Let Us Wage a War Against Poverty Not Against the Poor!!

by Peter Bohmer, given at the OMJP Community Forum at the Olympia Center, December 6, 2006

The anti-homeless sidewalk ordinances passed last Tuesday, November 28th are one more pinprick in the war against the poor, against homeless and street people. It is part of the ongoing attempt to criminalize the poor rather than to determine causes and solutions to poverty, racism, homophobia, the lack of affordable housing and the lack of meaningful work at livable wages.

The city government in Olympia and many of its residents just like San Francisco, Santa Cruz and Seattle are very liberal when it comes to opposing Bush and the war in Iraq, in denouncing the Nazis, and preaching tolerance but unfortunately, this does not extend to doing what is necessary to end poverty and homelessness in Olympia. The city council, with a few exceptions, like TJ Johnson, represents the homeowners and the businesses owners, not those with the least power and resources. We need to make it clear by our words and actions that we want a city council, a school board, county commissioners, Washington State legislators and other elected officials that put the needs of the poorest first. We need to say loud and clear not in our name to the privatization of sidewalks.

It is important to oppose and stop the war in Iraq, to call for the impeachment of Bush and Cheney but we must also connect this to the war at home, the cutbacks in public housing, the decline of college scholarships, the ending of welfare, the decline in wages and the lack of affordable and quality health care. The main public housing program in this country today is prison and jail, the latest number is 2.2 million people locked up, the majority of whom are black and other people of color, the overwhelming majority of whom are poor. That the U.S. lock up millions and that housing is not affordable to millions more is shameful, should not be tolerated and can be changed in Olympia and nationally.

The causes of poverty and solutions to it are not that difficult to figure out. Whether homelessness ends depends partly on what each of us does in ways big and small. Let us reflect and act on this as Christmas approaches.

Why Homelessness?

We are living in a society where there is a one sided class war going on by the wealthy against the rest of us, with the poor as the scapegoats. This has been going all over the world, sometimes it is called globalization, other times neoliberalism. Multinational corporations move production and their money all over the world seeking the highest profits, the Wal-Mart business model. It is a race to the bottom as corporations force us to compete against each other, as they demand lower and lower wages, lower taxes and less government spending except for the police and the military, and less environmental regulations. So real wages are falling for the majority. This would already make housing less affordable. In addition, for many people, mainly in the higher income brackets, housing no longer means a place to live in and call home but rather a means to make money from speculating, by buying houses with the intent of selling at a higher price, i.e., speculation. It is just another financial investment to them. This buying and selling of houses is one reason for the skyrocketing housing prices in much of the U.S., including Olympia. This speculative bubble may be bursting. Add in the lack or no federal money for public housing, the major cutbacks in subsidies for rental assistance, section 8, and the result is the growth of homelessness and many tens of millions of vulnerable individuals and families who are paying 50% or more of their income for housing.

Housing prices have gone up far more than the inflation rate or wages over the last 20 years and particularly in the last five years for buyers and renters, so have electricity and heating costs. So housing is less and less affordable. In Olympia and the South Sound, the price of a house has been going up by far more than 10% a year for the last five years while inflation and wages have been growing at about 2% a year. This escalating cost for shelter causes financial stress in low income and working families. The
decreasing public support for single parent and low income families and the longer hours people have to work to pay for rent and other necessities contributes to a more stressful family life and is a contributor to youth homelessness. Another contributing factor is the way those in power discard veterans from the Vietnam and Iraq wars. Once these ex-soldiers are no longer fighting, their social and economic problems, many caused by their military service, are of no concern to those in power. Many end up isolated and on the streets.

People are homeless because they do not have the income to afford their own place. The declining income in so many jobs, the lack of public resources for housing and the growing cost of housing is why at least 2 million people are homeless, and many more are barely hanging on. Drug and alcohol addiction and mental illness are contributing factors, compounded by the cutbacks in Federal funding for mental health programs, but wealthy people with these problems do not end up homeless. Poverty and homelessness are on the rise, nationally and in this area. The almost 40 million who are officially poor, and 80 million more, who have little or no savings are in a vulnerable and insecure economic situation. If someone in their family lost their job for more than a few weeks, they could soon lose their housing.

