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Impoverishment and Social Struggle under US Neoliberalism: The National Union of the Homeless

Homeless and poor people built multi-racial organizations to demand housing and economic justice in over twenty cities across the US in the mid-1980s, collectively forming the National Union of the Homeless (NUH). 'Homelessness' had entered public discourse, as large numbers of children and families without shelter disrupted 'skid row' assumptions. Credible estimates in the mid-1990s suggested that at least 700,000 persons were 'literally' homeless on any given night, of which 425,000 had no available emergency shelter, and only 46 percent of these persons were single men, many of whom held jobs as temporary or day laborers. However, homelessness has affected millions of US residents, an estimated two to three million people per year, with a total of seven million unique persons experiencing homelessness from 1985-1990 (Foscarinis 1996:5-6). Amid recessions, deindustrialization, and cuts in public spending, working people throughout the US experienced the impacts of growing precariousness. For every homeless person, many more were living 'doubled up' with other families, choosing between heat and food, facing eviction actions due to inability to pay rent. Yet out of these hardships, impoverished and dispossessed persons began to organize and lead struggles for housing, welfare rights, and economic justice. This paper will investigate the growth and impacts of deepening neoliberal policies in the 1980s, one significant instance of the resistance that emerged to increasing impoverishment and dispossession, and finally a couple of the significant challenges that the National Union of the Homeless faced in attempting to organize a nationwide movement capable of securing adequate housing for thousands of families and transforming the policies of the US government.

Impoverishment with a Neoliberal Face

> In the '80s, what was happening in the economy was new, where you could have a growth of productivity and wealth on the one hand, but then at the same time, the downsizing and

> layoffs on the other. And thus, alongside of this tremendous heating up of the economy, you had this growth of homelessness. This was the '80s and on into the '90s, where we were experiencing huge dislocations in the most impoverished communities.
> -- Willie Baptist, political educator/leader of the National Union of the Homeless, reflecting on the context in which the NUH arose (Skylight Pictures 2007).

Homelessness was and continues to be a publicly visible symptom of the deepening impoverishment and growing inequality affecting millions of persons in the US, amid economic shifts from the mid-1970s onward. Yet while the homeless are apparently the most marginalized and dispossessed within the political and economic structures of the US, the National Union of the Homeless (NUH) also boldly asserted the agency of the homeless, their ability to organize and affect historical change. For the social sciences, which have repeatedly grappled with the tension between structure and agency, particularly debating the nature of power and the possibility of conscious resistance, the organized struggle of the NUH and of the conditions or context from which the Union arose seem to provide a striking case for further study.[1] Beginning in the 1970s, how significant were shifts in forms of labor, concentrations of wealth, and even the nature of the state?[2] How did past political forms and discourse, such as the welfare state and the language of rights, ultimately shape resistance and political demands? How was resistance suppressed, undermined or co-opted by the state, through different institutions, at various levels of government, and in conjunction with international dynamics? On a practical level, how did material constraints—like the immediate need for shelter—hinder analysis and strategy? The first section of this essay will attempt to briefly highlight the historical context,

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[1] Analyzing popular attempts to transform history in France in the mid-nineteenth century, Karl Marx observed, "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted by the past" (1963 [1852]:15). While aware of the frequent 'tragedy' and 'farce' of history, Marx nonetheless spoke of the possibility of exploited and oppressed persons consciously uniting and collectively transforming society, particularly when conditions of economic crisis provided openings that led many to question the long-standing hegemony of political, legal, societal structures and the underlying economic order. While this was one of the first attempts to wrestle with structure and agency, the tension has repeatedly surfaced from Gramsci to Levi-Strauss, the Subaltern Studies Group to Bourdieu, Foucault to Castells.

[2] Harvey has observed that crises of over-accumulation tend to occur regularly under capitalism, leading to the devaluation or destruction of capital (including drops in the real estate prices), but owners of capital inevitably try to either push these consequences onto the most precarious within the political-economic system or to avoid these crises via 'space-time fixes,' moving capital to new sectors (including at points the real estate market) or regions, utilizing uneven geographical development and the different temporal dynamics of diverse financial instruments, in order to maintain ongoing profits. [See David Harvey. 1982. The Limits to Capital. Chicago: University of Chicago.]

the changing economic conditions and shifting political structures, under which poor and homeless persons organized resistance and attempted to make their own history through the National Union of the Homeless.

From the end of World War II until 1973, workers' wages had increased with productivity as part of the post-war bargain struck between labor, capital and the US government. Periodic economic downturns had been remedied by Keynesian economic policies of stimulating demand through counter-cyclical measures of lowered interest rates and deficit spending. This included the public spending and safety nets of President Roosevelt's New Deal and President Johnson's War on Poverty. However, by the early 1970s, these policies began to falter in the face of intensifying competition from Japan and Europe, the end of the fixed exchange rates of the Bretton Woods agreement, the oil crisis of 1973, and ultimately stagflation and the collapse of the property market. Beginning in this period, David Harvey has charted the rise of a fringe economic ideology, namely the neoliberal model of Chicago School economist Milton Friedman and his teacher Friedrich Hayek, to a largely successful struggle for the reassertion of elite class power. For example, the federal minimum wage paralleled the poverty line in 1980 and then fell to 30 percent below that level by 1990, while the top one percent of the population nearly doubled their share of the national income, and CEOs—now compensated primarily in stock options—saw their salaries increase exponentially relative to workers. Harvey defines neoliberalism as "a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade," including "deregulation, privatization, and withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision" (2005:2-3). While this model was pushed by think tanks and given recognition through Nobel Prizes to Friedman and Hayek, Harvey also traces the violent imposition of initial neoliberal experiments in Chile, under Pinochet's CIA-backed regime; the reorganization of New York City by an unelected financial elite following the fiscal crisis in the mid-1970s; and the full embrace of neoliberal policies by US President Ronald Reagan and UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.

The cost of rent, food, and utilities throughout the US continued to steadily increase relative to real wages throughout the late 1970s, with consumer prices surging 12.4 percent in 1980. Appointed by President Jimmy Carter as the Chairperson of the Federal Reserve, Paul

Volcker lowered the US inflation rate from 13 to 4 percent during his tenure from 1979 to 1987, yet he did so by raising interest rates to levels above 20 percent. While inflation had already been hardest on those with fixed incomes and on the poor, particularly those who did not own homes, Volcker's policies led to a deep recession in 1982-1983, during which the unemployment rate reached 10.7 percent (Kilborn 1987). Simultaneously, his policies tightened access to credit. For those who still had access to banks, whose neighborhoods had not been redlined, whose 'credit-worthiness' had not been destroyed amid inflation and unemployment, interest rates became untenable.[3]

Perhaps most striking were shifts in the composition and availability of jobs in the 1970s and particularly into the 1980s. While the recessions of the 1970s often meant temporary layoffs, thousands of decent-paying manufacturing jobs were permanently lost amid deindustrialization in the 1980s. In the early 1980s, Bluestone and Harrison defined deindustrialization as 'a widespread, systematic disinvestment in the nation's basic productive capacity,' noting, "...once all the ways that a plant (or store or office) can be closed down (or made obsolete) are accounted for, it is evident that somewhere between 32 and 38 *million* jobs were lost during the 1970s as the direct result of private disinvestment in American business" (1982:6,9). They emphasize, "...only in the last two decades [mid-1960s through mid-1980s] has systematic disinvestment become, from management's perspective, a *necessary* strategy, and from a technological perspective, a *feasible* strategy," which ultimately found a strong ally in President Reagan's support for 'a class war on workers and their communities' (1982:16,19). Harvey has noted that the policy shifts under Reagan and Volcker decisively undermined the Keynesian aim of full employment; he cites Doug Henwood's analysis in *After the New Economy* (2003) that Volcker initiated "a long deep recession that would empty factories and break unions in the US and drive debtor countries to the brink of insolvency, beginning the long era of structural adjustment" (2005:23). As cited at the

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[3] Shortly before Volcker's appointment, the federal government had made some attempt to overcome historic practices of 'redlining,' which had denied credit particularly to racial minorities and more generally to low-income neighborhoods, by passing the Community Redevelopment Act in 1977. Recognizing the public charter and federal insurance enjoyed by banks, the Act stated that banks had an obligation to serve the needs of the community in which they were chartered, including an affirmative obligation to assist in meeting credit needs. This initial step, which itself did not fully establish a right to credit and certainly not a right to housing, was eroded first by skyrocketing interest rates and then by deregulation under Reagan. As Bill Maurer has highlighted, deregulation and consolidation of services later culminated in the Financial Services Modernization Act of 1999, as well as a growing movement to internet banking. These changes have shifted debates from the needs and rights of physically situated communities to the equality of abstract individuals (in cyberspace). See Maurer, Bill. 2004. "Cyberspatial Properties: Taxing Questions about Proprietary Regimes." Property in Question. Eds. Katherine Verdery and Caroline Humphrey. Oxford: Berg. Pp. 297-318.

beginning of this section, Willie Baptist points to a striking paradox: "In the '80s, what was happening in the economy was new, where you could have a growth of productivity and wealth on the one hand but then at the same time the downsizing and layoffs on the other."[4] Rapid advances in technology, combined with massive deregulation, allowed for unparalleled capital mobility, undermining organized labor and allowing for the dominance of finance and investment. Even as macroeconomic indicators suggested that the recession of the early 1980s was ending, poverty and inequality were continuing to grow in most areas throughout the country. Looking particularly at Harlem, in New York City, Leith Mullings notes that New York lost 33 percent of its manufacturing jobs in the 1980s while seeing a significant growth in poverty rates, yet a boom in the financial sector officially pulled the city out of its recession. While there had been a significant increase in the black middle class in the 1960s and 1970s, this trend was quickly reversed since this new middle class was 'disproportionately concentrated in the public sphere and the social service sphere—precisely the areas most affected by government divestment' (Mullings 2003:178). Similarly, in *Norman Street: Poverty and Politics in an Urban Neighborhood*, Ida Susser documents the implications of deindustrialization and the funding cuts of the New York fiscal crisis of 1975 for the working-class residents of Greenspoint-Williamsburg, charting both the successes and failures of collective resistance, the trials of finding work and navigating the deteriorating welfare system, and the importance of support networks among women despite ongoing racial tensions. Looking at the upheaval in Barberton, Ohio, following the 1980 closing of the Seiberling plant of Firestone Tire and Rubber, Gregory Pappas' *Magic City: Unemployment in a Working-Class Community* emphasizes the structural causes of deindustrialization and unemployment and then considers how work is tied to identity, status, and conceptions of order.

