

Letter to the Editor of The Vancouver Courier

To the editor:

"Protest City" (09/28) was a treat. However, one quotation by your authority on the history of Vancouver squatting, Professor Keith Ralston, is, to put it politely, appalling. "During the Woodward's squat, the police were as patient as I would like them to be." Mr. Ralston clearly has not reviewed the Vancouver Police Department's own video recordings produced during the inside eviction at 6am on September 21, 2002. These tapes reveal, among other things, three squatters being dragged across the floorboards of the second story of Woodward's. Police pin one man to the ground, face-down, and a constable proceeds to step on the back of his neck. If you listen carefully you can hear another officer threaten to break the man's glasses if he refuses to stand up.

But what occurred the subsequent evening was not only vicious but sick. The VPD arrived on 100 block Abbott Street just before 11pm. Cops kicked and beat people in their sleep on the west sidewalk. Ten who were identified as "leaders" were arrested and kept overnight in jail then released without charges. One man's arm was dislocated while in custody. Even Woodsquat lawyer John Richardson was illegally apprehended and prevented from conversing with his clients (litigation pending). After the street was cleared, City Engineering Services (under the supervision of Mr. John Reeves) brought in three garbage-compacting vehicles and eight labourers to crush and destroy the tents, blankets, mattresses, food, clothes, tools and utensils, first aid supplies—even personal possessions such as identification cards, medication, diaries and scrapbooks. After that a mechanical sweeper-vehicle and flusher vehicle proceeded to "cleanse" the sidewalk. The manoeuvre was over by 11:30pm.

Although the City admits to this property destruction in a staff memo penned by Mr. J.W. McLewin, the VPD prohibited public documentation of this second eviction. Photographer Sid Tan was detained in the back of a police vehicle and had his camera taken away. A resident of the Metropole Hotel with a video camera was ordered to leave the sidewalk and forced to return to the inside of the building. There are 23 witnesses who have testified to these events but even a year later the Council and City staff refuse to acknowledge receipt of requests for the following remedies from Woodsquatters and the Woodward's Legal Defense Committee: (1) a written apology; (2) fair compensation for the property destroyed; and (3) disciplinary action against the senior manager of Engineering Services.

The chronicle of subsequent police harassment between September 23 and December 15, 2002 could fill a book or, perhaps, a series of books. The bizarre unreasonableness of the VPD's treatment of the Woodsquat is best encapsulated in one of the imperatives screamed by a patrol officer from his passing vehicle in the early morning hours of September 22: "Kill the peasants!" COPE, city bureaucrats, social workers and the VPD ought to proceed with caution and negotiate in good faith: if they ask for a ghetto uprising with such insistency they may just get one.

Aaron Vidaver
Woodsquat.net