**Housing as a Human Right!**

So the solution is not complicated—quality affordable housing for all. In Olympia, overturning these anti-sitting on the sidewalk for poor people ordinances is a necessary but not sufficient step. Let us demand of this city, of Thurston county, the State of Washington and the Federal government that they put into practice the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—that housing is a fundamental human right. To make this happen, we need to organize for rent control, statewide and in Olympia, and to simultaneously increase the supply of affordable permanent housing by building public housing that is designed and run by the people who will live there, self-management, and by passing laws so more private affordable housing is built. Olympia can do its part. Let the city council, the county commissioners put some effort and money into this. Rather than spending time and resources on criminalizing the poor, they should work to get State and Federal money. Let us reduce the prison and jail population and use the money that locks people up for housing without bars. They, the government, and we should end the war in Iraq because it is immoral and illegal and because the money should be spent at home and for reparations to Iraq. Let us connect more the peace and economic justice movements. I am a member of OMJP, the Olympia Movement for Justice and Peace. We consciously mention justice before peace in our name.

To those of us who are not poor, let us treat the poor and homeless like we ourselves want to be treated. Being treated with dignity and respect is a basic human right. We need to reach out to the residents of Olympia, many of whom fear street people downtown because they look a little different or because they weren’t there 20 years ago. As Pat Tassoni mentioned in his excellent article in the November, *Works in Progress*, and tonight, Olympia is one of the three safest cities in the country. So although the fear is there, the reality is very different. Let us share this knowledge. Let us defeat the campaign of the downtown business association, the Olympia Downtown Association (ODA) to run those without ample purchasing power out of downtown. Businesses downtown should fight the Wal-Marts coming to town if their sales are declining, rather than scapegoating and criminalizing street people. An Olympia and a U.S. that is more diverse ethnically, culturally, that welcomes and values immigrants and poor people and also makes it a community and governmental responsibility that everyone has basic housing, health, food, public transportation, education and a basic income is a much more interesting and vibrant community than one that is more homogeneous. We can end homeless here by 1) making housing affordable or 2) by running out poor people by making it impossible for poor people to live here because of economic and political decisions and through police harassment and repression of the poor. The first way is the humane and moral way.
We need to do outreach to build a movement of poor and working class and middle income people that sees our common interests for an affordable Olympia, and that puts the needs of those with the least resources first. The outreach over a possible referendum overturning these reactionary anti-homeless laws could be one-step in making this dialog happen and building this cross class movement. The majority of people in Olympia are capable of empathy and solidarity, we need to talk to our neighbors, friends, coworkers, members in our church, and other groups we belong to about building an inclusive Olympia. This will force the city council, the State legislature, Governor Chris Gregoire, Congressperson Brian Baird, and Senators Maria Cantwell and Patty Murray to stop serving the privileged or get voted out. A movement of the people who are being harmed by this inhumane and immoral and environmentally unsustainable economic system, we are the majority, can make another world possible. In building this movement for economic justice, it is important that poor people play a major part in it. Let us not wait for the politicians to act but let us act strategically, boldly and not just on one day. If this reactionary ordinance goes into effect, maybe we should commit civil disobedience and make it unenforceable by hundreds of us sitting down on the sidewalks, downtown, the day it goes into effect. An Injury to One is an Injury to All.

Think Big!

We need to think big. Since 1981, when Ronald Reagan became President and up to the present, we tend to think small and act defensively, to minimize losses and cutbacks. If we think big and demand big changes, at least, we have a chance of making a significant difference. All over Latin America people are rising up against neoliberalism and the idea that “There is No Alternative”. Check out the massive struggle going on in Oaxaca and Chiapas in Mexico, and the recent elections in Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela.

We must simultaneously work on many levels. We need to stop these latest attacks by the Olympia City Council on the homeless. We also can win significant reforms and important victories. These reforms should include immediate ones like opening up more shelters where the homeless are treated with dignity, and stopping police repression against the poor and youth, particularly those of color. Although we won’t win this tomorrow, we should build movements that demand and win an adequate supply of affordable housing and rent control, jobs that pay a living wage, income for the unemployed and those who can’t work, and affordable and quality childcare and health care for all. There should be community centers downtown that are open seven days a week, 24 hours a day where low and no income folks and youth are welcomed and have a big say in how they are run. Let us fight against the war abroad and at home.

We also need to work at the same time for more fundamental change; we used to call it revolutionary change. Revolution does not necessarily mean violence. As long as we live in a capitalist system, property rights will be given more importance by those in power then people’s needs; there will be poverty and inequality, nationally and globally. Let us work together to create a different system, a society built on need not greed, where we get rid of capitalism and all of the related isms: sexism, racism, heterosexism and class oppression. Let us build a society where basic needs are guaranteed, where work is meaningful, where there is community, environmental sustainability and solidarity across borders.

Our aim is to unite the many against the few. Affordable and quality housing for all is possible, so are living wage jobs and the end of poverty. ANOTHER WORLD IS POSSIBLE. DEMAND THE IMPOSSIBLE. Thank You!