President Reagan's response to growing unemployment and deepening impoverishment was to continue public spending cuts, while pushing tax cuts and anti-labor policies favorable to corporations and the financial community, positing that benefits would eventually 'trickle down.' In urban neighborhoods across the country, steep cuts in public investment in and maintenance of housing and parks decimated the built environment. From 1981-1988, Reagan cut the budget of the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) from $32.2 billion to $7.5 billion,

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[4] See the opening quote of this section (Skylight 2007). While David Harvey has argued that the post-1973 developments in the US ultimately represented changes in the surface appearance of capitalism rather than a fundamental structural change, he also outlines how movement towards 'more flexible modes of capitalist accumulation,' combined with new space-time compressions made possible by technological developments, reshaped labor markets and allowed financial markets to achieve some autonomy from production (1989).

even while new tax laws reduced incentives to private developers to build affordable housing (Fagan 2004). In *Changing Priorities,* the National Low Income Housing Coalition (NLIHC) emphasizes the severity of the budget cuts under the Reagan administration, which continued into successive administrations. The report notes that the HUD budget authority ranged between 5% and 8% of the total federal budget authority from 1976 to 1981, but has only risen above 2% once since 1981 (Dolbeare 2002:5). "In January 1977, the outgoing Ford Administration submitted to Congress a budget request that would have funded 506,000 additional low income housing units (400,000 Section 8, 6,000 Indian housing, and 100,000 home ownership)," but, the NLIHC report continues, "By FY82, subsidized housing commitments had dropped to 60,590 and they remained in the 60,000-100,000 range until 1995, when the number dropped to 33,491, and then in 1996, to 8,493" (2002:9). Even for the shrinking 'middle class,' homeownership became an increasingly remote possibility for many, amid high interest rates, recessions, and ultimately deepening economic inequality. "In 1983, only 30 percent of 'typical' home-buying households—a married couple under 35 with two children—could afford to purchase a mid-priced house. In the previous decades, 65 percent of this group could" (Hopper 1984:52).[5] This put immense pressure on an already tight rental market, driving up rents for all tenants, and this meant that the number of families 'doubling up' with other families—often the first step towards homelessness—increased from 1.3 million in 1978 to 2.6 million in 1983, while unrelated individuals living with others increased from 23.4 to 28.1 million in the same period (Hopper 1984:53). Eviction actions grew in many areas. According to HUD statistics in 1984, the average age of homeless adults was estimated to be 34, with approximately one third being women and family members, without counting those given Emergency Assistance to Families vouchers for hotels (Hopper 1984:57). Shallow gains, like the Stewart McKinney Homeless Assistance Act of 1987, were wrung from the Reagan administration through high profile advocacy by the National Coalition for the Homeless, founded by Michael Stoops and Robert Hayes in 1981, and the Community for Creative Non-Violence, led by Mitch Snyder.[6] However,

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[5] Not unlike the past few years, financial institutions tried to induce buyers with low teaser rates for the first year or two, followed by high interest fixed or adjustable rates.

[6] Snyder, who would ultimately commit suicide in 1990, was famous (or infamous) for winning a 1400-bed homeless shelter from the Reagan administration through a building takeover and subsequent 51-day fast. While Snyder was celebrated in a film starring Martin Sheen and friends with many celebrities, his shelter was strongly criticized by NUH members and others for permitting or facilitating drug use, its state-of-the-art prison-like atmosphere and surveillance system, and its failure to include a program of political or practical education, even while removing the homeless from view in Washington, DC.

the Act ultimately provided funding for emergency shelter services, even while Reagan was implementing neoliberal policies that progressively rolled back public services and denied funding to housing.[7] And as members of the National Union of the Homeless would emphasize, shelters are not homes.

Under neoliberal policies, wide-ranging analyses have often focused on the diminished or decentralized role of the state and on the weakening nature of nation-state sovereignty amid deepening international connections, and social scientists have taken the lead in questioning the *a priori*, unitary existence of the state, instead focusing on the everyday practices and representations of states, as cultural artifacts in a transnational environment (Sharma and Gupta 2006). Yet Weberian conceptions of the state as centralizing the legitimate use of violence, or even functionalist Marxist analyses of the state as protecting the private property interests of the capitalist class, seem to retain some resonance as the police took an increasingly active role in suppressing dissent, multiple government departments facilitated and secured international capital mobility, and government subsidies as well as tax breaks facilitated contested developments. As one example, Maria Foscarinis, the Executive Director of the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty and former co-director of the National Coalition for the Homeless, has charted the extensive criminalization—from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s—of activities associated with homelessness, from begging to sleeping, sitting or loitering in public places to restrictions on providing aid or assistance to the homeless (1996). Across the country, redevelopment and gentrification (discussed below) have often meant the displacement of the poor and even middle class, criminalization of the homeless, and increasing surveillance and security measures in remaining public spaces (commonly justified via the 'war on drugs'), whether amid the so-called revitalization of downtown Atlanta for the 1996 Olympics or via growing anti-homeless laws and 'quality of life' initiatives justified via fear, aesthetics and real estate prices in California (Ruthheiser 1999; Don Mitchell 2003). Similarly, Mike Davis has

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[7] In 1973, the federal government quit funding the construction of new public housing, substituting the Section 8 voucher system (for the 'deserving poor'). Existing public housing gradually fell into disrepair due to under-funding or lack of maintenance. In 1989, the severity of the problem pushed Congress to create the National Commission on Severely Distressed Public Housing, but even its meager recommendations were grossly under-funded. By 1994, when Congress commissioned a limited national viability study of public housing renovation versus increased rental vouchers, some 100,000 public housing units failed the test. Periodic pushes to subsidize or encourage the private construction of low-income rental units have repeatedly fallen far short of targets—privatization of low-income housing has met with massive market failures, while existing landlords are not required to accept vouchers, allowing discrimination against the poor, families with children, and minorities (Feldman 2004).

observed the growth of surveillance, security, and even militarization, evident even in architectural design of a redeveloped Los Angeles (1992). Many members of the National Union of the Homeless were subjected to evictions involving the police, intimidation and arrest during protests and housing takeovers, and the threat of child removal for neglect when they participated as homeless parents in political organizing. While governmental cuts in housing assistance and public spending were devastating, elected politicians and government agencies also actively facilitated and policed spatial de-concentration, redevelopment, and gentrification, involving the dispossession and displacement of large segments of poor communities.

In the wake of widespread urban riots, including the 1967 Detroit riot that claimed 47 lives and was ultimately controlled only by the intervention of the 82nd Airborne paratroopers, President Lyndon Johnson called for a series of government sponsored studies, including the involvement of the RAND Corporation, the Ford Foundation, and a diverse group of 'experts.' In 1968, this culminated in Johnson launching the National Advisory Commission Report on Civil Disorders (or the Kerner Commission) with the task of answering three questions: "What happened? Why did it happen? What can be done to prevent it from happening again?" In the introduction to its report, the Commission announced: "This is our basic conclusion: Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white--separate and unequal....Discrimination and segregation have long permeated much of American life; they now threaten the future of every American" (Kerner 1968). Troubled by the presence of deeply segregated, 'racial ghetto' rife with crime and insecurity, poor health and sanitation, and exploitation by merchants and creditors, the report encouraged the pursuit of "integration by combining ghetto 'enrichment' with policies which will encourage Negro movement out of central city areas." Pointing to six million substandard housing units and suggesting that "nearly two-thirds of all non-white families living in the central cities today live in neighborhoods marked with substandard housing and general urban blight," the report recommended reorienting the federal housing program to place more housing outside of ghettos, in part through expanding rental supplements for existing housing, and by bringing the private sector into construction and financing via low interest rates and other incentives. These solutions for 'spatial deconcentration' have in practice often meant the dismantling and dispossession of communities that had already been subjected to massive

neglect and discrimination, without clear plans or adequate support for displaced residents.[8] While avoiding future urban riots or minimizing the danger of organized rebellion (against conditions that the Kerner Commission identified as unjust) may have motivated government support for spatial deconcentration, multiple real estate developers and investors pursued gentrification strategies driven by pursuit of profit, ultimately benefiting from government assistance.

Neil Smith has charted the struggles over redevelopment and gentrification of New York City and other urban areas. From a marginal niche of the real estate industry to a systematic practice reshaping urban areas in the 1980s, gentrification is framed by Smith as "simultaneously a response and contributor to a series of wider global transformations: global economic expansion in the 1980s; the restructuring of national and urban economies in advanced capitalist countries towards services, recreation and consumption; and the emergence of a global hierarchy of world, national, and regional cities" (1996:7-8).[9] He outlines a useful theory of gentrification based on the 'rent gap,' which emerges between existing capital (structures and land) devalued via disinvestment or inflation, particularly relative to central business districts and suburbs, and the potential for profitable reinvestment in inner city areas, particularly amid urban growth and redevelopment.[10] However, as developers exploit these rent gaps, Smith insists, "The economic

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[8] Notably, the policy of spatial deconcentration may have been first identified by Yulanda Ward, a Washington DC-based, 22-year-old, African-American housing activist associated with several organizations before her murder in 1980. Ward wrote and ultimately had published a couple versions of an essay entitled "Spatial Deconcentration" for grassroots activists, based on the Kerner Commission Report and allegedly on documents from HUD and the US General Accounting Office. While activists had been documenting and challenging processes of gentrification since the early 1970s, this suggested a more insidious government sponsored program that went beyond or perhaps paralleled capitalist economic processes. As of 31 July 2008, multiple sites had copies of these essays, including: http://libcom.org/library/spatial-deconcentration-d-c and http://www.eco-absence.org/text/ward.htm.

[9] Notably, Smith builds on the insights of Castells, Mollenkopf, and Sassen. In *The Dual City: Restructuring New York*, Mollenkopf and Castells emphasize the deepening of complex inequalities, as New York City lost over a half million industrial jobs between 1965 and 1990, but point to a 'dominant class,' specifically the global financial elite and associated technocrats who exist and rule in a 'space of flows' with exclusive access to certain 'networks of information flows,' even while clustering around specific 'nodes' in global cities (1991). In the same collection of essays and in her book *The Global City*, Sassen further theorizes the development of the service and informal sectors in these global cities, often employing the poor and working class who have been displaced to the urban periphery by redevelopment and immigrants who have been dispossessed by global economic forces (1991).

