

Representation

1. More democracy [. . .] in the neighborhood. . . .
2. More democracy [. . .] in elections. . . .
3. More democracy [. . .] in the government. . . .
4. More democracy [. . .] in big business. . . .

2.C.5.

Willie Baptist

From “Five Main Slogans: Lessons from the History of the National Union of the Homeless” (1993)

As automation, globalization, and the defunding of social programs worsened urban poverty in the 1980s and 1990s, the number of people without homes grew rapidly. The National Union of the Homeless analyzed why homelessness was increasingly prevalent, attempted to provide homes and resources for people in need, and sought to organize homeless people to pick up the mantle of the poor people’s campaign launched by Martin Luther King in 1968.

The epidemic of homelessness is worsening. The corporate businesses are today compelled by competition to “downsize,” employing the labor-replacing devices of electronic technology to cut production costs and maximize profits. Human labor is made increasingly useless and homeless. To eliminate homelessness, this profit-making and people-murdering system cannot be simply bandaged. It must be eliminated. Adequate paying jobs cease to be the source of economic survival for the homeless and millions of the other poverty-stricken as they are hurled permanently outside of the production process.

Homeless Takeovers and the 1992 LA Rebellion

Under these conditions, homeless and poor people have no choice but to take what they need by violating economically unjust laws, confronting directly the governmental apparatuses that uphold them. In the [1992] video, *Takeover*, Ron Casanova—editor of the *Union of the Homeless National News*—spoke to the necessity of these acts of civil disobedience when he stated, “It can be done. It can be done. . . . [F]orget that it’s against the law. I’m dying in the streets, I think that should be against the law.” This political nature of the problem and solution of homelessness kept asserting itself throughout the National Union of the Homeless Organizing Drive of the late 1980s. . . .

Mission, Organizing Slogans, and Streetheat

The political character of the National Union of the Homeless Organizing Drive revealed itself in every aspect of the drive, from its mission statement and slogans to its militant street actions. In May of 1988 the new homeless executive board members of the union collectively formulated the mission of their organization:

The heart and soul of the National Union of the Homeless is to commit our lives to ending the oppression of all homeless people and work tirelessly for economic justice, human rights, and full liberation.

We dedicate ourselves to transmitting our awareness of our sisters and brothers, to planning a sustained struggle and to building an organization that can obtain freedom through revolutionary perseverance.

We pledge to deepen our personal commitment to end all forms of exploitation, racism, sexism, and abuse. True solidarity demands that we create not only the new society, but also the *new* human being.

The five main slogans developed and used during the drive were: 1) "Homeless but not helpless!"; 2) "You are but one paycheck away from homelessness!"; 3) "No housing, no peace!"; 4) "You only get what you are organized to take!"; and 5) "Up and out of poverty, now!" They proved to be effective tools for organizing the homeless and their supporters. They also served as tools for political education.

The shrewdly formulated slogan "Homeless but not helpless" initially confused even the most conservative bourgeois foundations into thinking that the homeless organizing drive provided good public relations for their "self-help" theories denying the responsibility and blame of the government and society. So they at first granted some of the drive's efforts much needed financial and media supports. On the other hand, the actual organizing and agitating thrust of the drive made the slogan a declaration of political independence from the poverty-pimp agents of the Powers That Be. . . .

"Homeless but not helpless" meant that the homeless would take the leadership of the struggles against homelessness into their own hands. It provided the homeless organizers a tool for teaching a very strategic lesson of history. . . .

The slogan "You are only one paycheck away from homelessness" served as a weapon to win support from other sectors of public opinion. It also provided a means to expose and explain the class economic causes of homelessness, exploding the myth that the homeless and poor had failed society instead of society failing them.

The slogan "No housing, no peace!" originated out of the [1988] police riots against the homeless takeover of Tompkins Square Park in New York City. The Tompkins Square Park Tent City Homeless Union introduced the slogan to the national union. It later blared forth on to the national scene during the tortuous East Coast "Exodus March to Washington, DC" of some 350 homeless men and women from New England and New York. "No housing, no peace" is a dec-

