The Revival of the National Union of the Homeless

The experiences and organizing efforts of the homeless can teach us all about taking action together in this unprecedented time.

By Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis

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A man is seen in a homeless encampment on Thursday, March 19, 2020, in Oakland, California. *(AP Photo / Ben Margot)*

Early last week, Americans woke to news of the largest one-day oil price drop in history. Since then, stocks on Wall Street have continued to plummet and the Fed has materialized, overnight, $1.5 trillion for investors. For over a year, economists have predicted the probability of an impending recession, and those fears have only multiplied since the coronavirus unsettled markets around the world. As the Trump administration struggles to articulate even a short-term strategy to mitigate this public health emergency, we must consider what a deeper economic collapse will mean for the nation, and the 140 million poor and low-income people who already live their own public health crisis and recession every day.

During the Great Depression, one of the most visible and alarming signs of a society in crisis was the explosion of homelessness across the country. In response, the newly homeless built shantytowns and encampments in and around major cities, known as “Hoovervilles,” after President Herbert Hoover. The self-organization and survival

strategies of close to 2 million homeless people is not often remembered in the retelling of history, but they prefigured many of the major policy developments of the New Deal period, including housing reform.

During this unfolding health and economic crisis, it is not difficult to imagine that we could soon see the emergence of "Trumpvilles" all across the country. Although some local and state governments have taken measures to head off the immediate growth of homelessness, like moratoriums on evictions, it is clear that that the nation is not prepared for the level of precarity that millions will be thrown into, only compounding the deep poverty and instability that existed before the coronavirus pandemic hit the United States.

In New York City, the government waited at least an extra week to close schools because over 100,000 students are homeless and rely on school services for regular meals and shelter. What will happen to these children and the millions more whose families are one paycheck or health care crisis away from poverty and homelessness? Meanwhile, while we wait for a federal government response that is

commensurate with the problem, folks are beginning to take their own life-saving measures. In Los Angeles, homeless moms and their children have begun to move into abandoned homes to protect themselves and the larger public from further exposure.

In early February, at the same time that the US government was receiving intel on the inevitable growth of the coronavirus into a global pandemic, the Trump administration released its proposed budget for the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The reforms represent a sweeping policy of austerity that would cut low-income housing assistance programs by $4.2 billion, decrease public housing operating funds by 21 percent, and end all funding for public housing capital repairs. When the government continues to disinvest in critical programs and services, and appears wholly ill-equipped for the social and economic challenges ahead, the experiences of the homeless and their efforts to organize for change has much to teach us about why and how poor and dispossessed people are beginning to take action together in this time.

Today, there are somewhere between 8 million and 11 million homeless people living in the United States—on the streets, within a crumbling shelter system and a growing constellation of informal encampments, and trapped in the rotating door of cars, couches, doubled or tripled up apartments, and public space. This is nothing less than a national emergency that has developed over decades, but which is largely ignored or made invisible. For over 40 years, while the crisis of homelessness has quietly exploded, a narrative has been popularized that understands

homelessness through the hyper-racialized and atomized image of a black man sleeping on a city grate. For a wealthy elite that has advanced a generation of neoliberal reforms, it has been critical to cast homelessness in this way: as an aberration on the margins of an otherwise healthy society, rather than as the most visible indictment of a political and economic order that has left 140 million people poor or low-income, in which homelessness and poverty are structured into the very core of society.

In the late 1970s and early ’80s, major structural shifts to the global economy were accompanied by domestic policy adjustments that included deep tax cuts, deregulation of banking and financial markets, privatization of public utilities and services, and anti-labor measures. In the midst of these epoch-making policy decisions, homelessness swelled as the government demolished public housing and invested in private urban development projects that fueled gentrification and pushed poor families out of their homes. From 1978 to 1983, the HUD budget was reduced from $83 billion to $18 billion, and the cuts only deepened from there. Thousands of families who had lived for generations in public housing were rapidly left without homes and swept into a new and growing network of shelters.

Out of those shelters, poor and homeless people quickly began to organize themselves into communities of mutual aid and solidarity. In 1983 in Philadelphia, a group called the Committee for Dignity and Fairness for the Homeless formed, and in less than a year had over 500 homeless members. They opened their own shelter, what they called a “project of survival”, and used it as a springboard to organize among the homeless. In 1985, they founded the

Philadelphia/Delaware Valley Union of the Homeless with the express goal of uniting homeless people across lines of division like race, gender, sexuality, and religion. They recognized that among them rested a latent power that could galvanize the larger society around their appalling conditions, but only if they built genuine and independent political organization. One of their key slogans became "Homeless Not Helpless."