[10] House value, sale price, capitalized ground rent, and potential ground rent are treated as separate categories. Amid new construction, the sale price represents the value of the house or structures, plus enhanced ground rent received by the landowner, but devaluation can eventually occur due to disrepair, changes in style, etc. Some homeowners may sell, rentals increase and maintenance patterns decline with absentee landlords interested in maximum profit. Under-maintenance may eventually lead to lower property values, restricted access to credit, and the redirection of investment. 'Blockbusting' (involving real estate agents exploiting racism in white neighborhoods

geography of gentrification is not random; developers do not just plunge into the heart of slum opportunity, but tend to take it piece by piece...They 'pioneer' first on the gold coast between safe neighborhoods on one side where property values are high and the disinvested slums on the other where opportunity is higher." In many neighborhoods in the 1980s, New York City held hundreds of '*in rem*' properties, foreclosures normally for nonpayment of property taxes, which they began to sell to developers in auctions or for token payments and then further subsidized with tax breaks if developers agreed to reserve 20 percent of units for lower-income residents. As loans suddenly became available, gentrifying outposts in these poor communities were often advertised and discussed in 'frontier' language, tapping into a US myth that effaces history and geography while justifying inequality and exclusion. Marketing this myth, real estate developers then formed temporary alliances with the art community, particularly in the Lower East Side, even as graffiti was whitewashed and art increasingly commodified in the 1980s. While art critics celebrated the 'rawness' of the neighborhood and the emergence of neo-primitivist and neo-expressionist art, real estate developers—who had attracted artists and galleries with low rents—used the art community to spin the rechristened 'East Village' as a hip, cutting edge neighborhood, whose rents then became largely untenable for most artists and galleries by the late 1980s (Smith 1996). Emphasizing the multiple and devastating impacts, Ida Susser suggests, "Urban renewal policies followed by gentrification in the 1970s and 1980s have isolated the urban poor in enclosed and practically invisible communities. Such invisible and relatively powerless communities concomitantly become sites of last resort for methadone clinics, housing for the mentally ill and—partially as a consequence of the well-known phenomenon of NIMBY—industrial waste disposal plants" (1996:415).[11] While struggling to maintain or locate affordable housing, often facing at least bouts of unemployment or underemployment, millions of Americans found fewer 'safety nets' amid the displacement and

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by buying cheap properties and selling them at high prices to racial or ethnic minorities, who then often struggle to make payments or pay for maintenance), 'redlining,' and abandonment commonly follow. This process of devalorization leads to a rent gap between capitalized ground rent under current conditions of use and potential ground rent heightened by emerging urban development (1996:58-70).

[11] More recently, Lyon-Callo has explored the NIMBY (not-in-my-backyard) phenomenon regarding resistance of gentrified or newly developed urban neighborhoods to the location of homeless shelters and other services for poorer residents (2001), while Mike Davis has even suggested, "The most powerful 'social movement' in contemporary Southern California is that of affluent homeowners, organized by notional community designations or tract names, engaged in the defense of home values and neighbourhood exclusivity" (1992:153).

dispossession of the 1980s and into the 1990s, as conceptions of public responsibility and rights for all were increasingly undermined.

From the mid-1970s until the full implementation of 'welfare reform' with the end of Aid to Families with Dependent Children in 1996, federal funding for welfare programs was consistently decreased as responsibilities were devolved to state government, threatening universal entitlements from Social Security to unemployment insurance and decreasing other means-tested programs from housing assistance to food stamps to educational assistance. Funiciello has documented the commonly used practice of 'churning' in which poor families were cut off from welfare, food stamps and Medicaid, often for the mere failure to return a notice or fill-out a new form, which often they had failed to receive. In New York, this process intensified from 1975 until 1981, when case re-openings, a necessary but arduous requirement for any families that needed to re-secure government assistance, actually outnumbered new case openings (1993:169). This effective denial of legal entitlements, which would then be progressively rolled back through the 1980s and 1990s, led to a 'prehomeless syndrome' for many families and individuals. Notably, the struggle of the National Union of the Homeless straddled this significant shift in the form of US governmental institutions and policies, a shift from control primarily via welfare regulation and resulting consent to a period of more open confrontation and coercion involving active policing and surveillance. In *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare*, Piven and Cloward argue that welfare, particularly the means-tested social assistance common in the US, serves both to maintain civil order and to regulate labor. In their understanding, increased welfare expenditures co-opt potential dissent or turmoil during the periodic crises of capitalism, such as the Great Depression and again in the 1960s, only to be reduced during periods of fuller employment to ensure adequate, cheap labor. However, despite a serious recession in the early 1980s, welfare cuts were deepened, and inequality grew immensely. Claiming the promises of the post-World War II welfare state, the NUH demanded concessions and rights vis-à-vis the government, similar to numerous grassroots struggles that emerged in the same period. In examining the impact of the disappearance of 'stable, male-oriented jobs and a concomitant, growing dependence of families on the state,' in the Greenpoint-Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn during the period of the New York fiscal crisis, Ida Susser explains, "Now, rather than focusing on the distribution of resources or the ownership of production, people demanded that the *state* take action to ameliorate bad

conditions...that a broad range of services be funded by the state *as a right*" (1988:266-7). Susser suggests these demands, accompanied by direct action and collective protest often organized by women, emerged in part due to historical shifts related to Roosevelt's Social Security Act of 1935 and its strengthened provisions under Johnson in 1965. Similarly, in *The Magic City*, Gregory Pappas notes that that the Federal Housing Administration and related government policies strongly encouraged homeownership and access to credit for working class families following World War II, causing most to eventually view homeownership as 'more a birthright than a dream' (1989:29). Paralleling these studies, the homeless and allied activists used the slogan "Housing is a human right!" in regular demonstrations and concerts as part of the Tompkins Square Park struggle in New York City, which became allied with the National Union of the Homeless. However, the language of rights, still effective in winning some concessions, was increasingly met with intensified policing, displacement, and the so-called 'War on Drugs.'

On a final note, in attempting to analyze the conditions under which they were struggling to survive and determined to organize for change, the NUH gradually developed and adopted the position that a 'new poor' had emerged, of which the growing numbers of homeless families, children, women and men were indicative. This analysis, put forward in their leadership schools and eventually outlined in a number of pamphlets by (Annie Smart) Leadership Development Institute, noted two fundamental shifts within the larger capitalist system, namely '1) the shift in southern agriculture from manual labor to mechanization, and 2) the beginnings of a shift in the urban economy from mechanization to electronics' (Annie 1990a). While the mechanical cotton picker had forced the mass migration of southern tenant farmers to northern urban areas—a significant factor concentrating poor, unemployed and often African-American youth in inner city areas—the development of electronics, information technology, robotics and wider manifestations of the capitalist-driven digital era have pushed a growing segment of the population first into low-wage, precarious underemployment in the service sector and ultimately into permanent unemployment. "The result of this shift is the vast growth of structural unemployment and poverty of not just black urban youth, but of people of every color, every age, and every geographic area. These people are the social base of the new movement to end poverty" (Annie 1990a). The growing wave of dispossessed and displaced persons foreshadowed the likely but untenable position of a significant portion of persons throughout the US, aptly addressed by the NUH slogan: 'You Are Only One Paycheck Away From

Homelessness.' "There can be no collective bargaining between the employer and the permanently unemployed. There can be no negotiated peace between city hall and the downtown business interests on one hand, and the forgotten, impoverished communities on the other," the Leadership Development Institute wrote in another pamphlet, continuing, "Currently, we can see those cast outside the money-based system already moving to take what they need to survive" (Annie 1990b).

Claiming Dignity and Rights: A Brief History

> The dispossessed of this nation—the poor, both white and Negro—live in a cruelly unjust society. They must organize a revolution against that injustice, not against the lives of the persons who are their fellow citizens, but against the structures through which the society is refusing to take means which have been called for, and which are at hand, to lift the load of poverty. The only real revolutionary, people say, is a man who has nothing to lose. There are millions of poor people in this country who have very little, or even nothing, to lose. If they can be helped to take action together, they will do so with a freedom and a power that will be a new and unsettling force in our complacent national life.
> --Martin Luther King, Jr., announcing his Poor People's Campaign (1968:59-60)

> It can be done. You understand...it can be done, if people just take the initiative and break it in. You've got to forget it being against the law. I don't care. I'm dying in the streets! I think that should be against the law!
> --Ron Casanova, leader of the New York and then St. Louis Union of the Homeless, justifying coordinated housing takeovers by the homeless (Skylight Pictures 1990)

> This was homeless people organizing homeless people.
> --Willie Baptist, National Union of the Homeless leader (Skylight Pictures, 2007)

While an increasing number of people in the US were simply struggling to survive, the poor and homeless who led the National Union of the Homeless collectively organized multi-city

takeovers of abandoned houses, creatively used the media and people's tribunals, built alliances with unions and student groups, and marched on those in power with concrete demands for change. At its height, the National Union of the Homeless had approximately 25 chapters in cities across the country. Several key leaders emerged from union, civil rights, and welfare rights struggles, who in turn drew lessons and inspiration from past, notably including the Poor People's Campaign, initiated by Martin Luther King, Jr., months before his assassination. As Willie Baptist has observed, "When [Martin Luther King, Jr.] launched the 1968 Poor People's Campaign, he began to understand that the issues of race relations that found expression in the Civil Rights Movement, the issue of foreign policy that found expression in the Vietnam War, and also the issues of economic exploitation and poverty, that those issues were inseparably connected, that you can't resolve one without the other." (Skylight 2007). While the Poor People's Campaign had gradually faltered, many of its grassroots leaders remained active. Leaders also emerged from parallel struggles, such as the Watts Riots, the Black Panthers, the American Indian Movement, and Leftist political groups. The National Union of the Homeless, often connecting with the National Welfare Rights Union and other organizations led by the poor, would learn from, claim the legacy of, and continue the spirit of many of these struggles.

In 1983, Chris Sprowal, Tex Howard, and Franklin Smith founded The Committee for Dignity and Fairness for the Homeless in Philadelphia. All three had been homeless and unemployed for at least a year, and their call for justice and housing drew over 500 homeless members—from unemployed former construction and factory workers to single parents and families—within nine months, as well as support from churches, labor, and several community organizations. By February 1984, recognizing the immediate needs of their members, they established a shelter run and managed by currently and formerly homeless persons, while focusing much of their advocacy on the treatment of the homeless in Philadelphia's emergency service system. However, by 1985, their advocacy began to include demands for permanent housing, work and healthcare, under the slogan 'Homeless But Not Helpless' (NUH 1988).

