, without prescriptions and without cost.

The Women's Wing is part of making a call for a #Squat2Survive movement in every community. We hope the Women's Wing will empower others who are vulnerable to gender violence to carve out autonomous spaces where we are safer, and where we can build a new, militant segment of the anti-colonial and anti-capitalist movement that is fundamentally anti-patriarchal and against colonial gendered violence.

GENTRIFICATION AND COVID-19

Fast-tracking the death of Surrey's poor

Isabel Krupp

When the City of Surrey forcibly dismantled the homeless camp along 135A Street in June 2018, only 160 people received rooms in temporary modular housing. Everyone else was left to survive in shelters, on the streets, or in the bush. "They act like clearing the Strip was a huge success," said Wanda Stopa, a homeless community leader. "But the only difference is now we're scattered and hidden."

In early 2019, former residents of the Surrey Strip established a new camp in a wooded area off King George Boulevard, which they named Sanctuary Tent City. A resident of the camp, Rory Kohinsky explained, "A lot of us living at Sanctuary were shuffled off of the Strip into the shelters or the bush. Eventually we found our way here." But the camp was bulldozed in November 2019, when the city opened a 42-bed shelter in the area. Residents described the city-orchestrated destruction of their home as the "latest assault" in an ongoing war on the poor.

The last official count found 600 homeless people in Surrey. According to Wanda, that count included only about half of those on the street. "There were roughly 1000 homeless people in Surrey when the Strip was closed," she said. In this context, 160 modular housing units and 42 shelter beds are a drop in the bucket.

"They didn't solve homelessness. All they did was move people off of the Strip," said Dave Diewert, an activist who has organized with

homeless communities in Surrey for years. "Why did they do that? Because there's a massive gentrification plan for this area." The redevelopment plan for Surrey City Centre charts a "bold transformation" from a low-income, suburban town centre to a high-density, high-end downtown. In Wanda's words, "The real reason they cleared the Strip was to 'beautify' the neighbourhood."

Top-down gentrification: The Surrey Centre Plan

The Surrey City Centre Plan was approved by City Council in January 2017. At its heart, the plan is about "renewing private sector development interest" in the area. It promotes the development of highrise condos and office towers, and promises public sector investment, aimed at "bringing more working professionals and students into the area" to live, work, and shop.

The City Centre Plan is 273 pages long; the word "homeless" appears only once in all of its pages. The plan for Whalley, rebranded the "Historic District," fails to mention that the neighbourhood was once home to the Surrey Strip or that it is currently the site of a large, established homeless community.

Instead of supporting the community that already calls Whalley home, the City Centre Plan seeks to develop a "pedestrian-oriented eclectic shopping experience" – an "experience" that fundamentally excludes anyone who

has limited disposable income and is unable to participate as a consumer. When the City Centre Plan describes the “beautification” of Whalley, we can read between the lines: “beauty” means the absence of visible poverty and “beautification” means the displacement of poor and homeless communities from the City Centre.

Replacing the poor by upscaling housing types

A guiding principle of the City Centre Plan is “housing diversity.” The Plan promises “housing choice” and a “full spectrum of tenures including ownership and rental as well as supportive and social housing.” Currently, 57 percent of people living in Surrey City Centre rent their homes (compared to 29 percent in all of Surrey), 43 percent of whom spend more than a third of their income on rent. Introducing new market housing into the area – for sale or rent – will drive up costs throughout the City Centre. Even if a token number of non-market units are thrown into the mix, the result will be net

loss of low-income housing stock. This process is known as the “Woodward’s Effect” after a “social mix” housing project that accelerated the gentrification of the Downtown Eastside in Vancouver.

The City Centre Plan relies on the same market that created the housing crisis in the first place to solve the problem of housing affordability. The most outrageous market solution proposed by the plan is the development of “micro-suites,” which are self-contained units that are less than 375 square feet. There is no guarantee these units will even be affordable to low-income renters. As Global News reported, there are micro-suites in Vancouver that are renting for \$1700 per month.

What about non-market housing? The City Centre Plan makes vague reference to public-private partnerships as a vehicle for the development of social housing. The plan states that its goal is to “enable land use conditions that allow flexibility for developers to incorporate non-market rental and social housing through

partnerships with government and other agencies.” In other words, Surrey is following the lead of Vancouver and other cities across Canada, which refuse to build social housing except in collaboration with profit-driven, private developers, who invariably take more than they give.

