

SQUAT 2 SURVIVE

bulletin no. 2, april 17 2020



a volcano publication

<http://thevolcano.org>

NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

We published our first Squat 2 Survive bulletin a few days after the launch and police eviction of the Hothouse Squat in Surrey, in order to reflect on what we felt was an important event. Two weeks later, we are publishing our second bulletin on the eve of a second squat, hopeful and anxious about how this one will go.

We distributed about 2,000 copies of the first bulletin, mostly in street communities in Metro Vancouver. We were proud to see people reading these reflections and ideas, and we think these discussions contributed to the decisions made in the movement about how to carry out the Kennedy Stewart Squat.

The real story within this underground COVID diary is the story of the Squat 2 Survive movement, which is a story being written by poor and unhoused communities themselves. But we have also been reminded of the importance of print publishing to support and encourage this movement.

If you have the means, please consider donating to The Volcano to continue our publishing work in support of this movement. We will publish more quick bulletins in the weeks ahead, and also plan to get our monthly newspapers back on the street at the end of this month.

Solidarity! - Volcano

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The Volcano

SQUAT 2 SURVIVE

Bulletin #2, April 15, 2020

<http://thevolcano.org>

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Contact us with your article pitches

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BAILOUTS FOR CONSUMERS, STARVATION FOR THE POOR

Inequality continues under COVID-19 quarantine as Indigenous and working class people fight back

Ivan Drury



Banner hung outside the Hothouse Squat in the Vancouver suburb of Surrey, April 1 2020 (Red Braid)

There are two stories of Canada's response to the novel coronavirus. One story, which is spoken-to in daily briefings by politicians, is the story of bailouts and the warm embrace of state support. This is the story of \$5.8 billion in Federal monies for beleaguered oil and gas extraction corporations and \$500 million

for property and homeowners in mortgage forgiveness. The other is Iris's story.

On March 22nd, three weeks into Canada's immersion into the COVID-19 pandemic, I got a phone call from a young woman named Iris. She had gotten my phone number from a pamphlet about COVID-19 that she found

on the street and she was calling for advice. Holding in tears, she said that she had nowhere to go. Her boyfriend had just been arrested so she had found herself suddenly alone on the street, with no money or income, and nowhere to stay. All the shelters, she said, were full or not accepting new residents because the operators were trying to improvise ways to stop the coronavirus from being introduced into their buildings.

She said she was calling for advice. "There is an empty apartment across the hall from my friend's place," she said. "Do you think it would be okay for me to break in and stay there?" She said her plan was to nail the door shut behind her, keep the lights off, and keep quiet to not be discovered.

Canada's response to COVID-19 is a poor young woman terrified, breaking into vacant apartments and huddling in the dark, hiding from police, and, hopefully, the coronavirus.

In the coronavirus crisis the Canadian state is distributing some degree of bailout support to the civil society public, while it treats others, who it has long targeted for destruction, as a social and health threat to that public. During the pandemic, Iris and tens of thousands of other poor, Indigenous and racialized migrant people have their meagre food and health services stripped away. The capitalist health bloc of state and civil society are arranging a two-tier response to COVID-19 in Canada. Civil society may rally around its frontline soldiers and receive some piece of the bailout, but the subaltern on the second tier are fined, harassed, arrested, detained, and institutionalized into congregate emergency shelters, or ordered to remain in modular housing, crowded Indigenous reserve housing, prisons, and immigration detention centres.

Losing services

During the third week of Canada's COVID pandemic, volunteer researchers with Red Braid Alliance for Decolonial Socialism, the group that I organize with, did a telephone survey of shelter and soup kitchens throughout the province.

They surveyed 54 out of 61 homeless shelters listed BC-wide. Out of 2,335 available shelter beds, 761, about one-third, had been frozen to new admissions or closed completely.

Researchers also spoke with staff at 32 soup kitchens that serve weekly or daily free meals outside of Vancouver. More than one-third of them had closed completely, making a recorded loss of 630 meals a week. The number of meals lost is likely double that or worse, because about half of the meal programs in a government registry were unreachable; many of those are likely closed. In Vancouver, the numbers were less marked; where only 7 out of 27 soup kitchens surveyed had shut down.

Every soup kitchen, along with every restaurant in BC, had been forced by government order to close their regular indoor food services. But unlike restaurants, soup kitchens did not move their menus to gig-worker delivery service. The great majority of soup kitchens have moved from hot meals to exclusively cold, bagged lunches, with sandwiches and cookies replacing relatively more nutritious hot meals. Out of 40 soup kitchens still operating province-wide (half of them in Vancouver), only 7 reported that they were still serving hot meals.