On 6 April 1985, Chris Sprowal, Director of the Committee for Dignity and Fairness to the Homeless, welcomed more than 400 homeless delegates, as well as union leaders, religious leaders, public interest lawyers, state politicians, and the local president of the NAACP, to the Founding Convention of the Philadelphia/Delaware Valley Union of the Homeless. Sprowal, who had been a leader in the New York City CORE (Congress on Racial Equality), had

widespread union contacts—most significantly with the National Union of Hospital and Healthcare Workers—that helped to draw publicity and political support (New York Times 21 April 1985). During the Convention, the Union of the Homeless adopted a Constitution that committed it 'to act collectively' to advocate for the rights and dignity of homeless and poor people and 'to demand an end to homelessness, unemployment and poverty forever in America.' Further, the Constitution stated: "This Organization pledges to organize and unite the homeless, unemployed and poor working people of the Philadelphia/Delaware Valley region without regard to race, color, sex, sexual orientation, age, religion, national origin or political affiliation" (Philadelphia 1986). In quick succession, the Union would win the right to shelter and 24-hour intake in city homeless shelters, guarantee the right of homeless persons to vote (eliminating a permanent residential address requirement), and secure public showers, after staging bath-ins at public fountains. Key to this success was building an independent financial base, with 6,000 members paying monthly dues of one dollar for the homeless and five dollars for the employed. Simultaneously, by late 1985, the Union was building a national network of new chapters, responding to requests for assistance from cities across the country. In response, the Union developed a six-week intensive Leadership and Organizing Training Institute for Homeless Activists. Using membership fees and other contributions, graduates of the Institute were at the forefront of organizing affiliates, as part of the 'National Homeless Organizing Team' (NUH 1988). The Training Institute would also eventually lead to the Annie Smart Leadership Development Institute, to continue guiding political education and analysis.

The National Union of the Homeless (NUH), with representatives from eight affiliates, held its first strategy meeting in Philadelphia, in October 1986, electing officers and developing the first national policy for the organization. The NUH also initiated the Winter Offensive Strategy, calling for simultaneous actions by each of its affiliates under the slogan: 'Homes and Jobs: Not Death in the Streets.' Locals or affiliate unions in Los Angeles, Chicago, New Orleans, Philadephia, and New York, all had bases, while locals in Boston, Baltimore, and Washington, DC, were still struggling to secure adequate spaces. Within several weeks, a dozen members of the Greater Boston Union of the Homeless, together with two NUH leaders from Philadelphia, had taken over and held for six days a burnt out, city-owned brownstone in the South End. In evicting the Union due to alleged safety concerns, Mayor Raymond Flynn agreed to help the Union locate a building as a base of operations run by the homeless to house and

educate the homeless. Savina, president of the 250-member Greater Boston Union of the Homeless, told a New York Times reporter, "This is an emergency situation. We're not developers or advocates. We're the homeless themselves asking the city please to listen or we'll take back what's ours...We won't tolerate another winter of people freezing in the street or going to shelters that are shells without hearts" (*New York Times* 7 December 1986). A number of affiliates had significant victories, and within the next year, new affiliate unions emerged in Oakland, Tucson, Albuquerque, St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Detroit. The growing NUH gathered homeless representatives from across the country to testify at a National Tribunal on the Plight of the Homeless, in October 1987, in New York City, on the UN International Day of the Homeless. The powerful indictment of the Tribunal provided new energy to and support for protests, hearings, and housing takeovers across the country, as the NUH collectively focused organizing efforts on 'the acquisition of permanent, decent housing for homeless families and individuals and the promotion of employment and employment training opportunities (NUH 1988). Among the press coverage gained, *The New York Times* reported "Homeless Plight Protested in Three Cities," focusing on the takeover of empty units at the Henry Horner Public Housing Project by the Chicago/Gary Area Union of the Homeless, as well as mentioning similar actions and arrests in Oakland and Seattle. Forcing the Chicago Housing Authority to admit that 5,700 public housing units remained vacant (due to disrepair), Gary Otis, president of the Chicago/Gary Union, emphasized, "People say we're crazy out here on the streets. Well, what's crazy is sitting around and not doing anything about it. We're not going to give up" (Johnson 7 January 1988). Recognizing the extreme limitations of emergency shelter, local and nationwide protests for affordable housing led Philadelphia Mayor Wilson Goode (still suffering politically from the public scandal surrounding the police bombing of MOVE headquarters and resulting deaths in 1985) to agree to work with the local Union of the Homeless and the Committee for Dignity and Fairness in rehabilitating the 3000 vacant properties throughout the city as permanent, decent housing for homeless families and individuals. In 1988, Dignity Housing was officially incorporate by Sprowal, Leona Smith, and now Executive Director Alicia Christian, who had gained administrative and nonprofit skills via previous employment as Project Director for the Center for Community Change and Director of Research for the Congressional Black Caucus. Founded and guided by the homeless, Dignity Housing established a housing development and social services program with $2.9 million from the city to acquire and renovate

an initial fifty homes. Significantly, the program of Dignity Housing initially involved extensive peer counseling and came to host the Dignity Tenants' (later renamed Annie Smart) Leadership Development Institute in 1992, to guide political education and tenant activism.[12]

In addition to the charismatic Chris Sprowal, who served as the spokesperson for and initial leader of each successive development of the Union, a few key leaders are worth mentioning. Willie Baptist became involved in organizing the Union of the Homeless, shortly after the official founding of the Philadelphia/Delaware Valley Union, recruited from the workfare/welfare rights struggle in Detroit to help shape the strategic direction and political education of the organization. Willie was instrumental in developing the training program of the NUH and ultimately in creating and leading the Annie Smart Leadership Development Institute. Recently reflecting back on the genesis of his activism, Baptist explained, "I'm formerly homeless. I've been poor all my life. I've worked all kinds of jobs, mostly low income jobs. I became active very early on in social struggles. In 1965, the Watts Uprising erupted, and I participated as a 17-year-old youth. And that experience really shaped who I am today; it instilled in me a sense of social responsibility and the need to build something much broader than my own individual activity" (Skylight Pictures 2007). From the Watts Uprising, Baptist participated in the Black Student Movement and Leftist political organizations, worked as an organizer with the United Steelworkers, and then after bouts of unemployment and homelessness, became a leader and the primary political educator in the National Union of the Homeless. In this role, his extensive connections with the National Welfare Rights Union and the Up & Out of Poverty Now! Campaign facilitated nationwide organizing and collaboration. Several leaders of locals would also become central to the work of the National Homeless Organizing Team of the NUH, helping to launch and educate new affiliate unions across the country while guiding their own members. One of the most dynamic and powerful was Savina Martin, a 31-year-old former army medic, who had been homeless for a year due to an inability to work during her second pregnancy, when she became the president of the Greater Boston Union of the Homeless. Operating on a limited budget and contending with Boston emergency shelter system, Martin organized hundreds of homeless members and orchestrated strategic housing takeovers. Like many leaders, Martin faced personal as well as wider political

[12] Notably, in the mid-1990s, Dignity Housing would gradually transition to a mainstream NGO, partly due to funding issues, with multiple programs no longer run by the homeless. Peer counseling was ended, and the Leadership Development Institute would eventually be moved to the newly emerging University of the Poor.

challenges; as she has shared in a few public interviews, she discovered the murdered body of her sister, Dominga, in 1987, and within a year, she was addicted to multiple prescribed medications and other drugs that she was taking to deal with the resulting nightmares. Ultimately, compounded by the endless demands of local and national organizing and the struggles of trying to raise a family, this addiction led to temporary setbacks. However, Martin successfully sought treatment and reemerged as a leader in later struggles of the National Union of the Homeless. She also founded a new group in 1989 for homeless women recovering from substance abuse called Women's Institute for New Growth and Support (Hernandez 5 March 1991). In a 1993 interview, discussing the challenges of poor and homeless people organizing for societal change, she suggested, "We have to ask ourselves, 'What is empowerment?' It's not just one person's responsibility. Everyone is a leader in his or her own right" (Kahn 3 January 1993). While multiple other leaders should perhaps be mentioned here—notably including Leona Smith, the eventual president of the National Union of the Homeless—a final mention will be given to Ron Casanova, who grew up largely in New York City institutions and spent years living on the street. As recounted below, 'Cas' would become the leader of the New York City/Tompkins Square Park Union of the Homeless and later the Kansas City Union of the Homeless, as well as the vice president of the National Union of the Homeless.

In *The Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City*, Neil Smith begins with a striking account of the police violence, riots and ultimately organized protest that centred on Tompkins Square Park in New York City's Lower East Side (1996). Smith marks the beginning of the struggle on 6 August 1988, when hundreds of police in riot gear attempted to brutally (but ultimately unsuccessfully) enforce a 1pm curfew in the park, which was then providing shelter for dozens of homeless evictees. In the coming months, an average of three hundred evictees, together with anti-gentrification and housing activists, began to organize resistance, even as the city government demolished several Lower East Side buildings occupied by squatters in May 1989 and as the city police destroyed tents and belongings in a July 1989 raid, despite widespread community support for the homeless. Losing everything but his birth certificate (a vital piece of identification to pursue any type of job or assistance) in the July raid, Ron Casanova writes, "That is the moment I became an activist, when I saw the destruction. I realized that the government or powers-that-be could do that at any given time. Now it became personal (1996:134). Coming to political awareness and eventual leadership in the Tompkins

Square struggles and then the Kansas City Union of the Homeless, Casanova has recounted several key moments in the history of the NUH in his memoir, *Each One Teach One*. Notably, his account highlights the awareness and analysis of the organized homeless in Tompkins Square Park and beyond, as he notes growing concern as the New York Supreme Court allowed real estate speculators to destroy or convert single-room occupancies—the last resort of the poorest—in a 6 July 1989 ruling, or as he highlights growing anger at the warehousing of apartments for later high-end development, not unlike the Christadora House on the park that had been redeveloped from a settlement house and welfare office to expensive condominiums, following a period of abandonment as it passed through several developers' hands (see Neil Smith's rent-gap theory of gentrification outlined above). In July 1989, Casanova and his fellow residents at 'Tent City' were visited by leaders of the National Union of the Homeless from Philadelphia, including Willie Baptist and Leona Smith, then president of the NUH. Learning that both had experienced homelessness and that the board of the NUH was composed of 90 percent homeless and formerly homeless persons, Casanova and his friends quickly entered into dialogue with the NUH and accepted an invitation to attend the upcoming National Survival Summit, eager to break their relative isolation. Notably, despite new alliances and subsequent victories, repeated raids on the Tent City would culminate in the New York Parks Department, Police and Fire Department successfully emptying Tompkins Square Park several days before Christmas 1989, burning the homeless tent city to the ground, and finally in the closure of the park for a multi-million dollar reconstruction in June 1991, under the liberal administration of Mayor David Dinkins. In response to the park commissioner Henry J. Stern's justification that it would be 'irresponsible to allow the homeless to sleep outdoors,' without mentioning that the city shelter system could only house a quarter of the city's homeless population (Smith 1996:5), Casanova defiantly declared, "If I got to die this time, I'm going to die ripping the boards down from these buildings. I'm going to die trying to make a home for myself. I'm not going to die because they want to sell me drugs. I'm not going to die because they want me on welfare. I'm not going to die because they want me in the shelter system. I'm going to die because I want to live" (Skylight 1990).

In the summer of 1989, chapters of the National Union of the Homeless, the National Welfare Rights Union, and the National Anti-Hunger Coalition convened a Survival Summit in Philadelphia, which ultimately brought together over 50 activists from more than 30 states.