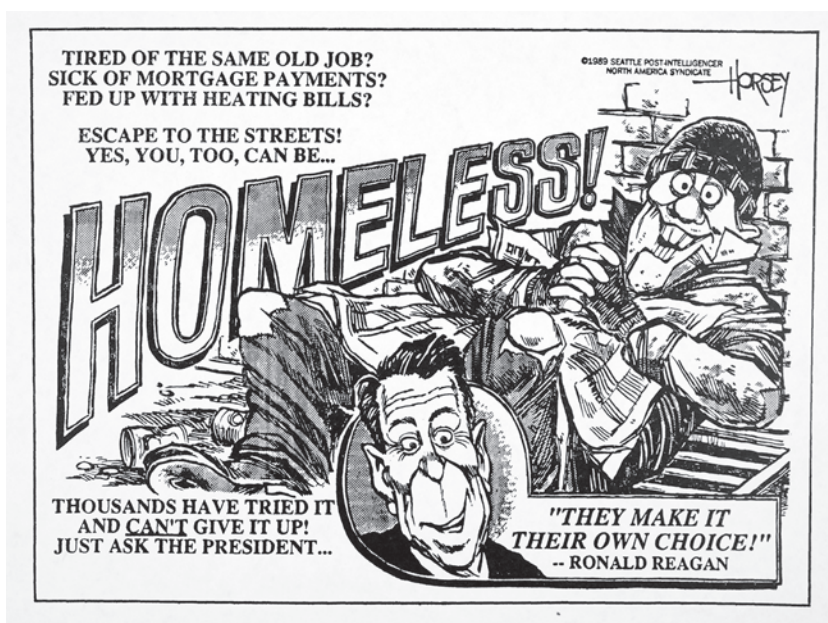


Figure 2.5. David Horsey, “Homeless!” (1989). Image courtesy of Lincoln Cushing/ Docs Populi. Reprinted with permission by David Horsey.

laration of war against the conditions of homelessness and a determination to “stick and stay” the course stopping at nothing short of revolution if necessary to obtain housing for every man, woman, and child.

“You only get what you’re organized to take!” was the recognition that takeovers and all efforts must be reinforced by organization, which includes the establishment of “power bases” to sustain operations. The *talk* means nothing without the *walk*. This slogan meant for the poor and homeless fighters, the beginning of the political understanding that the real fruit of any battle or takeover was the consolidation and expansion of their unity and organization. And that indeed and especially in America, *political power grows out of organization*.

Obviously this historical and strategic meaning of the slogan “You only get what you’re organized to take!” has not been lost on the political police—the FBI and the local “red squads.” In the aftermath of the April LA uprising they have concentrated their surveillance and fire on the most organized element of the rebellion, the politicized so called youth gangs.

The National Union of the Homeless took up the slogan “Up and out of poverty, now!” when it joined with the National Welfare Rights Union and the National Anti-Hunger Coalition and convened the National Survival Summit in Philadelphia, PA, in July of 1989. In taking up this call, the homeless union leaders took a gigantic step toward linking up with hundreds of other poverty victim-led organizations and groupings. This slogan is the recognition that only in consciously directed massive numbers do we possess the strength to shake

and reshape the economic and political foundations of homelessness and poverty ending these deadly diseases sooner not later.

In the course of its existence, the homeless union has used and will continue to use many slogans to rally, educate, and organize homeless and near homeless people. The five mentioned above are the main ones and have all stood the test of time.

2.C.6.

James Boggs

From “Rebuilding Detroit: An Alternative to Casino Gambling” (1988)

Autoworker James Boggs was one of the most inventive Marxist thinkers of the late twentieth century. He and his wife, philosopher and activist Grace Lee Boggs, developed an influential approach to deindustrialization in Detroit that advocated for people to develop alternatives to capitalism here and now through building local democratic, noncapitalist institutions to transform social relationships. In critiquing the economic development model pursued by the first Black mayor of Detroit, Boggs offers an alternate model of meeting the needs of the city’s multiracial working-class communities.

The question which Detroit and other industrial cities are now facing is “What is the purpose of a city?” Up to now, because it has been our historical experience for the last seventy-five years, most Americans have thought of the city as a place to which you go for a job after you have been driven off the land by mechanization. But now we know that the large industrial corporations are not going to provide those jobs in our cities.

What then is going to happen to the one million people who still live in Detroit, half of them on some form of public assistance—not only blacks but Chicanos, Arab Americans, Asians, and poor whites? For most of them, Detroit is the end of the rainbow. They can’t go back to the farms from which their parents and grandparents came because these have been wiped out by agribusiness. There are no new industries coming here to employ them. Therefore, if we are to think about a future for Detroiters, if we are going to create hope especially for our young people, we are going to have to break with most of the ideas about cities that we have accepted in the past and start with new basic principles.

To begin with, we have to stop seeing the city as just a place to which you come to get a job or to make a living and start seeing it as the place where the humanity of people is enriched because they have the opportunity to live with people of many different ethnic and social backgrounds. In other words, we have to see that our capital is in people and not see people as existing to make capital for production or dependent on capital to live.