“Diversity” as social cleansing

The City Centre Plan promises the area will be “home to a diverse population.” The word



Surrey's plan redevelop Whalley as “condo city” as shown in their Surrey Centre redevelopment plan (Graphic from the City of Surrey website)

“diversity” appears dozens of times throughout the plan. But this recognition of “diversity” has nothing to do with supporting the 57 percent of City Centre residents who are not white, who struggle to survive in a country founded on racism and colonial violence. “Diversity,” in the terms of the plan, means economic diversity. This language provides cover for gentrification, for flooding the City Centre with young professionals at the expense of its low-income residents.

Homeless and precariously housed people have no place in the City Centre Plan, because they do not contribute to – and, in fact, impede – private development and investment. How the City of Surrey plans to manage populations that will be radically excluded from the social and economic life of the “transformed” downtown is left out of the City Centre Plan. But homeless communities can see the writing on the wall. As

cities gentrify, policing and criminalization are the tried-and-true methods for dealing with the poor.

Policing the crisis: Surrey’s anti-homeless “Outreach Team”

While the City Centre Plan was being developed, just months before it was finally approved by City Council, the Surrey Outreach Team was launched. The team, comprised of 12 police and 4 bylaw officers, was established to surveil and contain homeless people living on the Surrey Strip, and eventually, to disperse them. After the Strip was shut down, the Surrey Outreach Team and the Mental Health Unit were amalgamated into the new Police Mental Health Outreach Team, which only led to heightened police and bylaw harassment. “They’ve been harder on us, more forceful, always telling people to move along. If you just sit down for a moment, the cops are in your



“Surrey Outreach Team” featuring lots of RCMP officers and some social workers (City of Surrey website)

face. You can't even stop," said Wanda.

The City Centre Plan guarantees that as development increases, so will police funding. All development proposals are required to contribute to "the capital costs for police protection" – \$65 per single family dwelling unit and \$250 per acre for non-residential development. This funding will enable police to continue driving poor people out of public view – into the bush, the shelters, jail-like "supportive housing," or actual jail cells.

Public investment and private profit

The City Centre Plan involves "significant public sector investment," but not for the low-income residents of the area. Its end goal is to "attract residential and office development" and "catalyze private investment." In other words, the City Centre Plan champions public investment and private profit.

A prime example of the City of Surrey prioritizing profit over the needs of low-income communities is the closure of the North Surrey Recreation Centre at the end of 2019. The demolition of the facility will make way for a mixed-use "Centre Block" development, described in the City Centre Plan. The project is currently being overseen by the Surrey City Development Corporation, a for-profit real estate development company that claims to "advance the City into a more vibrant [...] community." But for low-income residents of North Surrey, "vibrancy" does not mean "eclectic shopping experiences," micro-suites, and soulless public art. It means affordable, secure, and dignified housing, community-controlled services and amenities, and freedom from police and bylaw harassment.

Gentrification cleared the path for COVID-19 to devastate Surrey's poor

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic broke

out, the City Centre Plan was fast-tracking poor and homeless communities in North Surrey toward invisibility and death. Gentrification and its twin, the criminalization of poverty, interact with COVID-19 to ensure that the same people targeted for displacement are at heightened risk of contracting and succumbing to the deadly virus. If the City Centre Plan is an inferno, then COVID-19 is the latest bucket of gasoline thrown on the flames.

To survive the COVID-19 pandemic, low-income communities must fight back and stop the City of Surrey from sacrificing their homes to profit-hungry developers, and leaving them on the streets, in shelters, and in decrepit modular housing to die preventable deaths. On April 1, homeless and precariously housed community leaders occupied the North Surrey Rec Centre, establishing immediate shelter from the harms of homelessness, including the outbreak of COVID-19. The occupation, known as the Hothouse Squat, demanded that the North Surrey Rec Centre be converted into 100% social housing – a visionary demand, which the wider community should rally behind as a bulwark against the aggressive gentrification scheme known as the Surrey City Centre Plan.

INSIDE THE SURREY HOTHOUSE SQUAT

Tana Copperthwaite



Hothouse Squatters gather outside after the eviction (Red Braid)

It was a small walk from our meeting point to the squat, and we all walked in small groups to respect the COVID-19 protocols and to look less heaty.