By the late 1980s, the organization had gone national, with close to 30,000 members in 25 cities. With a powerful and growing base, organizers across the country escalated their efforts, including waves of coordinated takeovers of vacant HUD buildings. These takeovers met the material needs of some, at a time when the government had abdicated its responsibility to protect and provide for its poorest citizens. They also served as a campaign of mass popular education, raising the question of the immorality of homelessness when there were more empty, federally owned houses in the country then there were homeless people.

In just a few years, the National Union of the Homeless broke into the national narrative and began to challenge the prevailing notion that their members were poor and homeless because of bad personal decisions and the moral failures of their families. Instead, they targeted the systems and structures that produced their poverty, and in the process they won a number of significant victories, including the right for homeless people to vote without an address, municipal programs and services led by the homeless, and commitments from HUD to make 10,000 housing units available for the homeless. These victories and the sustained organizing of homeless communities, led by the homeless,

were an emphatic repudiation of the commonly held position, even among the left, that the poor could at best be a spontaneous spark of dissent and outrage, but never an organized force that could lead a larger movement for social justice.

I was 18 when I joined the Homeless Union in Philadelphia. I threw myself into efforts in North Philadelphia, one of the poorest neighborhoods in Pennsylvania. Over the coming years, I saw the power that homeless communities were building there and all across the country: We took over and occupied vacant houses, built projects of survival, marched and organized, and learned from poor people's struggles of the past, from Reconstruction to the Poor People's Campaign of 1968. I also saw firsthand how the state and its economic tools press down on the poor when they attempt to unite across lines of division. By the mid-1990s, despite its visionary efforts, the Homeless Union began to go into decline, undermined by the "chemical warfare" of the crack epidemic, the march of gentrification enabled by decades of neoliberal urban policies, and the successful cooptation of some of its efforts and leadership.

For the next two decades, veterans of the Homeless Union continued, in fledgling but groundbreaking ways, to lay the foundation for a mass movement to end poverty, led by the poor. In 2018, many of those leaders joined with poor people and moral leaders from other organizing histories and contexts to launch the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival.

At the core of this new effort can be found the ethos of the Homeless Union; that poor people can be agents of change, not just subjects of a cruel history; that within our communities lies the political calculus for transformation in this country; that our power as poor people depends on our ability to unite across difference; and that the position of the homeless only anticipates the poverty and precarity of millions of people in an economy undergoing massive structural change and dislocation.

At a national convening of the Poor People's Campaign last summer, homeless leaders voted to reconstitute the National Union of the Homeless, with locals in over 10 states and counting. The California Homeless Union has proliferated in particular, in a state with enormous wealth beside a growing crisis of affordability and homelessness. In early February, it won a tentative $300,000 settlement with the City of Maryville and Yuba County for the seizure and destruction of property after seven riverside homeless encampments in the area were forcibly evicted. It is also closely connected to the California Poor People's Campaign, which counts in its numbers tenant union organizers in central Los Angeles and community leaders supporting the mothers who have led the now nationally recognized takeover of vacant housing in Oakland.

These leaders understand that their fight is not just for homeless people, but for all poor people and those living just an emergency away from poverty and homelessness; that this is a fight that cuts across every issue, from housing, education, health care, environment, militarism, systemic racism and sexism, and more. In the last two weeks, the California Homeless Union has advised the organizing

efforts of graduate students and university employees at UC Santa Cruz, who are staging a general strike in the face of low pay, high costs of living, and the reality of homelessness on the campus of the richest university system in the nation.

The California Homeless Union understands better than anyone what's at stake and why we must organize: Last October, Deseire Qunitero, a member of their Santa Cruz local, died alone in the woods only miles from the university, after the city destroyed the encampment where she was living. The Homeless Union released a public statement after the death of Mama Desi, as she was known, calling poor people en masse to see themselves in her story: "Millions of people are one paycheck, one eviction, one family medical emergency or one 'natural' disaster away from homelessness."

The California Union of the Homeless knows that the conditions that allowed for her death are the product of a status quo that is hurting the majority of people in this country. If we are to change this reality, we would do well to follow their lead.

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