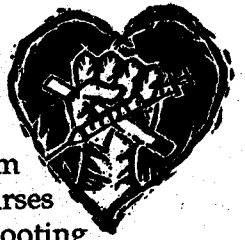


# FIGHTING BACK IN THE DTES



## A GHETTO IS NO COMMUNITY

While the Carnegie Center celebrates its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year, those of us living in the Downtown Eastside (DTES) have nothing to celebrate. At the anniversary on April 27<sup>th</sup>, 2003 speakers talked about community, although few of them have lived and seen their friends die in a ghetto constructed by politicians and enforced by a violent police force. Policing poverty is nothing new in the DTES.

Our new COPE regime, who were elected on the backs of the poor, have done nothing but furthered our suffering, the suffering that they exploited for votes. With this constant assault, we in the DTES have come to see that we have been abandoned by those on the outside who promised us assistance. As the health catastrophe worsens here, more money is put into maintain the quarantine. The programs that were funded to help us are only helping poverty pimps cash in. The job of the police and private security firms is to keep us corralled in our ghetto, to be herded through their courts and jails only to end up back in the same place we started - on the streets with no money, no housing, no chance.

We have been forced to realize that we must defend one another. That we must fight for the rights and dignity that are ours. The struggle from the DTES must come from within the DTES. When one of our brothers or sisters pay the ultimate price in this class/drug war, their death is our death, their heart is our heart and that is the heart of our struggle.

For our brothers and sisters.

## THE OCCUPATION ESCULATES

When we, the residents of the Downtown Eastside, were informed that fifty new cops were to be reallocated into the DTES, we wasted no time discussing the effects their brutality would have on the statistics. We are the blood and bones of those statistics and enough of our bones have been broken and our blood lost, to know: unless we fought more suffering would come. On April 5<sup>th</sup>, the Saturday before the police escalated their occupation of our ghetto, we took to the streets. Under the banner of VANDU (Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users) 150 of us snaked through the streets. Marching to a proposed safe injection site we demanded that it be opened immediately, then marching to a community policing station we declared "no new police." As we held up traffic and took over intersections, our brothers and sisters on the sidewalk saw that we do have the power to stand together.

The next Monday, April 7<sup>th</sup>, the 50 new cops rode in on their horses. Many of the cops have been reallocated from community policing centers all over the city which have lost their funding from the provincial government. Cops that are use to accommodating suburban disturbances have now been shipped into our ghetto with a vengeance. Other cops are from domestic dispute squads that were also cut by the BC Liberals, so instead of responding to women in terror they are terrorizing the people who are forced to live out on the streets.

## SAFE SITES, FOR US BY US

On this same day of invasion our safe site was opened by a hand full of DTES residents and supporters. For all this time "the safer site" has been able to provide

to constant surveillance, intimidation and illegal jack-ups by the police. People have been able, in our sanctuary from the police, to shoot up safely with nurses and peers present as opposed to shooting alone in a hotel room or in a back alley. As well the safe site sends out witnessing shifts to patrol the cops. Taking down badge numbers and video taping their abuses lets the cops know that they are being watched and will be held accountable; at least in their legal system.

