

W.O.O.D.S.Q.U.A.T. #49

LETTER TO MAYOR & COUNCIL / ELECTION ANALYSIS



“Invest in affordable housing, stop slum landlords and redevelop direlict buildings.”

- COPE election flyer, distributed to each resident of the Woodward's Squat in October

WE WILL WIN

FORECAST: “*Tonight*..Mainly cloudy. Low 5. *Wednesday*..Mainly cloudy. Fog patches in the morning. High 8. *Thursday*..Cloudy w/sunny periods. Low 3. High 9. *Friday*..Cloudy w/sunny periods. Low 4. High 9. *Saturday*..A mix of sun and cloud. Low 4. High 8.”

DAY 81 – TUESDAY – 03 DEC 02

LETTER TO MAYOR & COUNCIL

03 December 2002: Day 81 of the Woodward's Squat

Dear Mayor and Council,

Welcome to office. We understand that many of you had a hand in ensuring that the City did not move on the enforcement order over the past four days. Thank you. We appreciate your intervention and will remember that you did this for the residents of the Woodward's Squat.

We also appreciate your agreement to let the Woodward's Squat stand for at least another 7 nights, at least until Tuesday 10 December, in order that the City may provide decent and dignified housing for everyone remaining on the street.

There is, however, outstanding business left over from the previous City administration.

We recommend the following remedies:

1. The City should issue a written apology to the residents of the Woodward's Squat for the destruction of their possessions by Engineering Services on Sunday 22 September;
2. The City should take disciplinary action against the senior manager in Engineering Services who ordered the destruction; and
3. The City should provide fair compensation for the destruction of these possessions.

Our preliminary inventory of items destroyed by the City was distributed to Mayor and Council at your meeting on 22 October. Inquiries regarding property destruction and the process of providing fair compensation should be directed to the Woodward's Legal Defense Committee at <woodwards-legal-defense@lists.resist.ca>. We believe that the WLDC will be sending you a letter regarding our proposed remedy early next week.

There is, also, new business pertaining to the housing crisis in the downtown eastside.

First, there are the steps the City needs to take in order to make a peaceful transition from the street to decent and dignified housing:

1. The City must negotiate with elected representatives from the Woodward's Squat over the terms of the transition;
2. The City must ensure that any contracts entered into between the City, hotel owners, service providers, and

agencies make provisions for self-management of the space by the residents;

3. The City must ensure a peaceful resolution to the crisis. (The residents of Woodward's Squat are committed to a non-violent solution and any suggestion that there are weapons or "potential weapons" such as "posts, heavy pipes, construction materials, boards with nails protruding from them, and syringes," as one of the City affidavits asserts, is not only ridiculous but dangerous. Unsubstantiated rumours and provocative statements like these may very well lead directly to a premature, unreasonable, and extremely violent Police action. This is irresponsible and unacceptable. If there are any Police actions because of these statements and rumours circulated by City staff, we will hold the City responsible for those Police actions.); and

4. The City must replace Judy Graves immediately. (Many of the residents of the squat do not trust Judy Graves, the only staff person the City has assigned to process over 200 people. This lack of trust arises from what are perceived to be false statements made by her in her affidavits and the failure of many arrangements she had promised. We are especially concerned that the statistical data she is generating is flawed because when a resident declines her approaches [because the resident does not believe she is competent], Graves is reporting that this resident has "refused an offer of housing." This is terribly misleading and we cannot accept the legitimacy of any City or Police actions based upon her reports).

Second, there are steps that the City must take in order to fulfil the COPE campaign promise to "Invest in affordable housing, stop slum landlords and redevelop derelict buildings." I believe the Coalition of Woodward's Squatters and Supports and the Mutual Aid Housing Association will be in contact with you regarding longer-term innovative low-income housing projects. We would like to stress two actions that are within your area of functional responsibility that ought to be part of this process:

1. The City should draft a civic anti-vacancy by-law to seize and convert empty, abandoned buildings into social housing; and
2. The City should provide full disclosure of all information regarding the proposed sale and development of the Woodward's building.

