

Woodwards Squat Continues Despite Police Raid – Nicole Lindsay

Despite a raid in the early hours of Saturday morning, protesters are determined to continue the battle for social housing in Vancouver's East Side. After their release, many of the 54 arrested have returned to the corner of Abbott and Hastings, and will continue to demand that the Woodward's building-- their HOME-- be returned to them.

Saturday, Sept. 21, 2002

At shortly after 6 am this morning police raided the Woodward's squat, arresting over fifty people. After a tense night of unconfirmed reports about the impending raid, increased police activity within the building, and several false alarms, protesters in the Woodward's building informed supporters outside that police were beginning to forcibly enter the second floor.

Over the course of the night, protesters had erected barricades on doorways and staircases, sealing off the squat on the second floor. The barricades were intended to impede police progress onto the second floor in the event of the police storming the building. As protesters had hoped, when the raid actually occurred the barricades allowed time for some media (BCTV) to enter and also allowed the exit of some individuals who wished to avoid arrest before police broke into the second floor.

Police presence outside Woodward's arrived shortly after people began to leave the building. Although most of people who climbed down the ladders in the first few minutes of the raid were not arrested, three of the last people to attempt climb down the ladders were forcibly removed from the ladders, handcuffed and, in one case, pepper sprayed by police waiting at the bottom of the ladders. At this point, the police force included several police cars and motorcycles, two paddy wagons, and approximately fifteen bicycle police who used their bikes to form a barricade around the bottom of the ladder. After the three individuals who had been arrested (including a Vancouver Indymedia reporter, a first aid attendant, and another supporter) were taken away in paddy wagons, the ladders leading up to the second story window were removed by police. The three arrested supporters were taken to the Main St. police station and were strip searched before being transferred to holding cells at the Supreme Court on Smythe St.

As police arrested and removed the three supporters from the corner of Abbott and W. Hastings, witnesses standing on Abbott beside Woodward's could hear a loud rhythmic thumping from inside the building. Although it sounded like police battering through the barricades, protesters inside the building later told us that the noise was made by police in full riot gear pounding on their shields with batons.

After police removed the ladders from the second story windows, the supporters left outside the building were in some confusion about where the protesters inside would be taken. A small group of supporters moved to the rear of the building (Cordova St. side) to see where police would exit with protesters who had been arrested inside. The group was followed by police on bicycles, motorcycles, in police cars and on foot. Several supporters were harassed and intimidated by police who at various times shouted at supporters to move onto the sidewalk (in an area where they were surrounded by police

blocking the sidewalk), threatened to arrest supporters who had been seen running or who were standing on the road, and used three motorcycles to herd supporters together. Police also tried to disperse the group, but several supporters linked arms and refused to move from where they were standing on the sidewalk.

Just before 7 am, supporters saw protesters being led from the Woodward's building (through an underground tunnel) into the lower level of the abandoned parkade located across Cordova St. Paddy wagons parked in the parkade took the detained protesters to the Supreme Court holding cells, where they waited to appear before a judge until 10:30 am. While in custody, protesters were not given an opportunity to speak with a lawyer, nor were they able to consult with each other. Protesters were brought into the courtroom in groups of four, where they were told the conditions of their release if they decided to sign the undertaking. If they chose not to sign the undertaking, they would remain in custody until Monday morning. One person out of the 54 arrested chose not to sign the undertaking because by remaining in custody he would be assured of food to eat and place to sleep inside, as he had no place to go once released. Although many of the other protesters are in the same situation, some felt pressured to sign the undertaking, and others felt determined to return to the street outside Woodward's (the undertaking forbids entry into the building) to continue the cause of claiming a place they now view as their home. Inside the courtroom, the protesters were advised that they could file an appeal to the injunction (which was already done before arrests were made, but must be repeated). Several protesters confirmed that a second appeal would be filed.

After protesters were released this afternoon, meetings took place to determine the course of action. Future events include a community meeting at Carnegie Theatre (401 Main St.) on Sunday, September 22, at 10 am; followed by a community picnic at Woodward's (corner of Abbott & Hastings) from 1-3pm. Community members and supporters are encouraged to come and show their support of people reclaiming housing space in the Downtown Eastside.

Please continue to support the Woodward's squat—it is only with community support and participant that we can succeed in creating the accessible and affordable social housing so desperately needed in the Eastside and in other areas of Vancouver, B.C., and other provinces.