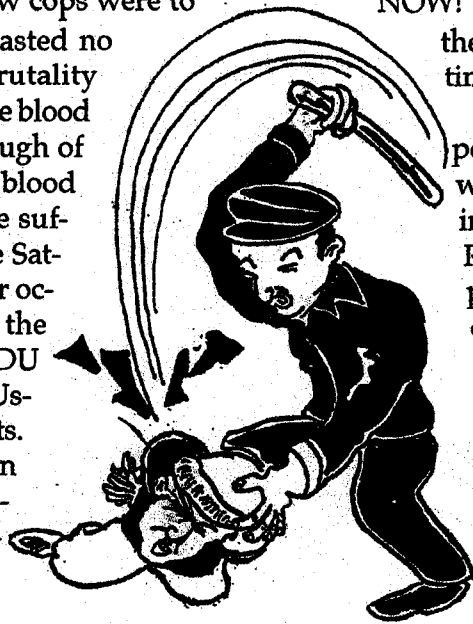
## OUR STUGGLE ESCULATES

On April 8<sup>th</sup>, a day after the added police presence, we rented a school bus and took a field trip to city hall. We did not wait to find out the consequences before taking action for we knew if we didn't nobody else would. The city council was to decide if they should shell out more money to the police to keep their occupation funded for an extra six months after the first three months. Representing our brothers and sisters was the Housing Action Committee (HAC), an organization of residents, squatters, homeless persons, and people living in shelters. We came to make our message loud and clear and loud it was. For almost half an hour, fifty of us held council captive to our rage. We let them know we would fight tooth and nail against them and their police. We educated them on statistics that had been collected by drug users, proving the absurdity of policing drug use. Of 260 people asked about encounters with the cops, in this survey, 65% said after getting their drugs confiscated they immediately got more dope. Some reported they where forced to steal for more money and some said they had to turn to the sex trade, the most dangerous profession in the world. We left city hall chanting: "SAFE SITE NOW!" Leaving everyone present knowing that the struggle that has been brewing for a long time was surfacing to new levels.

During all the publicity we and the police were getting, the real communication was happing between organizations working in the DTES. The Coalition for Harm Reduction was established linking anti-poverty groups together with lawyers and doctors, all united together against the police and for a safe site. The coalition immediately began on creating a base of support for the safe site and our overall struggle. At the same time as meetings where being held in our supporters offices disruptive actions were being conducted in the offices and meetings of our enemies.

## NO HOPE FOR COPE

The "peoples" mayor, Larry Campbell who has made it obvious he no longer needs poor people, had the gull to hold a meeting on the four pillars. The four pillars - prevention, treatment reduction, and enforcement - are the foundations for a "plan of action" crafted by the former mayor and some suits who know nothing of the reality we face day to day. We believed it was impossible to discus the other three pillars while it was only the one pillar - enforcement - that was being supported and used as a baton to beat the poor. Angry residents, the only representatives from the DTES, were not even invited and were dragged out when it was their turn to address the room full of ignorant COPE supporters. One man was dragged out by the police chief and two other cops, who retched his arm behind his back, while he yelled that by policing the needle exchange distribution



in attendance screamed the same thing and were also made to leave. We stood outside the hall when people were exiting the meeting and spare changed them for money for a safe site since we weren't getting anything from COPE who refuse to put any money into actually helping poor people. On his way out we asked Larry Campbell if he wanted to have a real discussion with us, his response was his turned back and his middle finger.

But we knew we would see him real soon, that same night actually because while our soup lines were being broken up by cops on horses, COPE was having a \$150 a plate dinner to celebrate all their achievements. Over 30 of our brothers and sisters showed up to crash their party. We set up a poor people's picket line to expose the hypocrisy of those crossing us. COPE has done nothing but systematically lie to use. They promised the Woodward's squatters social housing, they bought the building and are offering the same offer as before: 100 units for poor people and three times as many units for yuppies. They assured residents of our ghetto that they were against the Olympic bid that would force many of us into homelessness, but then they supported an uneven vote that allowed their financial supporters to spend millions of dollars on a propaganda campaign to convince the middle class that money is better spent on highways than social services that would save peoples lives. Then there is their most acclaimed

promise: a safe injection site. Claiming council's hands were tied and blaming government bureaucracy, COPE has done nothing but set dates for the opening of the site. These dates have come and gone while our brothers and sisters overdose in alleys and washrooms. When COPE is exposed for the liars they are they will have to save face. To ensure their progressive persona they will give into our demands and hand out some money to show the media just how much they care. In their attempts to suppress our dissent we can hold them up for funding for social housing and money into different programs.