Together, the Summit adopted the common slogan and campaign 'Up & Out of Poverty, Now!' Ron Casanova recalls, "I got to talk to brothers and sisters and kids, people who actually are going through the same changes. People who feel that kind of pain—instead of just accepting it, like we have been all our lives—started to organize, started to try to think of a way to get out of poverty. When we got done with the Summit, our intention was to take HUD in any way, shape or form. We went to Washington to get HUD" (Skylight 1990). Over the course of three weeks, Casanova and the Tent City-New York City/Tompkins Square Park Union of the Homeless helped lead almost 300 members of the National Union of the Homeless and allied groups to Washington, DC, together with Willie Baptist, Savina Martin, Diane Johnson, and key leaders from other cities. Their 400-mile Exodus March suffered police harassment and physical hardships, including five marchers experiencing miscarriages and two having heart attacks. Notably, Casanova was particularly critical of the Center for Community Nonviolence (CCNV) and its media-savvy leader Mitch Snyder for poor planning, from inadequate food to lack of accommodations to routes that often skirted towns instead of marching through the center to garner additional marchers and press coverage (Casanova 1996). Snyder and CCNV had taken responsibility for the logistics of the Exodus March, after convincing the NUH and other organizations of the homeless to support and join the Housing Now! Rally. On 6 October, the National Union of the Homeless successfully secured a meeting between Jack Kemp, Secretary of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and the Union, represented by Leona Smith and Casanova, as well as Alicia Christian from Dignity Housing. During the meeting, also attended by Robert Hayes of the National Coalition for the Homeless and a few others from major (shelter/)housing rights organizations, Kemp promised that ten percent of all HUD housing, particularly Federal Housing Authority foreclosed housing, would go to the homeless beginning in 1990, to be rehabilitated and managed by the homeless.

Despite winning a significant concession from HUD, two other occurrences highlighted the significant challenges faced by the Union. First, the National Union of the Homeless had undertaken the Exodus March in part to join the 100,000-person Housing Now! Rally in Washington, DC, on 7 October. However, after refusing to stay in the 1,400-bed Center for Community Nonviolence shelter due to conditions there, NUH was denied a space in Lafayette Park—made famous by the Hooverville encampment and Martin Luther King, Jr.—or anywhere else near other protesters. Casanova recalls, "In actuality, they put us out in the boondocks on

the far side of the RFK Stadium parking lot, in the woods, where nobody would see us, Yet the whole point was to be seen" (1996:171). Noting the cemetery, morgue, AIDS testing clinic and nearby jail that surrounded them, the *Washington Post* similarly described their location: "The main open-air encampment for the homeless was in the capital's Siberia—a soggy up-slope on marshland that borders the fetid Anacostia River...This was about the only site in town on which 300 squatters could settle and not be blamed for lowering property values." In the same account, emphasizing that the homeless came as 'demanders of justice' and not as 'recipients of charity,' the journalist favorably covered the demands produced by the homeless, stating, "The demands were no different from those brokered routinely by healthy and employed people: 'the opportunity to be productive' and 'to work for a livable wage'" (McCarthy 15 October 1989). Then, instead of being given a spot at the center of the main Rally, as promised, the homeless quickly found that Mitch Snyder, who was then running the CCNV shelter, Donna Brazile, and other organizers of the rally intended, together with politicians and movie stars, to speak for the homeless instead of allowing them to speak for themselves.[13] Decrying 'poverty pimps' who were more interested in shelters than in ending homelessness, the NUH forced its way to the stage and demanded the right to speak. Finally, Leona Smith and then Ron Casanova were given a chance to speak, and Leona emphasized, "The struggle is not over, my brothers and sisters, until every single homeless man, woman, and child in America has a right to decent, affordable housing, and a right to a decent quality of life. It does not stop. It does not stop" (Casanova 1996:180). As mentioned again in the final section, there was a constant need to assert the necessary leadership of the homeless and poor, while confronting those who claimed to speak for (and who often profited from) the poor. The second related but later incident occurred when the NUH discovered, via a New York Times article, that Jack Kemp began negotiating with Mitch Snyder and Barry Zigas, president of the National Low-Income Housing Coalition, without consulting the National Union of the Homeless or any other grassroots anti-poverty group

[13] Mitch Snyder, affiliated with the Center for Creative Nonviolence (CCNV), had become the best known advocate for the homeless, following widespread publicity for his arrests and hunger strikes on behalf of the homeless—securing the largest homeless shelter in Washington, DC—and a 1986 made-for-television movie entitled 'Samaritan: The Mitch Snyder Story,' starring Martin Sheen. Between his initial emergence from prison for grand theft auto in 1973 and his suicide in the CCNV shelter in DC, in 1990, Snyder would become friends with numerous actors, activists, and politicians. One of his successes, which many homeless leaders have critiqued for its focus on emergency relief, was the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act of 1987, secured largely due to Snyder's lobbying of Speaker of the House Jim Wright. Snyder also worked closely with Robert Hayes, founder of the National Coalition for the Homeless (New York Times 8 July 1990).

(Maitland 26 November 1989). Kemp's formal letter had been addressed to 'Housing Now!' and opened a seemingly intentional path to keeping his commitment without dealing with the homeless. After a futile second meeting avoided by Kemp and attended by the financial director for low-income housing, HUD quit answering calls and letters.

In response, on Tuesday, 1 May 1990, the National Union of the Homeless coordinated takeovers of empty federally-owned houses, citing the promise of HUD Director, Jack Kemp. The documentary film *Takeover*, a collaboration between Skylight Pictures and the National Union of the Homeless, provides a record of these simultaneous actions in New York, Minneapolis, Detroit, Los Angeles, Tucson, Oakland, Chicago, and Philadelphia. Significantly, while still receiving some favorable coverage from the progressive press, such as WBAI radio and the Village Voice in New York City, the National Union of the Homeless realized the importance of producing their own (or collaborating in the production of) media about their struggle. Watching interview segments with homeless leaders from each of the cities, the emerging unity of the poor across historically constructed barriers of race, ethnicity and gender is evident in mothers clear about the justice of finding a home for their children; men--both white and black--who first lost jobs then homes but who have maintained their dignity through organized and collective struggle; Native Americans articulate about ongoing abuses; and veterans questioning their dispossession and abandonment by the government despite their service. Shelter, as well as food and clothing, are demanded as basic human rights, while leaders master knowledge of government policies, intervening in HUD hearings but also willing to break unjust laws in hopes of changing them. Many are articulate about the loss and suffering of homelessness, but they are also strategic in planning actions, savvy in the use of media, and powerful in outlining the justice or morality of their struggle. Convinced that ending homelessness and poverty is possible, Leona Smith suggests, "Once people can begin to realize the power that we have, we can turn this country upside down." From police brutality in New York City to arrests in Detroit and unjust child removal in Minneapolis, the homeless faced the retaliation of the state, despite the broken promises of Jack Kemp and HUD. Yet cracks emerged; in Philadelphia, the mayor refused to intervene with city police, insisting that the federal government could send its agents if HUD wanted to turn out homeless families. In Oakland, after initial arrests, publicity forced the city government to hand $2 million in land for the construction of Dignity Housing West, while stopping further evictions following additional

takeovers. Fifteen successful building takeovers in New York City forced the government to give millions of dollars to a homeless-run housing program. Yet Willie Baptist observes, at the conclusion of *Takeover*, that the struggle has been difficult, and everyday another 2,000 Americans become homeless (Skylight 1990).

Facing Challenges

> History has taught...it is not enough for people to be angry—the supreme task is to organize and unite people so that the anger becomes a transforming force.
> -- Martin Luther King, Jr, as quoted by the NUH and Up & Out of Poverty Now! Campaign (Kramer 1991)

The City of Philadelphia, HUD, and other government agencies were periodically embarrassed into acting or perhaps forced to act in order to quell more widespread outcry. In the mid-1990s, Ida Susser argued, "[The homeless] have emerged as a symbol of the new poverty in the United States. Political concern for housing the homeless, or at least removing them from the streets and subways, stems from the need to make the increasing inequality to which the majority of the residents are subject invisible, individual, and private." Meanwhile, neoliberal policies insisted on ongoing cutbacks in government spending on social services and public housing, the reversal of progressive taxation, and ultimately welfare reform. Freedom becomes little more than freedom to compete in the market and consumer choice, as government or public responsibility is devolved and then minimized. Instead of pointing to structural causes of poverty and homelessness, government and wider public discourse increasingly demonized the poor and homeless, trapped in a culture of poverty and dependency and ultimately blamed for their self-destructive behaviors and individual pathologies.[14] Histories of doubling up and displacement or underemployment and unemployment, intertwined with significant economic shifts, were often minimized or ignored.[15] Despite widespread anthropological critiques, 'culture

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[14] While the initial causes of poverty might have been systemic, Oscar Lewis argued that a culture or values system—including some seventy psychological or ideological traits—allegedly developed among the poor, which were then passed onto their children and which helped to explain the persistence of poverty (1998).

[15] Ida Susser notes that many ethnographies inadvertently contribute to this reification of the 'poor' and 'homeless,' because persons are studied for a particular, brief time period, instead of over a prolonged process of struggle (1996).

of poverty' arguments were quickly inserted into mainstream discourse, perhaps first via Daniel Patrick Moynihan's *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (1965) report to President Lyndon B. Johnson that identified the 'Negro family' as "the principle source of most of the aberrant, inadequate, or antisocial behavior that did not establish, but now serves to perpetuate the cycle of poverty and deprivation" (Leacock 1971:11). Goode and Maskovsky note that even the numerous ethnographic rebuttals of the 'culture of poverty' tend to still treat poor communities as isolated spheres, failing to challenge notion "that the culture of poverty produced an incapacity to organize collectively and created an avoidance of mainstream political, economic, and social institutions" (2001:11). In this regard, the organized action of the National Union of the Homeless—including homeless leaders building intentional alliances with churches, student groups like Empty the Shelters, and even teams of lawyers in an effort to make the 'American Dream' accessible to all—is particular significant.

While it is important to celebrate the periodic victories and organized struggle of the National Union of the Homeless, including the emergence of multiple leaders who continue to guide related struggles, the organization eventually declined, without having significantly reversed wider trends of impoverishment and dispossession. As highlighted in the first section, the significant shifts represented by neoliberal policies posed immense challenges to organizing. The ability to demand rights or concessions from the state became more precarious, even as policing and surveillance increased. While the NUH was initially successful at securing some media attention, the poor were gradually pushed out of sight, de-concentrated, or isolated to peripheral areas by government-aided redevelopment and gentrification. Media coverage, in turn, often became complicit in minimizing the extent of impoverishment and inequality and in blaming poverty on the poor themselves, via metaphors of dependency and pathology. While each of these phenomena deserves significant attention, this final major section will specifically examine two constraints faced or lessons learned by the NUH. These lessons included the need for the impoverished to organize the impoverished across historically constructed and politically manipulated racial and gender-based barriers, insisting on a united leadership base of the poor and homeless, and the potential devastation wrought by drugs and the War on Drugs.