The City of Vancouver has opened some hand washing stations on sidewalks in the Downtown Eastside, where between 60 and 80% of the population is low-income. But most communities and services have not put anything at all in the place of these frozen

shelter beds and disappeared public spaces and services.

Case-by-case pandemic treatment

Where governments have opened or maintained low-income community resources, they are either dangerous congregate spaces where the COVID-19 virus is more likely to spread, or they are institutional, pathologizing spaces set up to treat people already exhibiting symptoms of having contracted the virus.

In Victoria, BC's capital city, the City government declared three parks as temporary campsites for unhoused people. These COVID camps include trailers outfitted with bathrooms and running water and promise residents 3 individually packaged meals a day. These COVID camps are overflowing. The fields themselves are orderly, gridded like soccer pitches with spaces marked for people to set up their tents, and security staff surveil residents and regulate donations in mass, outdoor shelters. In the bushes around the fields, tents crowd the bushes where an overflow of unhoused people seek a space

where they won't be harassed by security guards and bylaw and police officers.

In an OpEd published April 3rd, public health professors Bernie Pauly and Marilou Gagnon critique Victoria's COVID camps. They argue:

Proven prevention approaches include rapidly housing people in hotels and housing rather than creating physically distant indoor shelters, setting up open-air shelters, or other designated locations for warehousing homeless people that make physical distancing a charade and self-isolation a myth.

A statement released on April 14th by the social democratic NDP Provincial government agrees in word, claiming "we are providing emergency housing options [where] people experiencing homelessness and COVID-19 symptoms can self-isolate." But it fails to mention that the meagre 900 emergency beds the government has opened province-wide are accessible only by health worker referral, and most of them are congregate emergency shelters consisting of cots set up in rows in empty gymnasiums.

Pauly and Gagnon, along with the US Centre for Disease Control, say such congregate shelters will cause a second, devastating outbreak in poor and incarcerated communities.

On March 26th, the City of Vancouver announced that it will open 200 hotel rooms to people who are homeless and living in SRO hotels who need spaces to self isolate. These rooms are also accessible through doctor's referral. For those with money, the city and province mandate a pandemic response: everyone must self-isolate at home and practice physical distancing, under penalty of fines, and regardless of health status.



*Government-run COVID camp set up in a park in Victoria BC
(Kym Hines)*

The poor, however, only gain access to self-isolation spaces as a form of minimal medical treatment, and these beds are restricted to those who show symptoms.

Staff at the Union Gospel Mission in Vancouver, which provides 72 shelter beds, say they don't have any isolation space onsite. But they are "spreading the mats out a bit more than usual." In the words of a worker in a small-town shelter, the protocol from the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority is for shelter operators to treat the coronavirus "on an individual basis, not like a pandemic." One man staying in the

Union Gospel Mission told me on April 11th that nothing has changed in how the space is operated except that he sees staff cleaning more often. He sleeps in a bunk bed in a small room with about 40 people. "If I stretch my arm out from my bed I can touch the guy sleeping next to me," he said.

As of April 17th, there is word that BC Housing will be opening 32 hotel rooms to poor people who do not have symptoms to self-isolate but this number is a far cry from the number of rooms needed. The City of Toronto and of San Francisco have announced plans to open

thousands of units of tourist hotel rooms to unhoused people needing sanctuary from the dangers of COVID-19. While "thousands" sounds impressive (and in San Francisco it might, if the successful struggle there continues, be 7,000 hotel rooms), even these numbers leave the great majority of people in shelters and unsafe housing stuck in the path of the viral outbreak. But under any measure, the actions taken by Vancouver and British Columbia are shameful; they treat poor people as an acceptable sacrifice or as a threat to public health rather than a particularly important population to defend.

Governments are organizing COVID-19 treatment for the poor on a case-by-case basis rather than affording them the same mass, pandemic-level access to self-isolation accessible to people with homes and resources.

Against social isolation for the socially isolated

Calls to extend government relief to the poor refer to a hope that the COVID pandemic has finally shaken Canada



Vancouver Police continue their regular sweeps of the Downtown Eastside, with PPE for officers (VPD twitter account)

from the long spell of neoliberalism and brought back the possibility of a revitalized welfare state. But the signs are that deep colonial, race, and class inequities encode differential access to the relief packages that have trickled down. I argue that it is not to help people who need help to survive, or to end the attacks on communities targeted by the forces of capitalism and colonialism. Any relief that has trickled down to poor communities has been either as an unintended side effect of a scattergun approach to distributing a consumer bailout, as aid that is ineffective in practice but useful as propaganda to bolster the benevolent image of the Canadian government, or, most often, as a congregate containment project that works to protect members of civil society from the public health danger of the poor. Demands from social democratic groups to revitalize the welfare state and redistribute social wealth to the poor either misunderstand this danger or, acting as ideological wing of the capitalist-health bloc, misrepresent and help sell the mythology of the benevolence of the state.