Me being the slowest of our little group, I pretty much came in last and ambled in the open door. A friend and I cleared the garbage left on the floor just inside the abandoned Rec Centre by someone who worked there while my comrades unloaded our supplies, and two others went roofside to hang banners reading HOMES FOR ALL and SQUAT2SURVIVE COVID-19!

This was no sneaky, clandestine operation, the Hothouse Squat in the North Surrey Recreation Centre was meant to meet our peoples' needs, and to show the peoples heartfelt desperation

to find the safety, the security we so badly need. The squat was for the poor Indigenous, homeless, drug addicted, alcoholics; all the desirables, undesirables, useful, useless Our squat said that anyone with a heartbeat has the same right to life that the prime minister of the country has: no better, no worse. The #Squat2Survive movement fights for equal rights for all, homes for all, LIFE FOR ALL!

Inside the Hothouse Squat

Downstairs, inside the squat, some people scoped out their private spaces; there were so many small empty rooms! What an excellent location for people to make use of. Other people gathered in the trophy room, where tape on the floor, marked off by squatters, showed our

group and anyone joining us how to speak and stay within COVID-19 protocols safely. Communication is important inside the squat, but staying healthy with safe distance is even moreso.

When we were mostly gathered in the trophy room, Isabel did a roll call. We went over our agenda to keep foremost in our minds our more pressing, specific goals: the main and most important idea being we were all in need of space to self isolate. The news had just come out that the death toll had risen in regard to overdoses, worst of all in the Downtown Eastside because drug users have lost services except the order to self isolate. We die alone due to the drugs not being so pure or safe as they had been; with no one to do drugs with, the death toll was higher than it's been since 2013! The catch-22 for drug users is that self isolation is vital but so is the need to stay in close touch with those in danger of overdose or death by other means. We all need each other; you can't trust police or politicians to be honest or keep you safe; you need to rely upon others with the same goal to stay alive; to stay safe. In the Hothouse Squat we created a space where we could be safe from COVID-19 and also keep our community together to be safe from overdoses.

After our roll call meeting, I began to explore the space we were in. We had set up our tent already and sat in the meeting. I didn't have my phone with me so couldn't find out what was going on outside. Inside though, the realization of what we were doing was beginning to show on peoples faces: this is Canada and we were partaking in civil disobedience, some of us for the first time ever in the name of a true cause and not a crime or an act of greed. This act was occurring because we made it happen, because it needed to happen to save lives. This was no joke to any of us, and not only were we trying

to aid our brothers and sisters, we were doing this for a good, pure, unselfish reason. I saw pride on faces that hadn't had much more than despair etched on them for so long! Guys with open grins on their faces, the guys who never smile cuz there was no reason to were getting sore cheeks. The spirit gets worn down but a good cause can change your outlook on things. It was fantastic.

The cops arrive

Then i peeked out of the blinds very carefully and saw a wall of RCMP uniforms in my vision. I turned my walker around and scooted back to the trophy room to tell what I saw, but the outside supporters had already relayed the news.

I sat down in my taped-off square to wait. Isabel led us in chanting a few slogans and Ma Maa



Mike Musgove of SUMS (circled) hamming it up with a crowd of cops (City of Surrey website)

Tia and Destiny sang and beat out the women's warrior song, which resonated beautifully in that room. Many other voices joined with the two Indigenous women.

The police entered just then, holding back their drug sniffer dog. The bald macho pig at the front addressed us generally; 'You are I hope all aware that by breaking in here and trespassing you are committing a crime according to the criminal code?' Isabel's reply was "We are aware that we are establishing our rights as documented in the charter of rights and freedoms!" Mr. Pig turned, waved his fellow officers back towards the exits and that part was over.

We had a big sigh of relief and we made up a new chant on the spot: "Kill COVID, not us!" We all felt energized by how easily the goblins were scared away, so we chanted awhile and felt productive. And then came the second wave of big pigwigs.

Social worker trickery

This time the cops were led by an amiable, round about the middle, unassuming, harmless looking guy. He introduced himself as Mike Musgrove and said he was from the Surrey Urban Mission Society - SUMS. He said he was part of a group looking to solve the very problem we'd come to address right now. Mike said he and others had already looked at this building for the same purpose, but were looking at other places as well and they

were working hard on solving the problem.