Building the Leadership of the Homeless across Lines of Race and Gender

The necessary leadership of the homeless and poor is constantly reiterated in documents of the NUH and in conversations with former leaders, which point both to historical precedents of the leadership of the oppressed or exploited and to the changing economic situation that suggests that the position of the homeless and poor-both unemployed and working-foreshadows a growing trend in the US and beyond. However, knowing the pain of poverty and insecurity of homelessness is not sufficient to analyze the causes of impoverishment or to strategically lead a struggle for justice, so the development of the Annie Smart Leadership Development Institute and a commitment to political education became important aspects of the work of the NUH. Retrospectively analyzing the demise of the NUH, the importance of these elements, of developing multiple committed leaders and undermining the charismatic leadership of a few, has been repeatedly emphasized in initial conversations with former leaders. Similarly, particularly in working with a series of student leaders in Empty the Shelters, there was a growing recognition that it was possible for a wide range of persons to adopt the perspective and position of the poor and homeless, ultimately aligning themselves and their skills with the struggle to end poverty and even taking leadership roles within the movement. Further, the NUH recognized a need to develop an understanding of the origins and historical development of racism and patriarchy and to challenge their ongoing existence, largely because they undermined collective struggle to end homelessness and secure a decent future for all. Many leaders grew up experiencing the overt violence of racism, as well as patriarchy, and multiple statements suggest that their commitment to work across lines of race and gender was a gradual process of overcoming anger and developing a deeper analysis. Again in hindsight, Willie has suggested that the NUH could have been more attentive to their public representation of homelessness; Leona Smith, Chris Sprowal, and Ronald Casanova—primary spokespersons for the Union at key moments—were all African American, allowing for easy depictions of a 'black underclass' or for easy conflations of poverty and race while potentially hindering alliances with poor whites. In subsequent struggles, including the Kensington Welfare Rights Union, the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign, and the University of the Poor, leaders became more careful to represent the multi-racial leadership of poor women and men, while acknowledging ongoing impacts of racism and patriarchy. This said, in a moment when many struggles were being pushed into an NGO-based and foundation-supported model (often tied to identity-based resistance) and leading social scientists were pointing to the place-based,

communitarian nature of resistance in the face of economic globalization (Mollenkopf and Castells 1991), the analysis and commitments of the National Union of the Homeless are striking, particularly as they overcame significant challenges arrayed against them.

In May 1988, the new homeless Executive Board Members of the National Union of the Homeless drafted their mission statement, which read:

> 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.

Similarly, the Constitution of the initial Philadelphia/Delaware Valley Union of the Homeless had explicitly committed the Union to organize and 'unite the homeless, unemployed and poor working people' across lines of 'race, color, sex, sexual orientation, age, religion, national origin or political affiliation.' The National Union of the Homeless was disproportionately identified as African-American and male, but women occupied key leadership positions, including Leona Smith who became the NUH President, and poor whites, Latino/as, and Native Americans were central to the membership and leadership of many chapters. In an important pamphlet jointly drafted by members of the Union's Annie Smart Leadership Development Institute and other members of the Up & Out of Poverty Now! Campaign, Marian Kramer, President of the National Welfare Rights Union, outlined the key aspects of their shared analysis and strategy:

> ...The uniqueness of the National Welfare Rights Organization was that Afro-American women began to emerge in leadership roles...We made a difference through our organized struggles to change the welfare department. We got jobs, education, etc. But now we are no longer needed to produce. We have witnessed production shift from manufacturing to electronics. Our country can produce for the world, and yet we have homelessness, hunger, and unemployment.

> We know the government uses drugs to regulate our working class. We know our children are undereducated and killed in the streets. We know that certain elements on the right and on the left are attempting to keep us divided...
>
> We must understand strategies and tactics to obtain our overall goal to come UP AND OUT OF POVERTY NOW. We know poverty has no color and any attempt by certain mis-leaders to paint it black must be counteracted. We have been labeled as the underclass and not as part of the working class. We have witnessed the judicial, legislative and executive branches of the government attacking our living standards....We, the victims of poverty, must lead because we know our fight is the foundation of the working class fight today (Kramer 1991:4-5).

The Up and Out of Poverty Now! Bill of Rights contains a similar observation: "The history of this country is replete with examples of social problems being brought to a successful conclusion only when led by those Americans most victimized by the problems." This observation caused the adoption of the 'Johnnie Tillmon Model' of organizing, named for the welfare mothers from Watts, who became the first Chair of the National Welfare Rights Organization. Contrary to the 'Saul Alinsky Model' that called for 'maximum feasible participation,' the impoverished and homeless were seen as the necessary leadership base and 'vanguard' of the movement to end poverty in the 'Johnnie Tillmon Model,' which also insisted that while attempting to build an independent financial base among its members, the movement to end poverty had to address immediate needs of the impoverished, ideally through cooperative projects of survival that ultimately serve as 'bases of operation' for the larger struggle (Kramer 1991:22). Again, in constructing a model for organization and leadership development, two strategic political principles provided guidance, namely: "1) Poverty victims must be at the forefront of the struggle to end poverty; and 2) you only get what you are organized to take." This, in turn, informed the 'five main interdependent ingredients of organizing,' in brief: teams of indigenous organizers to identify and organize around issues on which people are prepared to act; bases of operation often associated with projects of survival (first pioneered by the Black Panthers in the Free Breakfast for Children Program and Free Health Clinics); mutual support networks with wide-ranging allies; voices or internal and external lines of communication; and nationally connected cores of leaders trained in political consciousness and strategy able to unite diverse but related struggles. Notably, these principles and ingredients, outlined in the pamphlet *The*

Methods of Building Leadership and Organization, are drawn directly from and illustrated with the experiences and lessons of the NUH (Annie 1990b).

The National Union of the Homeless also drew inspiration from multiple historic struggles. Challenging the simplistic, violent, anti-white image of the Black Panthers projected by the FBI and its Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO), the NUH studied the Panthers, their struggle for economic security for all, and their ultimate destruction, and from this study, they identified the 'Six Panther P's,' namely: a clear *program* identifying central issues, strategic and creative *protests*, *projects of survival* responding to the immediate needs of communities and deepening connections and discipline, *press work* to break isolation and misinformation, continuous *political education*, and an emphasis on *plans not personalities* (recognizing that the Panthers demise was largely due to over-reliance on a few charismatic leaders). Another important historical model was provided by the intended 1968 Poor People's Campaign of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who announced the campaign prior to his assassination with the observation: "The dispossessed of this nation—the poor, both white and Negro—live in a cruelly unjust society. They must organize a revolution against that injustice..." (1968:59). King's connection of racism, impoverishment, inequality, and foreign policy toward the end of his life provided an important model for analysis and organization.

Drawing on these models, leaders confronted multiple specific challenges in attempting to build the National Union of the Homeless. As suggested by a quote in this section, leaders often emphasized that 'poverty had no color,' yet it required significant and ongoing work to grapple with the history and complexity of racism, as well as patriarchy and other forms of oppression, and to find ways to unite in a common struggle to end poverty. One helpful framework for understanding both the constraints and the powerful historical agency of poor and homeless leaders in the US context—a framework which echoes much of the analysis of the Leadership Development Institute of the NUH—has been put forward by Dr. Leith Mullings, a participant in many struggles for economic and social justice in New York City and beyond and a public anthropologist. Emerging from her study of infant mortality rates among African-American women in Harlem, Leith Mullings developed the interpretive framework of the Sojourner Syndrome, named for the slave-turned-abolitionist preacher Sojourner Truth. Mullings writes, "The story of Sojourner Truth has become an important symbol of both the constraints and activism characterizing the lives of African American women. It conveys a

message about the interaction of race, class, and gender, as well as the dialectic of oppression, resilience, and resistance" (2005b:79). Her framework insists on an intersectional approach, in which class, race and gender are understood as 'historically created relationships of differential distribution of resources, privilege and power,' as processes that constrain or allow certain choices. Founded on private property and driven by competition, capitalism allows a few to profit based on the exploitation of the labor of the many, yet capitalists must constantly ensure that the many do not effectively challenge this system. Race, a socio-historical construction, seemingly developed as a justification for colonial exploitation and, in the US, to separate poor Europeans from Africans and Native Americans, following their united rebellions against wealthy European landowners, most notably following Bacon's Rebellion in 1676.[16] While decades of laws, false promises, and brutality were necessary to convince most white persons that racial affiliations were more significant than class, racism has had very real and devastating effects over centuries of US history. Similarly, relatively powerless in the workplace, men were encouraged to rule in their homes, even while economic pressures and later welfare policies made family life increasingly strained. At the base of these oppressions are unjust economic structures, which must be collectively challenged, yet racism and patriarchy have had lasting effects even while they have served to alternately justify and hide the ongoing economic exploitation of the vast majority of people.[17] This analysis seems to parallel many of the understandings of leaders of the NUH, which intentionally identified itself as a union and built

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[16] Leith Mullings highlights, "As African and African American labor became the basis for the development of much of the Western hemisphere and an engine for the expansion of capitalism in Europe, the attendant accumulation created the conditions for the rise of the modern world system" (2005a:670). An important body of work, stretching from WEB DuBois' *Black Reconstruction* to more recent historical ethnographies like Pem Davidson Buck's *Worked to the Bone,* has examined the historical construction and manipulation of race, racism, and ultimately racialized labor to maintain an unjust, unequal system to the benefit of an elite few in the making of the US. Extending David Harvey's concept of ongoing 'accumulation by dispossession,' Mullings emphasizes that it is often the racialized who are dispossessed and disadvantaged, as racism and resulting conceptions of 'white privilege' allow at least temporary alliances between capitalists and other classes, namely the white working class and poor in US, who remain exploited by their apparent allies.

[17] More recently, in analyzing the massive injustices made manifest by Hurricane Katrina, Adolph Reed has pointed to a similar framework for analysis, arguing that the intense focus on race, despite the reality of racism, 'is appealing partly because it doesn't confront the roots of the bipartisan neoliberal policy regime.' While acknowledging that the Bush administration is composed of 'small-minded bigots,' who are 'contemptuous of black Americans in general,' he also highlights that race has become the most familiar language of social justice in America, but one which has ceased to evoke a response from the federal government. "...for quite some time race's force in national politics has been as a vehicle for reassuring whites that 'public' equals some combination of 'black,' 'poor' and 'loser'; that cutting public spending is aimed at weaning a lazy black underclass off the dole..." Reed argues, and then concludes, "Class will almost certainly turn out to be a better predictor than race of who was able to evacuate, who drowned, who was left to fester in the Superdome or on overpasses" (3 October 2005).

ties to other progressive unions. However, repeated challenges undoubtedly faced the daily work of building relationships across historic divisions, of developing a united multiracial leadership of women and men, and of navigating issues of representation amid hegemonic conceptions of race, gender, and class, historically constructed and daily reinforced by the media, educational institutions, and politicians.