The coronavirus pandemic reveals the underlying inequities and income inequalities that undergird Canadian settler colonial and capitalist society. The COVID-19 government response for groups that are securely part of Canada's civil society has been a public health model, which has treated the virus as a pandemic, and has provided resources to stop middle class and privileged working-class people from backsliding into absolute desperation. The limits of who is, in practice, excluded from the full benefit of Canada's public health system is made obvious through this process. Canada's response has been to treat those already immersed in poverty and despair as part of the contagion. The struggle, therefore, cannot be content to petition, convince or find pitiful reason for the government and public to

open access to more resources. All signs are that resources low-income communities have access to are actually shrinking. The opportunity is elsewhere: in the militant and organized resistance and self-activity of the poor.

The lesson drawn by the Squat 2 Survive movement is that resistance is necessary, and that the self-organization and struggle of subaltern communities cannot depend on police following their own laws in good faith. The next squat, they say, will include stronger barricades.

"WE HAVE TO BAND TOGETHER OR WE'LL ALL BE IN HELL"

Poor women respond to Trudeau's \$40 million for women's shelters

Laura June Rose

On April 4th, 2020, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced a \$207 million COVID-19 aid package for homeless people and women fleeing violence. Packing the funding for both groups together makes it seem like the paltry amount going to communities that Trudeau called "uniquely vulnerable" to COVID-19 is more than it is. Of the hundreds of billions of dollars Canada is spending on managing the COVID-19 crisis, the vast majority is devoted to helping banks continue to sell credit, alongside a central bail-out package that pours money into the pockets of banks and bosses. Homeless communities are set to receive just \$160 million. \$40 million is going to violence against women shelters and sexual assault centers. And \$10 million is going to emergency shelters on Indigenous reserves.

Trudeau explained that the Liberal government is rolling out this package because "no one should have to choose between being somewhere they're unsafe and risking getting COVID-19." But Trudeau's aid package will not liberate Indigenous or working class women from that impossible choice. Trudeau lied when he said "the communities that need this funding have now been identified and money is getting to them" because the money is not going to poor women; it is going to government and non-governmental agencies and organizations

that run shelters and crisis centers in order to support their capacities to "manage or prevent an outbreak in their facilities."

Trudeau's comment about the forced choice between safety from gendered violence and safety from COVID-19 mistakenly associates gendered violence exclusively with private homes. But while colonial and patriarchal violence are at home in domestic spaces, poor and homeless women constantly face similar danger in the streets. There are two problems with Trudeau's proposal: homeless women face gendered violence and women's shelters are not safe from COVID-19.

Trudeau's benefit package locks poor working class women in shelters, erases urban Indigenous families

Vancouver anti-violence organization Battered Women's Support Services has reported a 300% increase in crisis line calls since the government's "stay home" orders began. In response, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced his government will provide \$40 million to rent new spaces for women fleeing violence shelters and sexual assault crisis centres and provide physical barriers for women in existing women's shelters. Trudeau's aid package continues to stuff women and children into congregate shelters. Women's shelters are

hothouses that could speed up the spread of COVID-19. Women at Oppenheimer Park tent city who have recently accessed the Downtown Eastside Women's Shelter and Powell Place Women's Shelter say that there are 50 women at the former and 65 women at the latter, all piled less than six feet apart in bunk beds.

Trudeau's plan has no money specifically

mixed-gendered and one for youth. The lack of funding for poor Indigenous communities in Trudeau's aid package is an extension of settler violence against Indigenous women and children that seeks to exterminate Indigenous communities.

If Trudeau was truly identifying vulnerable populations and sending money their way,



Women's March for Housing in the Downtown Eastside, 2010 (AHA Media)

for urban Indigenous women or families. The entirety of the \$10 million the Trudeau government has allotted for Indigenous women and children is going to Indigenous Services Canada to "support 46 emergency Indigenous women and children's shelters on reserves and in the Yukon." Indigenous people in Vancouver make up 34% of the sheltered and 46% percent of the unsheltered homeless population, while representing only 2.2% of Vancouver's total population. And even though there are six women's shelters in Vancouver, there are only two Indigenous-only shelters - one that is

he would not be pouring money into shelters where no woman is safe from COVID-19. And he would not conflate the colonial problem of Indigenous homelessness, which stems from the removal of Indigenous people from their land and the destruction of Indigenous kinship networks, with the "general" problem of ever-increasing homelessness for non-Indigenous people, which results from the government's continued support for austerity policies that roll back social support for poor working class families.