#### HEALTH CANADA MAKES US SICK

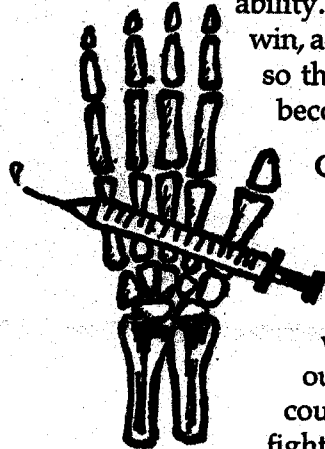
We know COPE are liars and their supporters have no intention to push for a safe site, that is why we went public with our safe site. We had to open it for ourselves by ourselves. All levels of government have deliberately reneged on their responsibilities. On April Fifteen HAC members stormed the health Canada office demanding to speak to Health Minister Anne McLean. We were told it would take 2 weeks for a response but after explaining to staff that the only political power poor people have is disruption and we would close down their offices, those two weeks quickly became five minutes. The response as was expected, was symbolic, but we did prove that because poor people cannot afford the time or resources to go through bureaucratic channels direct action and the threat of economic disruption is the only way our voice is heard by the powers that be.

One thing is for sure, there listening now. On Tuesday, April 29<sup>th</sup>, the safe site that had been operating for 3 weeks driven by users and supporters opened "publicly". The Housing Action Committee marched down Hastings to the site and opened it for a press conference where swarms of media reported statements made by representatives of the Coalition for Harm Reduction. Spokes persons from the space explained why it is necessary that professionals and volunteers come down from other neighborhoods to work in solidarity with our bat-

tle. Anti-poverty activists articulated why civil disobedience was the only way services could be provided and how this action was applying pressure to the reneging politicians to save face and do what they said they would do. Overall the diversity of the coalition was shown in unity with poor drug users beginning and closing the press conference.

#### STILL NO JUSTICE?

Now that a movement of poor people has resurfaced and come together to defend one another and fight back we must look at how other movements that originated in the DTES lost momentum. Since so far we have achieved small victories and are maintaining momentum others who were here before and are now nowhere to be seen, will try to jump on the bandwagon. There is a lot of money to be made from our poverty, that is why our ghetto is built as a fortress to keep us in (services like detox and "safe shelters" built within the quarantines walls ensure that when we get out of treatment we repeat the cycle, again.) COPE has shown that by pretending to side with the poor, agencies of control can achieve more power, more votes, funding contracts etc. For poverty pimps and charities there are millions of dollars to be made and very little has to actually reach those in need. For most non-government organizations siding with poor people on one isolated campaign increases their respectability. When it looks like we might win, activists and politicians take over so that what was to be our victory becomes there success.



#### ONLY TOGETHER CAN WE FIGHT

Most recently we saw this buy off/ sell out go down at the Woodward's squat where poverty pimps sold us out before a true accomplishment could be made. If it is to be us who fight tooth and nail - like did our brothers and sisters who stood there grounds heroically at the squat - then it must be us who determine where and how our struggle will go. When we join groups or sit in on meetings we must be sure to lead these groups through discussions and planning, and most importantly to be representing our brothers and sisters' will. We are not fighting for votes, we are not fighting for power, for institutions that do not serve us, we are fighting for our lives, real power over our lives. Too many have fallen in this class war for us to lose our struggle or to lose our hope. We must intensify our actions so that their disruptive consequences inflict real damage to our oppressors, only then will they enter into real negotiations with us in a serious way. Only then can we establish our selves in the larger movement for justice and dignity. Only then can we fight to win!

**Come down to the Safe Site every night from 10pm - 2am, 327 Carrall, beside Pigeon Park**

#### For more information:

**HAC - Housing Action Committee**  
cell: 604-708-5117

Meetings every Tuesday at 2pm

The Lifeskills Centre, 412 E. Cordova across from Oppenheimer Park

**APC - Anti-Poverty Committee**

Meetings every Tuesday at 6pm

at 327 Carrall Street

contact author at lubbv@resist.ca