We recognize that the responsibility for housing rests primarily with the federal and provincial governments. The City of Vancouver, under the NPA administration, was able to divert our attention away from targeting

their buddies at these two other levels of government. We were thoroughly caught up in litigation initiated by the City for the past two months. Now that a COPE administration is at the helm, we hope that this style of diversion may come to an end so we may together set our sights on our real enemies: the ruling class.

In conclusion, we would like to note that there will be at least three significant consequences of taking down the Woodward's Squat:

1. There will be an increase in violence in the vicinity of the Woodward's Building. Over the past 81 days the squat has provided its own volunteer health and safety crews. These crews have provided free services to people outside of the squat as well: to other homeless people, to visitors and supporters, to local residents in need. These services will come to an end when the squat is taken down. The result will be a return to violence-as-usual.

2. There will be an increase in the drug trade in the vicinity of the Woodward's Building. Over the past 81 days the attention that the squat has brought to the area has scared off many middle- and upper-class people who drive to the south side of Hastings Street to purchase crack cocaine. Citizens from the west side of town who drive to the area to purchase their drugs have not wanted to be caught on camera and have stopped coming into the neighbourhood to make their purchases. The drug dealers have complained that the squat has cut into their business. Some dealers have claimed to be losing up to \$5000 per day. We expect that when the squat leaves this threat of public exposure will too.

3. There will be a decrease in the level of sanitation in the vicinity of the Woodward's Building. The residents of the squat keep their home clean. They keep the three sidewalks they are camped out on clean and they have assisted Engineering Services crews to clean up the neighbourhood as an act of good will. Local residents have attested to the state of sanitation before and during the Woodward's Squat; some have sworn affidavits attesting to the contribution that squatters have made to the general clean-up and revitalization of the area.

Our organization would still like to assist the City with a peaceful resolution to the housing crisis. We have offered our help many times to the Mayor and Council over the past two months but have yet to be taken up on any of our offers. Please contact us at any time. Our emergency number is 604-727-8471 in case you need it.

Yours truly,
Aaron Vidaver
Friends of the Woodward's Squat

ELECTION ANALYSIS

by Shannon Bundock

Yesterday, December 2nd, the newly-elected COPE majority took control of the Vancouver City Council. This rise to power was facilitated by the social and political climate in the city during the weeks leading up to the election. Public opinion was shaped by key election issues. The efforts made by an unlikely coalition of working poor, drug users, urban aboriginals, disabled people, homeless people and many others were successful in mobilizing a sympathetic public around the crises of the downtown eastside: from the four-pillar approach to harm-reduction to the housing crisis. The housing crisis as an election issue gained prominence as a result of the work done by the Squatters and their supporters to highlight it. The Coalition of Progressive Electors (COPE) is a party based on the principles of social democracy and therefore addresses social problems with reformist politics. This party relies on the momentum of social movements to promote its legitimacy and claim legitimacy for electoral politics. Social democrats rely on social movements to influence public opinion and gain support for social issues. They then ally themselves with these movements, in hopes to be seen as providing a solution to the social crisis.

The Squatters constantly and persistently made clear the responsibility of the municipality to provide social housing. The Woodward's Coalition of Squatters and Supporters drew up demands that specifically addressed the responsibilities of the civic government and the Coalition called upon them to implement these demands, asserting that any inaction was unjustified. Through this, COPE candidates attempted to suggest the problem was not a result of an overall municipal trend to offload civic responsibility, but rather the problem lay in the specific council, its inaction due to the NPA majority. Throughout the election, COPE alleged that, if given the chance, they were willing to deal with the housing crisis in a meaningful way. COPE allied themselves with the struggle at Woodward's and took it on as their own struggle. COPE candidate Jim Green even went as far as to tell the Vancouver Sun he was disappointed the organizers did not involve him in planning the opening of the squat. As a result, COPE was successful in convincing many people in this city, including many Squatters, that they were serious about finding and carrying out real solutions to the housing crisis. Despite this, some skepticism remained and it has been apparent that our struggle does not end with the victory of COPE. We will need to continue demanding the civic government take responsibility for housing. COPE must be held accountable for promises that were made to the Squat and we need to demand they recognize the crucial role we played in their rise to power.