Another significant challenge to the united leadership of the poor was posed by a wide range of organizations, advocates, politicians and even academics whose declared mission was to assist the poor. Willie Baptist offers the following analysis, "Out of the [President Johnson's] War on Poverty Program, there developed a whole poverty industry whose mission was not to end poverty but to assist the poor or to give charity to the poor. We posed a threat to these agencies, these so-called anti-poverty agencies, and in many cases we were out-maneuvered by them" (Skylight Pictures 2007). As noted above, Piven and Cloward and many others have highlighted the role of means-tested welfare programs in regulating the poor. With cuts in public spending and services, despite growing impoverishment, non-governmental organizations—from social service organizations to churches—were celebrated (and given tax-free status) as the 'civil society' solution to growing social problems. Yet many of these nongovernmental organizations were unrepresentative and unaccountable to those they were allegedly helping, more interested in paternalistic assistance than significant social or systemic change. Wagner has argued that private charity has effectively allowed for the neglect and decline of public services, ultimately institutionalizing poverty and often co-opting dissent (2000). Delmos Jones had much earlier noted the possibility of even a grassroots or local group, particularly a Community Action Program running an inner city Head Start Program, beginning "as an advocate acting on behalf of the local population, but [transforming] into a component of higher-level institutions of the city" (1987:99). Adolph Reed has charted the history of 'poverty pimping' from the 1960s version of accommodation in pursuit of personal gain and political opportunism 'that sought credibility through a racial or activist patina,' claiming to speak for the poor via the legitimacy of antipoverty institutions even while taking "payoffs in exchange for acquiescing to ruling elites' repressive agenda (for example, urban renewal plans that would displace poor people)," to the 1990s version found in the multi-million dollar 'poverty-research industry,' in which particularly economic or demographic 'technical expertise is the new criterion of authenticity,' allowing 'self-righteous, third-person' claims of neutrality even while the poor themselves—instead of

unjust structures—are blamed for poverty (2000:102-106). While the experience of the NUH suggests that many in the 'poverty industry' actively worked to undermine their struggle, often in complicity with government agencies and many foundations, potentially well-intentioned efforts also regularly served to undermine the leadership and analysis of the poor and homeless, as highlighted above in conjunction with the 1989 Housing Now! Rally in Washington, DC.

Noting the efforts of Legal Aid and the Coalition for the Homeless in the 1980s, Funiciello critically observes, "The homeless attorneys and advocates often missed the point—that what families and other homeless people needed was housing, not a cleaner welfare hotel or another shelter—so the strategies they pursued were almost always contrary to the goal of accessing permanent housing" (1993:174). As noted above, the National Coalition for the Homeless (which by many accounts did address the structural causes of homelessness) was instrumental in securing the Stewart McKinney Homeless Assistance Act of 1987, but this act only secured funding for emergency shelters, even while the Reagan administration was drastically cutting the HUD budget. "While the prosperous Coalition *for* the Homeless was composed primarily of shelter developers and other service providers, the Union *of* the Homeless attempted to establish a base—perhaps a counterforce—to represent their own interests," explains Funiciello, noting that the Union referred to the shelters, sought by the Coalition and Mitch Snyder, as 'concentration camps' (1993:176). In 1983, the New York State Homeless Housing Assistance Program was created and given an initial allocation of $20 million. Under the initial leadership of Nancy Travers, the spouse-to-be of the co-chair of the Coalition for the Homeless, Kim Hopper, this program ironically proposed to alleviate homelessness through spearheading not-for-profit shelter development in the state, instead of by providing permanent housing. In a harsh assessment, Funiciello—a former welfare recipient who came to work closely with Travers—suggests, "[Travers, Hopper] and many of their friends shared an undivided loyalty to building shelters. Most shelter advocates had little experience in poverty issues. Plus, any bureaucrat who wants to get ahead must find a way to continue to be needed" (1993:179). In a recent work, Kim Hopper has reflected on the advocacy efforts of the 1980s and their ultimate impacts, notably recognizing that shelters are not the ultimate solution. He notes that even vagrancy laws, which the Supreme Court declared unconstitutional in 1972, have begun to reappear. However, Hopper seems to question the possibility of eliminating homelessness, instead he seems to suggest that the 'homeless' – a term that replaced derelict,

tramp and other earlier classificatory or linguistic appellation in the 1980s—have always been with us, even if (often questionable) statistics suggest that their numbers exceeded Great Depression levels by the mid-1980s (2003:15-6). Further, while he points to structural causes, from scarce housing to limited opportunities for adequate work, he also approaches a 'culture of poverty argument,' suggesting that many homeless individual and families become accustomed to a state of 'liminality,' arguing that 'misery can come to prefer its own company' (23).

Despite these critiques, the National Union of the Homeless and its many chapters built active alliances with a vast array of organizations, and many leaders continue to emphasize the importance of widespread alliances. In addition to building a broad leadership base of the poor, through widespread political education, Willie often emphasizes that any successful social struggle must often win a significant segment of 'the middle.' Despite his deep criticisms of CCNV and the organizers of Housing Now! Casanova is also quick to highlight the vital and impressive support provided by a Berkeley-based organization, Seeds of Peace, which joined the Exodus March with two buses filled with medical supplies and food, and he is quick to note the importance of alliances with lawyers, community-based organizations, documentary filmmakers, journalists, and artists in maintaining the Tompkins Square Park struggle. Savina Martin still has a series of documents and letters demonstrating the overall successful alliance that her Boston organizations were able to build with Mayor Raymond Flynn, who used his position within the US Conference of Mayors to advocate the active support of fellow mayors for the 1989 Housing Now! mobilization, including their participation in Washington, DC. Often using the language of human rights, as well as the moral/theological understandings of various religions, many leaders built alliances with both churches and a growing range of civil and human rights NGOs. Perhaps most significant was the consistent support provided by students through chapters of a parallel organization called Empty the Shelters/Fill the Homes. The NUH was responsible for helping to form and build Empty the Shelters, which broke from the National Student Campaign Against Hunger and Homelessness.

Dealing with Drugs

> At that time, there was a growing epidemic of crack cocaine that began; this began to inundate the shelters and impoverished communities…I literally cried talking to one

> chapter after another who had experienced tremendous crises and destabilization as a result of the crack cocaine epidemic. And with the downfall of the Homeless Union, its demise, I learned that any effort to build a movement has to be rooted in a core of leaders who are clear, competent and committed to what they are doing, so as to build a kind of intellectual force that can stick and stay through all the ups and downs and all the political forces that are arrayed against them.
> –Willie Baptist (Skylight Pictures 2007).

In the mid-1980s, crack cocaine began to flood into many poor urban communities across the United States. The devastating impacts of growing drug usage, particularly cheaply accessible crack cocaine, are difficult to fathom, both for whole neighborhoods and for grassroots organizations within them, including affiliates of the National Union of the Homeless. Intertwined with growing usage was the government-sponsored 'War on Drugs,' which foremost included intensified policing and incarceration, disproportionately of the poor and particularly of Black men. With cuts in public spending and welfare, a number of authors have pointed to the War on Drugs—versus the War on Poverty—as a new form of social and political control, particularly following the urban uprisings of the late 1960s (Parenti 2001, Wacquant 2002). Sharing this perspective, Leith Mullings has usefully explored 'the processes that constrained Harlem's history-making capacity' when this center of historic political struggles was "whipsawed by both a drug 'epidemic' and the so-called 'war on drugs.'" She situates this period both within the devastating impacts of 'neo-liberal, global capitalism' and within the need for 'new measures for establishing and maintaining order and control,' particularly among populations with long histories of struggle and dissent (Mullings 2003:173-176). Citing multiple academic and journalistic sources, as well as the impressions of her Harlem informants, Mullings suggests that elements of the US government were at least complicit with the spread of crack cocaine into many neighborhoods, and then she charts a history of the War on Drugs from President Nixon to New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller to President Reagan that has criminalized users and low-level dealers—targeting poor and disproportionately African American communities for brutal sweeps and searches—while minimizing attention to traffickers and denying substantial funds for treatment and other public services. Noting the

stifling of critical discourse and dissent, Mullings emphasizes a further impact, "In addition to the disappearance—as a result of addiction, illness, death, murder and incarceration—of untold numbers of young people who are often the vanguard of protest movements, both the drug epidemic and the war on drugs have severely disrupted the social relationships and networks that form the basis of social movements" (2003:190).

Often justified by increasing drug-related crimes, policing also sometimes became a means of securing a neighborhood for gentrification; neighborhoods were denied credit and government aid, ensuring their demise and impoverishment, often leading to a growing prevalence of drugs as informal employment and as comfort amid an abandoned landscape, which eventually provided political justification for demolishing public housing, creating draconian laws, and targeted policing. Examining the gentrification process in Harlem, Mullings suggests, "...it is almost as if the way had been paved by prior devastation and excessive policing" (2003:190). In the Lower East Side, the NYPD launched Operation Pressure Point in January 1984, to clear the way for rapid gentrification. Neil Smith recounts, "An estimated 14,000 drug busts were made in eighteen months throughout the Lower East Side, and the *New York Times* gloated that "thanks to operation pressure point, art galleries are replacing shooting galleries" (1996:25). However, strikingly, 'kingpins' were never arrested. In the 1980s, the NYPD literally conquered public spaces for redevelopment and gentrification in battles with the growing homeless/evictee population and existing community members. Union Square Park, Washington Square Park, and Tompkins Square Park were all surrounded by fences, redeveloped with divided benches, and intensively policed, amid the imposition of curfews and new lists of park rules. This type of policing undoubtedly posed significant obstacles to the New York/Tompkins Square Park Union of the Homeless and to other affiliates around the country, even while fueling anger and ultimately analysis. However, policing and incarceration were again only half of the problem, the other half was the massive health epidemic related to the spread of crack cocaine. Having faced (or facing) homelessness, struggling to maintain relationships and families amid the brutal conditions of poverty, attempting to navigate the demands of organizing, many leaders of the NUH eventually used and became addicted to drugs.