Gender violence is in the home but it's also in the streets

Homeless women are women fleeing violence, because to be an Indigenous woman living in the streets of a settler-colonial society means facing genocidal, gendered violence. And to be a working class woman living in the streets of a capitalist society means facing patriarchal violence. Homeless women are more vulnerable to violence by men they don't know in the form of misogynistic, racist, anti-poor bigotry, and are also more vulnerable to abuse because of their greater economic dependence on men.

Dana, a woman who lives in the Oppenheimer Park tent city, said that her experience fleeing violence landed her on the streets. Since she lost her bed at the women's shelter up the street, she set up a tent in Oppenheimer, where she said she still navigates abuse from men. She said that she feels forced to constantly choose between abuse from one man, indoors, or danger from police and all the problems of homelessness. She said she feels blame for her choices from a "dominant society" that says "you chose to be down here," when the truth is "you don't want to go to your abuser." She said it feels like society is "spitting on you." For poor Indigenous and working class women, the impossible choice between staying with an abuser or fleeing to the streets to avoid them exposes how complicated it is to survive as a poor woman in Canada.

No sanctuary: no women's shelters, no transition housing, and no women's housing

Karen, a member of the community at the Oppenheimer camp, described transitional housing for women fleeing violence as "different from women's shelters." She said, "they're like a house, you have your own room, if you have kids they live with you, there are

maybe 5-6 women in the house, lots of food, lots of baby clothes."

Reflecting on her experience living in homeless shelters, Karen said: "A lot of the women there have been there for 10 or 12 years. They'd come in normal and then 5 or 6 years later they're totally mentally ill." In the words of the women who were present at a meeting to develop the Women's Wing of the Stewart Squat at Oppenheimer Park, the reasons women's health deteriorates in shelters is because women have no privacy, are undernourished, and are "unable to do the only things that make us sane," such as painting or just having peace and quiet. But many women stay in shelters indefinitely because there is nowhere that is affordable to live as a single woman who is on welfare, disability or working minimum wage and part-time jobs. The modular housing buildings and SROs that poor women can afford aren't as safe from men's violence as women's shelters.

The latest BC homeless count reported there were 511 women among the "visible homeless" in Vancouver, and acknowledged that the true number of homeless women is much greater given that many women stay with friends. Only a minority of women fleeing violence from private households will end up in the type of transitional home Karen mentioned because in Vancouver there are only ten of these buildings. Others end up on the streets or in shelters where women's flight from violence is eclipsed by the "decision" to be on the street.

Social worker control is punishment and continues child apprehensions

British Columbia's spectrum of shelter to institutional family housing is a theater for child apprehension, where poor women are punished for their poverty by being isolated

from their families. When they are reunited, it is on the condition that they live under the watchdog eye of community support workers who work hand in hand with the Ministry of Child and Family Development and police.

Rhonda, an Indigenous woman living in Oppenheimer Park, said she does not need staff or a social worker. "All I need is a home," she said. Although the women and family buildings tend to be newer and therefore nicer, there are not nearly enough in Vancouver for poor families. Women I spoke with said these buildings often do not feel like homes because they cause constant involuntary exposure to tense altercations with other women, staff and health authorities, and police.

Most of the little social housing that is being built specifically for women with kids is "supportive" family housing operated by social service organizations such as RainCity, Atira, and PHS. Heather, an Ojibwe woman who lives in an SRO in Chinatown, said BC Housing "thinks that I should wait until I get into a family building like the Budzey or MacLean Park housing for me to have my daughter." She has no idea when that will be.

"We have to band together or we'll all be in hell"

Instead of Trudeau's benefit plan, which continues to contain some women in congregate shelters while leaving most women in harm's way in abusive home environments or in danger on the streets, we believe the only thing that will save our communities is us naming and fighting for what we need to survive.

All poor Indigenous and working class people should be eligible for the Canadian Emergency Response Benefit regardless of how much money we made, or what job we had in the previous year. Women especially need these

benefits so we are less socially and economically dependent on abusive men.

All vacant hotels and residential rooms should be opened for all women and trans, two-spirit, and gender-nonconforming people fleeing violence, whether from private households, modulars, SROs, shelters, or the street. Housed working class and middle-class women need a safe place to live too. The increased intimate partner violence in private households and the rising numbers of homeless women shows women's class status is more precarious than men's, as we remain unappreciated "guests" even in our own homes.

