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Organizing Matters

Tent Cities, Self-Determination, and (Against) the
Fascist Targeting of Homeless People

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is a lesson about organizing more broadly in a context in which working class people feeling vulnerable and hopeless and economically precarious can be susceptible to supporting or sympathizing with far Rightists or become open to actual active recruitment.

Notably, in Nanaimo, there has developed a layer of poor bashing opponents or the tent city who have shown up in larger numbers to hurl epithets at homeless people and to express support for the SOO mobilizations. And this has been encouraged by mainstream political institutions that have opposed the tent city and used poor bashing language and policy approaches against tent city residents and supporters. Notably, the leader of SOO on Vancouver Island has decided to run for city council in upcoming municipal elections.

Conclusion

So the role of official political entities in fanning fascist flames must also be recognized and openly contested. But collective organizing and self defense provide important counters to all of this. Fascists fear collective organization of working class people for solidarity and social and economic justice. In its absence they see an open ground for organizing of a fascist basis. In this way, the actions of SOO are not so much contradictory as shaped by the absence or presence of threats and potentials they see for their own organizing.

Some have expressed confusion over the apparently contradictory actions of neo-fascist Soldiers of Odin (SOO) toward homeless people in various urban contexts in Canada. There is a dual targeting of homeless people as opponents to be socially cleansed and as potential recruits. Both within the same fascist organization. Understanding the strategies of SOO in targeting homeless people tells us important things about how fascists are mobilizing and how collective organizing can work against them.

On one hand SOO have mobilized confrontations and attempted assaults against homeless people on multiple occasions in Nanaimo, British Columbia, a small, historically blue collar city, now university town. They have taken a poor bashing, bigoted approach against homeless people. On the other hand SOO have tried to recruit homeless people to their cause in Surrey, British Columbia, a blue collar suburb, and new, gentrifying, city center, in Metro Vancouver. They have also tried to do food servings as means of recruitment of homeless people in Edmonton, a major industrial city and seat of provincial government in Alberta.

So, what is behind these apparent contradictions and inconsistencies—bigoted anger and friendly recruitment? Well, to understand the SOO tactics around interacting with homeless people we first have to analyze the different contexts in each case, and, in particular, the levels and types of organizing among homeless people themselves. And we can also look at assumptions about community responses. These assessments provide important lessons about the need to organize our communities—all our communities, including the most marginalized and excluded—in order to oppose and discourage (and hopefully stop) fascist mobilizations. And they provide lessons about the role played by poor bashing and hatred by mainstream institutions.

Class Solidarity and Organizing Against Individual Vulnerability and Fascist Recruitment

In terms of organizing, it is important to note that in Surrey, where SOO tried to recruit homeless people into an anti-migrant position, using false claims that refugees were taking up housing from homeless people, there was little collective self-organizing on the basis of autonomy, self defense, and community solidarity. So SOO could approach individual homeless people to stir up resentments as potential recruits. Luckily homeless people there had little time for them. There were community support groups who worked in solidarity with residents of The Strip, where dozens of people lived in tents (but which was not an organized tent city). There were discussions about the real nature of SOO which helped build opposition. And SOO offered nothing to people except racist blame placing.

In Edmonton, similarly, homeless people were not organized in any sort of collective, self-determining, autonomous space. So SOO again apparently assumed they could also recruit homeless people playing on desperate circumstances to stir up, to construct, individual resentments.

In Nanaimo, conversely, and I would argue significantly, homeless people had self-organized into a conscious, a class conscious, tent city community, Discontent City. Along with allies they could collectively organize to oppose and confront SOO and other bigots and poor bashers. In Nanaimo, SOO viewed collectively organized homeless people as a threat. As a point of working class solidarity against bigotry and division and for an alternative built from the ground up. The fascists may have recognized the class solidarity operating in Discontent City and viewed it as an obstacle to their own efforts to split the working class and target more vulnerable sectors (including migrants).

Producerism and the Targeting of Homeless People

Fascists view organized homeless people (as part of the working class more broadly) as a threat needing to be removed. Generally fascists have targeted homeless people for violence. This is in keeping with their producerist vision. This is a Right wing approach to class issues that divides the working class between supposedly productive “producers” (in a way they further construct as white workers) and those they view as unproductive or as social parasites. This latter category can include both bosses, who do not labor productively, and unemployed people.

For fascists, the supposedly productive sectors of the working class are pinched by the unproductive who allegedly live off of their labor from both above and from below (without properly distinguishing actual exploiters who steal surplus value and less fortunate workers who have simply not had a sale of their labor power in a system where only bosses have the power to hire and fire). Rather than seeing all who need to sell their labor to survive as working class in a vision of class solidarity, and anti-capitalism, the producerist view divides working class people among deserving and undeserving according to fascist criteria.

Class Wide Organizing

Fascists have typically viewed homeless people as targets to be socially cleansed, and/or as recruits to be bought for a potentially small price. Where there is a class conscious organizing the latter becomes improbable. So the fascists feel a material threat.

This shows the importance of class-wide organizing, including among our most vulnerable members. This provides the defense against recruitment and mobilization of opportunistic fascists looking to use people in dire straits as fodder for their movements. This