Isabel said she'd heard this rhetoric from him before and it never amounted to anything, and she frankly didn't believe he wanted to expedite this like we did. A lot of our group had had previous talks with Mike at the Surrey tent city where he walked along in front of the police, asked after a person's welfare, said he was working hard on finding them a home and would let them know soon, and then walk on

while the police behind him displaced the guy he was just talking to.

No-one in our group who had had any dealings with him gave him any benefit of the doubt. I decided to give it a go anyhow. There was a lot of chaotic hollering going on, so I walked up and faced our group in front of Mike. I said I'd never met him and wanted to hear what he had to say. Everyone got quiet.

My question was: "I understand you saying you are working hard on this issue, but really that to me could mean weeks or even months and we

don't have that kind of time. What can you give us right now? If you don't have an answer, then walk away and leave us this space for tonight."

His answer was not surprising. He said he didn't have the authority to do that. My reply was "So why are you even here?" But it was drowned out by the guffaws the folks who already knew what he would say. Because of the



Tana speaking to the media after the eviction of the Hothouse Squat (Red Braid)

outbreak of laughter, Mike grabbed his lifeline; “you interrupted me while i was talking, so i’m not talking anymore with you, i’m leaving,” he said. Mike from SUMS told us he was leaving and anyone who left with him now would be unmolested or bothered by police.

The eviction of the Hothouse Squat and the beginning of the #Squat2Survive movement

A few people chose to leave then; four in total I think. The police remaining in the building made sure the threat was clear: anyone who stayed would be arrested. I decided for myself it was time to go since jail to me was a nightmare. I

was asked to stay, but not at all judged or derided for going. My choice was respected by my comrades, and as I left the pigs were saying bullshit like “be safe.” I did not reply.

When I got outside I felt a bit of an emotional letdown. I was ready to fight but it didn’t happen. But by doing what we did, we have a much better perspective on the next time -- and there will be a next time, and soon.

Homes for all! Kill COVID, not us! Wet’ suwet’ en solidarity! We want to live!

Oh yeah, there will be a next time.



Painting the #Squat2Survive banner to prepare for the squat (Red Braid)

SUPPORT THE MOVEMENT TO "#SQUAT2SURVIVE COVID-19"

On April 1st, poor and homeless leaders launched the Hothouse Squat by seizing a vacant, publicly-owned building in Surrey, unceded and occupied territory of the Kwantlen, Katzie, Qayqayt, and Kwikwetlem nations. Read more about the launch of the Hothouse Squat and our demands, on page 9-10 of this bulletin.

The Hothouse Squatters are calling for all poor and homeless people to join the #SQUAT2SURVIVE movement and take over vacant buildings, assert their right to seek safety, security, and shelter from a deadly pandemic, and pressure the government to release the resources necessary for those most vulnerable to COVID-19.

The Hothouse Squat is a militant self-defense of the communities most vulnerable to death. For people sleeping on the streets or in shelters, SROs, and modular housing, physical distancing and self-isolation are not possible. These warehouses for the poor are hothouses for the spread of COVID-19.

We argue that dismantling our squats and casting us back into alleys, shelter cots, and cramped modular housing units where we are at increased risk of dying from COVID-19 is a violation of our Section 7 Charter right to security of the person.

Our movement opposes Canada's bailout of banks and bosses. But we also oppose Canada's "public" health response, which treats white, settler, home-owning, heterosexual men as the population most in need of support and

protection. We fight back against settler-colonial and patriarchal dominance by supporting Indigenous and women-only spaces and leadership structures. We call on all future squats to follow these protocols and center decolonial and feminist work in our defense of our communities.

What is the Money For?

Our goal is to raise \$5000 to cover costs of hygiene supplies (soap, hand sanitizer, masks, harm reduction), food, cooking supplies and equipment, sleeping gear and tents, and, if necessary, legal support for the Hothouse Squat and the broader #SQUAT2SURVIVE movement.

If you have items to donate, check out our list of needed supplies, which you can find at: <https://tinyurl.com/squatsupplies>

How You Can Fight With Us

This squat has emerged out of a growing poor people's movement. If you can commit to an ongoing fight with Red Braid, we are calling on supporters to donate to us on a regular basis.

If you can support us to keep fighting on the streets, we commit to fighting for you to stay safe in your homes – because the change we are fighting for is systemic, and we are fighting for safe homes for all!

To donate, sign a petition supporting our demands, and get involved see the Red Braid website: redbraid.org