

## Who's in contempt over the Woodward's squat?

by Gwen Brodsky and Shelagh Day

This Friday is National Housing Day—a day dedicated to ending homelessness. Thankfully, two weeks ago, the BC Housing Corporation dropped proceedings against the 54 Woodward's squatters charged in October with contempt of court for occupying a publicly-owned and vacant building. The Corporation seems to have realized that continuing the contempt proceedings against the “Woodwards 54” would have increased the public's sympathy for the protesters, and further underlined the contempt that the provincial government is guilty of—its contempt for the rights of people who need homes.

Everyone has a right to adequate housing. This is a right that was first recognized in the *Universal Declaration on Human Rights* more than fifty years ago, and then guaranteed in the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, to which Canada has been a signatory since 1976. The fact that adequate housing is the subject of a human rights treaty underscores its importance to everyone's human dignity, and to each person's ability to live in safety and health.

The Woodward's protesters have performed an important public service by making those of us who have homes—and take them for granted—think more deeply about the profound discomfort, humiliation and danger of trying to live without a private, warm, decent place to wash, cook, sleep, defecate, and interact with family members.

In the Vancouver Agreement, signed in June 1999, all three levels of government agreed on the importance of safe, affordable housing and committed themselves to working together to “ensure an adequate number of safe, secure and affordable permanent housing units for low-income and high-risk individuals” in the Downtown Eastside, and to “increase housing options for low-income people in other parts of the city and the province.”

More than two years later, there is still no coherent plan for meeting the goals of this agreement. For the poorest people in the province, the housing problem is about both income and supply. On the income side, welfare rates in the province have been cut for a number of groups, and shelter allowances have been cut for families with more than two children. For many people receiving welfare this means that they cannot afford market rental housing. Single people on welfare receive \$510 a month, with \$325 designated for shelter. In the City of Vancouver, \$325 frequently means inadequate housing—a room in a hotel, with no cooking facilities. For women in particular, living in these hotels is not safe.

The alternative to market rental housing is social housing—housing whose cost is publicly subsidized, and that is designated for people with low incomes. There simply is not enough affordable social housing for the people who need it. And the province has announced that any new funding for social housing will be directed to seniors and those

whom the government decides qualify as disabled. No new housing will be built for low-income people who do not have a government-defined disability. In other words, on both the income and the housing supply side, the provincial government is making a bad situation worse.

The same goes for the federal government. Since backing away from social housing in the early 1990's, its contribution to addressing the Canada-wide lack of adequate housing for low-income Canadians has been minimal. It has made contributions to emergency shelters, but while shelters are needed, they are not adequate housing. People who use shelters are still homeless. We need the federal government enthusiastically back in the housing field.

City governments need to use their zoning and taxing powers to support social housing, to legalize secondary suites in order to increase the supply of rental housing, and to prevent the demolition or conversion of the housing that is currently available for low-income people.

The failure of our governments to address the twin problems of homelessness and housing show a profound disrespect for people who are inadequately housed. It is time for governments at all levels to get on with a real plan, including financial commitments and timelines. If they do not move forward quickly, they are the ones who will be guilty of contempt of the rights and needs of the poorest people.

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