We must realize that the success of our struggle will not be determined by politicians. The power in this struggle is in the unity and commitment we have as a mass movement. With this power, the role of electoral politics becomes arbitrary. The only reason our struggle is being addressed by politicians is because we have power and we are forcing them to address our issues. We are able to influence and steer public opinion in our favour because we are right in what we are doing.

The housing crisis is affecting many, many people in this province and country and that will only change if we win the battle for affordable, dignified housing. We know that social democrats are characterized by their ability to give us nothing but tokenistic support. This support has so far amounted to empty promises. Our power lies in the incredibly strong public support that has succeeded in forcing candidates notoriously oppositional to social justice to come out in favour of social housing. During the lead-up to the election, mayoral hopeful Jennifer Clarke was put on the spot by a Squatter and asked if she supported social housing at Woodward's, she said "YES", she and the NPA did.

The Woodward's Squat has made it clear that we must use electoral politics tactically within the goals of the movement. We must push for our demands with vigilance, but still maintain a healthy mistrust for any politician that promises to solve our problems. This experience with electoral politics has proven that winning Woodward's will not happen through deals in a boardroom with a private developer. Winning Woodward's will not happen during a city council meeting or in the BC legislature. Winning Woodward's will only and can only happen in the streets with a mass-based movement.

"What I'm saying is you don't provide anybody with any warmth, any food, by giving them an injunction. You can't eat an injunction. Whatever we're spending on lawyers for injunctions and surveillance should be spent instead on immediately finding people a warm, secure, safe place to sleep at night pending the finding of housing."

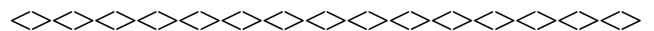
- Councillor Tim Louis, 18 Nov, to the *Georgia Straight*

"Housing should be a basic right of everyone everywhere. Tomorrow COPE will be presenting a motion [at City Council]. Tim Louis has a motion that he will present to Council asking that everyone here who needs housing be offered housing before any further action takes place. [cheers] [Audience: That's why we voted for you!] We are here in support of everyone's right to affordable housing. I am so pleased that this has drawn so much attention. It's a crisis. Housing is a basic human right. [cheers]."

- Councillor Ellen Woodsworth, 25 November, at a Rally to Support the Squat, Abbott Street

COALITION DEMANDS THE COALITION OF WOODWARDS SQUATTERS AND SUPPORTERS

1. Develop Woodward's as social housing immediately. There must be an allotment of housing in the building for aboriginal people equal to or greater than the percentage of aboriginal people in the Downtown Eastside.
2. Reverse the cuts to social housing and all social services.
3. Draft a civic anti-vacancy by-law to seize and convert empty, abandoned buildings into social housing.
4. Full disclosure of all information regarding the proposed sale and development of the building.
5. The Federal government must fund and support the development of aboriginal business in the proposed commercial storefronts on the ground floor of Woodward's. These storefronts must also include an urban native self-governing office with drop-in / support services and culturally sensitive native liaison workers from the community.
6. Decent and dignified immediate shelter for all homeless squatters forced from Woodward's and asked to leave the sidewalk in front of the building.



Woodsquat is published by the Friends of the Woodward's Squat. FWS is a material support group. It does not represent the Woodward's Squat or Woodward's Coalition for Social Housing and does not speak for any other of the many groups and individuals comprising this DTES housing action. For daily updates, background info, or contacts visit our website: www.woodsquat.net. Cover photo by Jason <jason@person.co.uk>.