But women are not waiting for Trudeau or any politician to save us. The #Squat2Survive movement can get us into healthier vacant buildings and off the streets and out of shelters, modulars and SROs where we are at greater risk of contracting COVID-19. Women participating in the squats have created "Women's Wings" in order to create space where women and trans people can work together and identify our particular needs, uninhibited by the social domination of men in mixed-gender spaces where our demands and interests are often sidelined.

Women's Wings in the #Squat2Survive movement are both a practical necessity and the exercise of a women's liberation and sovereignist politics that does not turn its back on poor Indigenous and working-class women. As long as women are in danger, we have no choice but to take over empty buildings. As Dana said at the Oppenheimer women's meeting, poor women "have to band together or we'll all be in hell." If hell is a COVID-19 hothouse shelter then the Women's Wing of the #Squat2Survive movement is our salvation.

THE STORY OF CLOUD CITY AND THE PROBLEM WITH BC'S \$300 WELFARE BONUS



Captain Kirk and Spock look up at Cloud City in an episode of Star Trek

Tana Copperthwaite

Once there existed two societies in a place called Cloud City: Upper and Lower. Upper was “enlightened”: learned scholars, scientists, teachers, artisans, politicians; non-violent.

Lower was a base society. Sub-IQ. Subject to Upper’s control: their place was to keep the Upper from having to do anything to inhibit its own beauty. Lower hated the filthy, back-breaking work, with all the heavy toll and exhaustion, but they could not rise above what they construed as truth from Upper: that its function was to maintain Upper.

One day a woman from Lower found a hidden route into Upper Cloud City. It was very different and she began to form new ideas out of the necessity of security and survival. She went back to Lower and brought more Lowers with her to Upper. They too began forming ideas and previously unheard-of concepts. Through the exploration of theory, one of them discovered an absolute truth about Lower: people who lived there were being suppressed.

The Lowers, in protest, ceased to work and after a while Cloud City began to sink towards

the ground. The Uppers felt their brilliance slipping into the sea of ignorance below and only then agreed to accept the Lower into their society without further doubt or question.

This story is, of course, fiction but allow me to open your eyes to some real myths and truths!

Myths and facts about the cost of being Lower

The COVID-19 pandemic is affecting everyone, but the government is giving more support to some people than others. People who lost work to COVID are getting \$2,000 a month from Ottawa while people who were already poor and on welfare are only getting a COVID bonus

of \$300. They use some myths to explain why:

Myth: People of low income don't need to have cars or extra money to pay for them. They can take the bus because it's cheaper.

Truth: At the rate bus fares are increasing, it's no longer affordable to take the bus anywhere. Extra zones equals extra fares; it costs almost \$20 for two people to ride to Vancouver from Maple Ridge. Low-income parents would be able to keep their children safe if they could drive them where they needed to go. It is not cheap to take a bus or train, and cab fares are extravagant.

Myth: Employed people have extra costs in the area of bills. They need less income, whereas welfare recipients don't require as much, having less bills.

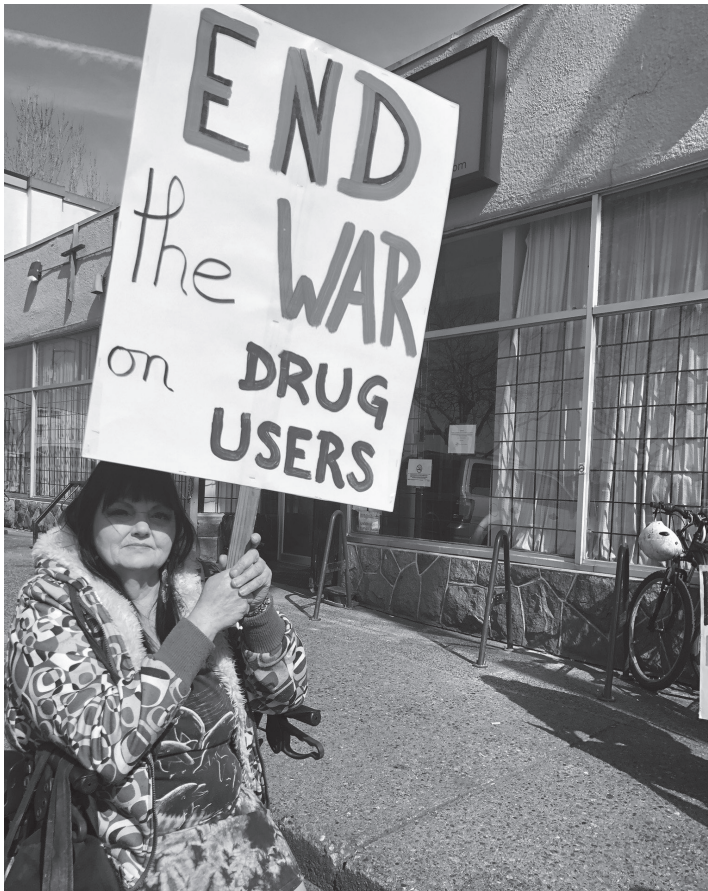
Fact: The above statement is completely false! Employed and unemployed alike require these following services to be content: telephone, Hydro, internet, gas, water, garbage.

