

HUMAN RIGHTS ALERT

AUGUST 16, 1999

ISSUE # 3



A Psychiatric Survival Broadsheet

SPECIAL REPORT **'Safe Park' challenges homelessness disaster, police persecution**

As of mid-July this year, the dirty war against homeless persons was dramatically escalated when the City of Toronto earmarked \$1.9 million to flood 'targeted' areas with extra police patrols.

Toronto mayor Mel Lastman was adamant that no attempt would be made to interfere with people on the basis of their (apparent) economic status, insisting that the object of these patrols was to force 'criminals and thugs' off the streets.

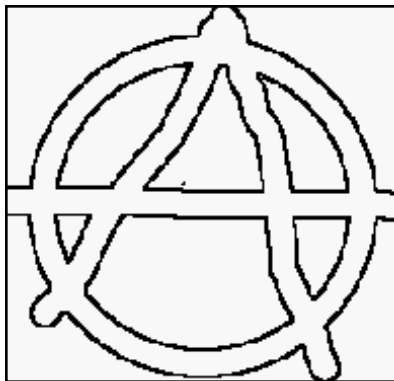
Within a few days of these patrols being initiated however, accounts from homeless people began coming into various agencies as well as to the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty that painted a completely different picture.

Women accosted, abused

One young woman described how, as she was walking through an area housing development on her way to visit relatives, found herself surrounded by police, who, after demanding to see I.D. insisted repeatedly that she was lying about her identity (she presented photo identification) and threatened her with numerous charges. This encounter lasted for more than an hour and involved as

many as ten individual cops, leaving this poor woman (who had no criminal record) in hysterics.

Another young woman was approached at Wellesley and Yonge St. while selling the Outreach Connection and informed that if she returned to that corner she would face arrest, by three cops who stated that there would be 'no more panhandling; no more sleeping in the parks.'



This woman (who was eight months pregnant) was merely trying to make enough money for a meal. Squeegeers have also been photographed and hit with numerous tickets while attempting to work at downtown intersections.

'Immigration problems'

In Allan Gardens, a group of more than two dozen police fanned out one evening, systematically ignoring well-dressed people strolling with their dogs while zeroing in on anyone who

was poorly dressed or otherwise failed to blend in with Lastman's vision of Yuppie heaven.

One man who was an immigrant from Ethiopia was accosted for I.D. by police who then made allusions as to Canada's 'immigration problems.' (This man had been sitting quietly on a bench reading a book when accosted). 'Thugs', indeed!

'Safe Park' launched

On August 7, 1999 nearly a thousand homeless persons and their supporters gathered in Allan Gardens in order to establish a 'safe park', as an outdoor space where the homeless might gather in order to find a small measure of safety in the midst of this relentless persecution.

As people dined on fresh pickerel and venison provided by supporters from the Quinte Mohawk community, several huge tarpaulins were draped from ropes strung between the trees and the space was defined by a colorful collection of banners and long rolls of yellow caution tape.

The cops were very much in evidence as we were setting up but had essentially disappeared from sight by about eleven that night. As rain began falling, approximately 130 people bedded down for the night under the tarps and in several large tents that dotted the site.

<Safe Park - continued next page>

SURVIVORS' RIGHTS ARE HUMAN RIGHTS!



<Safe Park - continued>

The Safe Park idea was developed by the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty and had been in the planning stage since the end of May. Over this time much practical support was obtained from agencies in terms of donations of supplies, meal preparation, and on-site medical support. (Just before the park was busted a schedule of thrice-weekly nursing clinics had been established, to be conducted in the park itself by staff from different community health agencies.). Extensive outreach was done at all the shelters, drop-ins and soup kitchens in the downtown area.

Economic colonialism

While the original intended focus had been primarily around the ongoing loss of shelter beds, and the complete lack of affordable housing, the ruthless actions of the police proved to be an important secondary issue.

For close to seventy-two hours, Toronto's homeless and their supporters were able to create a place of sanctuary and solidarity, right in the heart of a neighborhood that had been among the first to fall to the current spate of economic colonialism. This was an incredibly diverse gathering of persons of all colors and cultural backgrounds, women, gays, and numerous psychiatric survivors.

As little as fifteen minutes prior to the predawn raid that brought the Safe Park to a violent close on August tenth, there had been no real evidence that an attack by the police was pending. Occasionally small groups of cops would scout the perimeter of our space or stand nearby conferring with Parks and Recreation staff but made no move on the Park or its residents. The residents of Safe Park conducted themselves in a consistently peaceful and disciplined fashion, with many of

us discovering previously unknown skills in mediation and conflict resolution. All told it was an incredible learning experience for everyone involved, whether homeless or housed.

At about 5:30 AM on Tuesday, August 10 dozens of police (including the Emergency Task Force and officers in full riot gear) suddenly converged on the park while most people were sleeping. As some retreated to the boundaries of the park in order to avoid arrest many others gathered in the middle of the roped-off area.

There was less than five minutes' warning given - then the police waded into the crowd and started beating and arresting people. The 'Safe Park' was to become a victim of the very policy of social cleansing it was established to protest, as within half an hour of the police arriving, not a trace of our encampment remained.

Dreadful media coverage

All told, twenty-seven persons were arrested. The charges were mainly mischief and trespass, with several people also charged with assault on police. (You can be sure that an assault actually took place but the issue here as always in such cases is who actually assaulted whom. The cops tend to be considerably less than truthful in such cases).

It was to be nearly two more days before everyone's legal situation was clarified due to numerous screwups with the paperwork by the cops, and many people wound up spending nearly thirty-six hours in custody due to there being no JP available, or in the case of the homeless who were arrested, because there were no shelter beds. (This in contrast to the City's claims that during the Safe Park there were numerous beds available - this claim had already been disproven by OCAP's own regular polling of available beds, which invariably revealed a

system operating at above capacity).

As of Friday three persons remained in custody. One of these men will have a bail hearing this coming week. The others all appear in court together on August eighteenth.

The media coverage made this one of the biggest stories of the summer, and certainly it was one of the most significant activist events since the Toronto Days of Action in October of 1996. The coverage was consistently dreadful, with the media either vigorously promoting the myth of available beds or engaging in vicious personal attacks on specific activists and even the homeless themselves.

Much ado was also made of the fact that all but seven of the arrestees gave permanent addresses - it seems that the concept of solidarity is completely foreign to most journalists, not to mention the police.

The quantity (as well as the character) of the coverage made it clear this event had struck to the heart - this action even drew international attention, with both Associated Press and Reuters from the U.S. picking it up.

However biased and openly hostile the coverage may have been, there is now no excuse for anyone to claim ignorance regarding either homelessness or the brutal manner in which the authorities are responding to it. The actions of media and officials alike regarding this event bore a distinct note of desperation at the prospect of there being nowhere left to hide.

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319 Dundas St. E. #408

Toronto, Ontario M5A 2A2

Fax: (416) 368-5984

E-mail: <gbacque@idirect.com>

Contributions are welcome!

GRAEME BACQUE

AUGUST 15, 1999

