

## **“Safe Streets” A Dead End**

On Tuesday February 10th the Housing Action Committee (HAC), the Anti-Poverty Committee (APC), End Legislated Poverty (ELP) and a fist full of supporters stormed the stone sidewalks of Gastown. The small army of well over a hundred poor and working poor people lined the streets in a mass “pan-in.” Tourists, who usually walk by panners with disdain, were overwhelmed with shock. The police who are more then used to harassing individual panhandlers where left powerless by the mob.

Members of ELP passed “know your rights” cards down the lines of out stretched hands and hats. The card clarifies the law protecting a person’s right to panhandle under section 7 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. ELP made the cards after years of legal battles which have finally succeeded in upholding poor people’s right to work.

The mass demonstration was a response to the growing poor bashing coming from business and government. The Business Improvement Association (BIA), a committee of Vancouver business owners, carries a lot of weight with the city and often throws that weight down upon people living on the streets or who make their living on the street. They are further conspiring to persecute poor people by enacting more by-laws that would enable police and private security to ticket and push around panhandlers.

Recently the top goons of the BIA have hired free agent Dave Jones as their crime czar. Dave Jones has a long history of oppressing poor people. Before being recruited by the BIA, Jones was a top cop in the Downtown Eastside. During the heroic Woodward’s squat he was instrumental in developing the police and cities “divide and conquer” campaign. He worked tirelessly to undermine the solidarity in the squat and on the streets. He is also a world renowned strategist of crowd control and was involved in the security discussions regarding the bloody G-8 demonstrations in Genoa, as well as the G-8 meetings two years ago outside Calgary.

Now with his long history of police repression he has moved on to crime prevention in the private sector. It seems his first crusade on behalf of his BIA employers is to conquer the livelihoods of panhandlers. He has publicly stated that the first step is to encourage the public to refrain from referring to people asking for change as “panhandlers,” but to call them “beggars” instead. He envisions people purchasing pretend keys from charities and handing them out to people in need who can then redeem them for a sandwich.

Unfortunately for Jones and his cronies he has lipped off too loud outside of closed meetings and we on the street have heard of his plans. When we marched pass his office, (that he had to flee from) we left a letter warning him we are sick and tired of his begging to the police for more enforcement and that we don’t want any of his solicited bullshit.

Representing the government’s attitude is Lorne Mayencourt, the Liberal MLA for Vancouver-Burrard. He has threatened a few times now to push a private members bill that would see a series of new laws passed that would mimic the Safe Streets Act that was disastrously implemented in Ontario at the beginning of 2000.

The Ontario Safe Streets Act (OSSA) is an extension of legislated class war. It has given the police power to ticket, fine and/or detain street active people. Using squeegeing and "aggressive panhandling" as its justification for intensifying the then ruling Conservative parties war on the poor, a full out attack was waged on the streets by the police. Mass arrests and ticketing forced many people who depended on making their living through spare change further into isolation.

After waves of cuts to welfare and social services, women were left with nowhere to go. Involvement in the sex trade as well as overdoses increased. The Safe Street Act made driving through downtown less annoying for the wealthy but is a dead end for the poor.

The OSSA represents the ideology of the state and the aspirations of business. Through public manipulation the Liberals and the BIA are generating a propaganda war against poor people that will, as in Ontario, justify repressive laws. As the welfare cuts continue and policing increases, the city and province think that expanding the arsenal of laws and penalties will help keep poor people off the streets and out of the public eye. But by warehousing poor people in shelters and jails where the outside can not see in, the crimes of capitalism will continue with no accountability.

By marching through Gastown we have proven to the police, city, business and the government that we will not remain silent while they plot new ways to persecute our brothers and sisters. We have shown them, as well as ourselves, how rapidly we can mobilize a large group of people who can cause a great degree of economic disruption. We feel economic disruption is the only power we have as poor people.

If the Liberals are allowed to continue their assault on all working and poor people our actions will intensify. There are an increasing number of demonstrations on the streets and more people are attending. This mobilization is not being lead by individuals wanting to go only so far but by the people who are fighting to win!

HAC/APC organizer  
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