Myth: Welfare people can get by on what they get. They don't need more. It'll just be wasted on booze or drugs.

Truth: This is one of the most ignorant statements! The phrase "living below the poverty line" means just that. We receive less money than a family considered "poor." Welfare recipients tend to live where rent is cheap, and are forced to shop where they live, which is where food prices are not cheap. Discount club stores are generally in outlying suburbia. So here we are again.

Dehumanizing the poor and keeping them poor

People say that people who have lost jobs have it tough because they have



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

lost income they're used to, so it's harder for them than for people who were already poor. But COVID has made poor people lose income too, and it's not being replaced.

I believe that the sex trade workers have been hit the hardest, although I have no stats to back up my claim. But with the stigma that accompanies sex work is the scarcity of clients during the time of pandemic.

Believing that welfare recipients don't need the same amount of money as a working family with the same amount of family members is an insult equal to a slap in the face or a kick in the ass. Are their children so inferior that we don't need to spend the same amount for them? Aren't they worth it? They bloody well are!

We've watched our own government ignore an entire segment of our society, already downtrodden and worn out by hardship the likes of which many of us can't imagine. The poor have been shown how much value they are held in: none.

It takes years of pain and suffering to bring a person's head and heart so low that when they get an extra \$300, they think it's a windfall. Consider this: EI is being sped up for some. People who were employed at the onstart of the virus and are newly unemployed are receiving \$2,000 a month for four months.

Those who were already not employed, and have less, will receive \$300 a month for three months. So the people who were doing fairly, if not great, are getting \$8,000 total, while those who are always in hardship are getting \$900 total.

That's a fine way to show us where we stand in the eyes of our government. We are given a pittance when we need it more than ever. In a time when food services to the poor are shut down in the name of public health, and when libraries, drop-ins, and coffee shops, the only places the poor can spend their days or go to the bathroom, are closed. We are being told, "Here, go buy some ice cream and stop complaining!"

It's an insult. Kill COVID-19 – not us

"I BELIEVE IN THE FUTURE"

A Black Indigenous woman's struggle for home, family, and safety

Listen Chen

Karen is a long-time activist and resident of the DTES who reached out to Red Braid in March to ask for help organizing a squat. Karen's leadership and initiative were central to making the Stewart Squat happen.

On a sunny afternoon a few days before the squat, we sat down to talk about Karen's experiences in the DTES and her clear-eyed vision of the political possibilities of this moment.

How long have you been a resident of the DTES?

I've been coming around here for 40 years. I've lived in New West and different parts here and there, but mainly around here. I had about a good 10 years [in the Women's Shelter, on and off]. I don't know what helped keep me sane from all of that. I've seen so many painful things.

And for those 10 years in the shelter, you had to leave every morning and check in every four hours?

Yeah, in the rain even. You had to carry all your stuff, you couldn't leave it there. You had to check in every four hours or you'd lose your bed.

How long have you been in the Nora Hendrix modulars?



Karen Lane at Oppenheimer Park tent city (The Volcano)

Only a year.

How safe do you feel there as a Black Indigenous woman?

I don't feel safe at all. We have more men than women. Lots of violence, police there every weekend. Three stabbings we've had, two tasers, bear spraying. That one kid that broke in 26 times in different people's suites and it wasn't till he started on the manager till he got asked to leave.

What kind of housing do you think would feel safe, secure, and appropriate for women?

Self-contained suites, with separate balconies, like your own little space for outside, so you don't have to be mingling too close with the neighbors. Where you don't have staff to answer to about who you can have come in or

not, you know. Where you can do your thing, make your mind up how you like to live and who you'd like to come over. I can't even have my own son over, I can't have my grandchildren over because you have to be 25 to get in because of the violence and drug use.

So it doesn't feel safe and you're isolated from your loved ones.

100%.

Tell me why you're so interested in starting a squat.

Vancouver has a big, large amount of homelessness. And for the women – I've seen women go mentally ill, watching them in the shelter, they come in young and maybe because I was older and had a family and knew what that life and that security felt like, paying bills and things, I owned a home. I know what these things are like, these young people never even had that opportunity, you know. And they come in scared and there's lots of bullies and drug dealers and they get intimidated and pushed around. I've watched them go mentally ill to the point that they can't even take a bath anymore. That's a sad thing to watch. I can still pass those girls every day and they don't even know who I am anymore.

Homelessness just keeps getting worse and worse, and it's awful to watch. The rich are getting richer, balancing their books on the poor. It's not right. I've been fighting a long time to change things.

People around here aren't taking the pandemic seriously. I was at the bank and everybody was lined up close, I had to keep stepping back and saying, this is my space. When every day is a crisis, you can't see into the future. It's so hard to see into the future because you're living by the hour, by the minute sometimes. It's sad, it's overwhelming.

What do you want all poor and homeless people to hear?

That I really feel that this is the time to reclaim – to take these buildings, because I don't think we'll have opportunities to do that any time soon. A lot of these places are empty, and people need to be housed right now. It's crazy, I don't understand it. The government won't do it.

When the crisis first hit I went to Carnegie to talk to OHCW and they said that the government was going to get a hotel for the homeless. I said, are you sure? They said, that's what they're saying. Within two days, Carnegie was shut down. So I was really let down by that, because I was excited for that to happen. I'm worried for my son, I'm worried for a lot of people in this park who I know. They don't have news and TV to follow up on what's going on in the world.

I really believe we could make a movement, you know. Once people see that this can be done, I believe they will have more faith in it too, because a lot of people are like, "I don't think that's going to happen," or they're scared to get arrested, don't want to go to jail.

It takes some people to charge ahead, start the movement, and show that it's possible, who have that courage and vision to see into the future and see what's possible, to inspire others with action.

Right, yeah. You got to make the action. It's just like Oppenheimer Park, if we didn't make the action, none of these people would be here.

Why do you think you are able to see that future and feel inspired by the possibilities of this moment?

I don't know, I believe in the future. I believe that it's possible, that's what I believe. I feel that very strongly.

PRISONER DEATH IN CUSTODY

Rights groups call for Public Inquest and Immediate Release of Prisoners to Stop Spread of COVID-19

We are publishing a news release written by a coalition of prison justice organizations including Joint Effort, Union of BC Indian Chiefs, Abolition Coalition, and BC Civil Liberties Association about the outbreak of COVID-19 in the Mission prison. The death of an unnamed incarcerated person due to the pandemic is nothing less than an execution by the Canadian state that had and retains the responsibility to release all prisoners from the immediate and deadly danger of the COVID-19 pandemic. - Editors.



Mission Prison (Global News)

Prisoner rights, human rights, Indigenous and civil liberties groups are reacting to the horrific news of a death in Correctional Services of Canada's custody of a person incarcerated at Mission Institution in BC. Mission Institution is the site of the largest COVID-19 outbreak at a federal institution in the country.

This death is the first reported COVID-related death of a federal inmate. A prisoner transferred from Mission Institution now serving time in Atlantic Canada knew the prisoner who died in custody. In his words, "We were good friends and I knew he was in the hospital. That could be me next."

According to Joint Effort, a community group working with women prisoners in the Lower Mainland: "We are devastated by the death in custody of a prisoner at Mission Institution. People who are incarcerated are people who

we are connected to, whose dignity, livelihood and survival are in peril because of systemic inaction. We have been urgently appealing to elected and appointed government officials to release prisoners and people awaiting hearings. We warned them that their inaction would led to an exponential growth in COVID-19 infections endangering the most vulnerable, especially prisoners who are over fifty years old, pregnant, immunocompromised, sick or have pre-existing conditions that make them high risk for dying from COVID-19."

The groups are calling for an immediate inquest, as authorized by the Coroner's Act. Says Harsha Walia of B.C. Civil Liberties Association: "We call on BC's chief coroner and BC's Solicitor General to direct an inquest into this tragic and preventable death. Amidst a global pandemic and growing concerns about

the public health of people held in prisons and jails, an inquest is absolutely in the public interest and is necessary to ensure that similar deaths can be prevented. The Parole Board of Canada, Correctional Service of Canada, and provincial and federal governments must use every appropriate legal mechanism to expeditiously and compassionately release as many incarcerated people as possible right now and prevent further deaths in custody.”

Brandon Gabriel, a member of the Kwantlen First Nation and support worker who has worked with formerly incarcerated people in addiction treatment facilities, states: “Our Indigenous communities are unfairly and disproportionately represented in the corrections system because of an ongoing colonial history. All prisoners are undergoing such duress during the COVID-19 pandemic. So much so, that the passing of a prisoner in our unceded territory has now occurred.

This is unacceptable. All humans deserve basic dignity, health, and sanitation during this unprecedented health crisis.”

According to Grand Chief Stewart Phillip, President of the Union of BC Indian Chiefs: “The passivity of the Government of Canada as COVID-19 spreads through federal prison populations has been an alarming display of inhumanity, and one with lethal consequences. As we mourn the death of the first inmate from COVID-19 in the Mission Institution, we demand urgent action to prevent further suffering. A staggering one-third of the inmates in federal custody are Indigenous. We demand an immediate and proactive response from Canada to stem the spread of COVID-19 in the federal prison system; anything less would be a continuation of colonial violence against Indigenous peoples who are disproportionately bearing the weight of this virus inside prisons.”

“Flattening the curve of COVID-19 must include correctional facilities. All levels of government need an immediate plan to reduce the number of people in prisons and jails, and they must ensure every prisoner is able to access income assistance and social supports immediately upon release. For those who remain imprisoned, there must be full access to extended healthcare, harm reduction supplies, and hygiene necessities. We are gravely concerned that solitary confinement and lockdown are being relied on as purported health measures. With physical visitations being cancelled, family members and volunteer groups must be able to maintain contact through phones and online platforms,” further states Joint Effort.

El Jones, a member of the national Abolition Coalition and scholar at St. Mary’s University, has been part of a cross-country campaign calling on the federal government to act on releasing prisoners. Two weeks ago media outlets reported that federal Minister of Public Safety Bill Blair asked Correctional Service of Canada and the Parole Board of Canada to put together a plan to release federal prisoners for consideration.

“Today, tragically, the hands of our government have blood on them. This death was preventable if our governments, Correctional Services, and the Parole Board had acted in time to release prisoners. There is no death sentence in Canada. Pandemic is not punishment. Incarcerating people during COVID-19 is a human rights disaster that has now led to the death of one man, while infections grow in prisons across the country. We remind the public that prisons are never safe, and that incarceration at this time puts the health of all our communities at risk. If Prime Minister Justin Trudeau will not open the doors for eligible prisoners, more people will leave the prison in body bags,” states Jones.

SUPPORT THE MOVEMENT TO "#SQUAT2SURVIVE COVID-19"

On April 17th, poor and homeless leaders launched the Kennedy Stewart Squat by seizing a vacant, publicly-owned building in Vancouver, unceded and occupied territory of the Squamish, Musqueam, and Tsleil-Waututh nations. This is the second squat launched in the name of the #SQUAT2SURVIVE movement in Metro Vancouver since the COVID-19 crisis began.

The Stewart Squat, like the Hothouse Squat before, is 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 #SQUAT2SURVIVE movement 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 #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

4 DEMANDS OF THE KENNEDY STEWART SQUAT

April 17, 2020

We acknowledge that the Kennedy Stewart Squat is on the unceded and occupied territory of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-waututh nations.

Today we are opening the Kennedy Stewart 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.

Rather than watch our friends die while we wait for politicians like Stewart to throw us some crumbs, we are taking action into our own hands.

The #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 for admission to COVID emergency shelters and hotels is a setup that is causing a widespread outbreak in poor communities.

There are tens of thousands of empty hotel units all over British Columbia that the NDP government has the power, under the Province's state of emergency declaration, to take and use in order to house anyone on the streets or in shelters that put them in danger of contracting COVID-19. In downtown Vancouver alone there are 12,000 hotels, the vast majority of which are unoccupied. We

demand that the Province make use of these empty spaces to help prevent the spread of COVID-19 in communities that colonialism and capitalism targets for destruction.

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 street sweeps and all enforcement of bylaws and criminal code laws that criminalize poverty, homelessness, drug use, and informal and illicit economies like sex work.
3. **Health care and safe supply for all:** Make a safe, high quality supply of opiates, stimulants, tobacco, alcohol, 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. Supply nutritious food to all who need it, COVID-19 testing for all members of vulnerable communities whether or not they have symptoms, and make sure everyone has access to cleaning supplies and sanitary living conditions. Close the information gap by suspending phone bills and providing free internet and cellular data across BC.
4. **Economic support for the poor:** Make welfare and disability \$2000/month to match the Canada Emergency Response Benefit 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.