Particularly devastating was the loss of Chris Sprowal, the charismatic co-founder and co-leader of the Union, due to his addiction to cocaine. In a *City Limits* profile, Sprowal recounts his addiction and ultimate demise during a nationwide tour in 1989, to rally homeless

persons for the planned Exodus March on Washington, DC. In Chicago, the profile suggests, "He 'went berserk,' in his words, accusing his partner of stealing his stash. Then he sped off in his car, wearing pajamas, to find more cocaine. The next day, his partner cut the tour short and took him back to his native Philadelphia for rehab. 'I was completely wiped out,' he says now" (Russ 2001). Heightening the loss of Sprowal, their media-savvy and widely recognized leader, at least a few fellow leaders had used cocaine with Sprowal, further undermining his credibility and jeopardizing the organization. Then in his fifties, Sprowal publicly admitted to his addiction and ultimately spent the next few years struggling with addiction and periodic homelessness. Dignity Housing and the National Union of the Homeless both removed Sprowal from leadership (or accepted his resignation), in hopes of holding together an organization increasingly experiencing the impacts of cocaine and crack flooding into cities across the country. Leona Smith was elected President of the NUH at this point, and as Willie recounts above, he 'literally cried talking to one chapter after another who had experienced tremendous crises and destabilization as a result of the crack cocaine epidemic.'

Sadly, the downfall of multiple key leaders was only one of the experiences that raised the awareness of a number of leaders regarding what they called 'chemical warfare on the poor.' Another key incident occurred during the Housing Now! Rally in Washington, DC, where the National Union of the Homeless had been secluded and largely cordoned off in a remote corner. Cas writes, "There was a white shack out there that we believed, and which I believe to this day, housed the undercover cops who were keeping tack of us. That's where the drugs and alcohol in the camp came from" (1996:171). In informal conversations, a couple other leaders have recounted an almost identical story, noting that despite a perimeter of police around the NUH camp at all times—having been designated as the greatest security threat participating in the Housing Now! Rally—the police never bothered or investigate the white trailer or shack set-up near the main tent. Every evening, a person with a bike would supposedly emerge, winding through the camp and attempting to sell drugs to those present. This incident and others caused at least a few leaders to study the so-called War on Drugs, in an attempt to grapple the drugs that flooded poor communities despite growing policing and publicity.

Some suspected that the government had either facilitated or at least turned a blind eye to the importation of drugs into poor communities. A number of leaders had witnessed many of the angry, intelligent youth that participated in urban revolts (or riots) in the late 1960s become

nodding heroin addicts; now, their fellow leaders and many potential leaders among the impoverished and dispossessed were being consumed by crack cocaine. Further, instead of putting government resources into treatment and rehabilitation, recognizing drugs as a health-related issue, immense and grossly disproportionate resources were being put into policing users—notably instead of dealers—and building prisons. Their suspicions were finally given some public credence when the *San Jose Mercury* published the three-part 'Dark Alliance' report by Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Gary Webb, implicating the CIA—at least via their awareness and toleration—in the importation of cocaine from Nicaragua to help fund the US-sponsored Contras in their war against the Sandinista government and alleging the role of Nicaraguan cocaine in the spread of the crack cocaine epidemic from south central Los Angeles into the wider US (Webb 18-20 August 1996). Despite an archive of supporting material, Webb's account was soon attacked and denounced in other mainstream papers, but subsequent Congressional hearings led by Maxine Waters and later mainstream articles supported Webb's central findings.[18] Similarly, Peter Dale Scott and Jonathan Marshall, a Berkeley professor and San Francisco Chronicle editor respectively, have documented the extensive involvement of the US intelligence community not in fighting a 'War on Drugs' but in facilitating the production and importation of illegal drugs into the US. "Indeed, the long and sordid history of CIA involvement with the Sicilian Mafia, the French Corsican underworld, the heroin producers of Southeast Asia's Golden Triangle, the marijuana- and cocaine-trafficking Cuban exiles in Miami, and the opium smuggling *mujaheddin* of Afganistan simply reinforces the lesson of the Contra period: far from considering drug networks their enemy, US intelligence organizations have made them an essential ally in the covert expansion of American influence abroad," state Scott and Marshall, continuing, "CIA involvement in Southeast Asia contributed to the US heroin epidemic of the late 1960s, just as CIA involvement in Central America contributed to the cocaine epidemic of the 1980s" (1998:4). Whatever the initial US motives for turning a blind eye to, or perhaps even facilitating, the importation of illegal drugs at different historic moments, these drugs also seemingly became tools of social control. Amid cutbacks in welfare, despite growing poverty and inequality, many have suggested that new tools of social control—of co-

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[18] This controversy is documented in multiple places, including in a valuable online archive, hosted by NarcoNews, at: http://www.narconews.com/darkalliance/drugs/start.htm. In addition, Webb wrote and published a subsequent book, entitled *Dark Alliance: The CIA, the Contras, and the Crack Cocaine Explosion* (1998. New York: Seven Stories Press).

opting dissent—had to be identified in order to avoid renewed urban riots and more effective forms of organized resistance. While it is hard to assess the intentionality of certain government officials or agencies, several factors have arguably been successful at maintaining social control or undermining dissent, including: the displacement of many poor communities from urban centers and/or their isolation in peripheral areas, the presence and use of drugs particularly by youth, intra-communal violence related to drugs, increased policing justified by drugs, skyrocketing arrest and incarceration rates related to drugs and often resulting felony disenfranchisement, and even under-funded schools and the destruction of many public places.

As highlighted above, Savina Martin was one of the few leaders to successfully emerge from addiction, helping to found Women's Institute for New Growth and Support for homeless women recovering from substance abuse in 1989, while playing a leading role in Treatment on Demand in Massachusetts. Her immense difficulties in seeking treatment, resolved only due to her ability to access benefits as an army veteran, led her to realize the immense challenges of facing fellow addicts. Removing the right to healthcare—to treatment on demand—left many with the likely paths of either death or prison. Furthermore, her political consciousness caused her to realize that drug users did not bear all responsibility personally, instead she was able to identify the injustices of a political and economic system that denied the right to healthcare, creating tendencies to self-medicate while denying any kind of treatment, and created mass unemployment and homelessness in many places, leading to the necessity of informal and often illegal economies, including drugs. Attempting to shore up the National Union of the Homeless and then moving into other struggles, remaining leaders—many of whom were already women and mothers—began to look primarily to mothers as a new leadership base on which to build. Although some certainly used drugs, mothers seemed to be the grouping most able to resist drugs and commit to a long-term struggle for a more just future.

Conclusion: the Ongoing Relevance of the National Union of the Homeless

The National Union of the Homeless, claiming a historic place within multiple trajectories of struggle, overcame a series of significant pitfalls that had plagued other movements. Writing in this period, Mollenkopf and Castells suggested that communities or subordinate groups are increasingly local in their perspective, attached to particular cultures,

disorganized, and easily co-opted or maintained as 'the fragmented and powerless locales of social communities' (1991:416-417). Yet the Union made significant strides towards building a nationwide movement, coordinating collective actions on the same day in cities across the US. In analyzing the US union movement and working class consciousness, Stanely Aranowitz highlights the devastating impacts of racism, nativism, and paternalistic sexism in excluding large sections of the working class (1992). Here again, the Union had significant success in building a multiracial movement, led by both women and men affected by issues of homelessness and housing, with a strong sense of historical connection to earlier struggles and a purposeful political education program via the Annie Smart Leadership Development Institute. Finally, Aranowitz, among others, has suggested that the majority of US unions were interested in amelioration within a social democratic paradigm, as opposed to more revolutionary goals of transformation (1992:xxi). Undoubtedly, many NUH members and some leaders remained focused—perhaps appropriately—on shelter conditions or even on taking and securing long-term housing, largely overwhelmed by the immediate and articulated needs of the homeless in different areas, while few perhaps fully realized the challenges of societal transformation amid the increasingly international economic and political forces arrayed against them. [19] However, while actively analyzing the economic and political context, the Union of the Homeless clearly called for an end to homelessness, and their mission spoke of 'full liberation,' 'revolutionary perseverance,' and creating a 'new society' and a 'new human being.'

In conclusion, while this paper has been confined to a past historical period, it seems worth highlighting that ongoing neoliberal policies in the United States, allowing both rampant property speculation and predatory lending, have set the groundwork for millions housing

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[19] For instance, US government policies, since WWII and including the recommendations of the Kerner Commission, have encouraged homeownership for all Americans; do claims for the 'right to housing' resonate with this goal or did the NUH have broader goals of societal transformation? Responding to a series of articles on 'the housing question,' written amid the emergence of German industrialism in 1872, Engels suggests that workers have historically been forced to live in 'bad, unhealthy and overcrowded dwellings,' but this was due to their 'exploitation and oppression' as workers by the capitalist class . Debates regarding the housing question—focused on the 'smaller, secondary evil' of intensified housing shortages and increased rents—ignored this exploitation, proposing instead a "bourgeois and petty-bourgeois utopia, which would give each worker the ownership of his own little house and thus chain him in semi-feudal fashion to his particular capitalist" (1954:17-19). Noting the excessive prices that workers were forced to pay for 'shacks...an hour away from the town, in a muddy desert' outside of Kansas City, Engels observed, "In this way, the workers must shoulder heavy mortgage debts in order to obtain even these dwellings, and now become the slaves of their employers for fair. They are tied to their houses, they cannot go away, and must put up with whatever working conditions are offered them" (32fn). Engels' solution involves workers taking political power, ending their exploitation and organizing society for the common good, including expropriation and redistribution of housing to homeless or overcrowded workers.

foreclosures in the next two years. These foreclosures will put immense pressure on rental markets, even while welfare reforms have removed further safety nets and limited the ability to win concessions. Under neoliberalism, the poor are allegedly liberated from dependency, offered freedom and empowerment via the so-called opportunities and efficiency of the (now-failing) marketplace (Goode and Maskovsky 2001). Measures to criminalize the homeless and police remaining public spaces have been introduced in many small- and medium-sized towns; commercial revitalization via the 'main street model' of redevelopment—involving 'cleanliness and beautification projects,' 'target markets,' and 'crime prevention'—has been pushed by partnerships between businesses and government agencies like Fannie Mae (Seidman 2004). By 2008, more than one in 100 US adults was in prison, at an annual cost of $49 billion, with 60 percent being incarcerated for non-violent drug-related offences (Warren 2008). Thus, in the midst of a new housing crisis, amid deepening impoverishment and heightened policing, I hope that this initial research and analysis is valuable both for understanding the historical trajectory that has led to our present situation and for assessing the potential for and barriers to successful grassroots organization, based on a similar (although not identical) period in the recent past. On a note of significant hope, struggles of poor and dispossessed people are continuing and newly emerging around the US, from Picture the Homeless in New York City to the deepening fight of those condemned to the 99,000 FEMA trailers stretching along the Gulf Coast in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, whose plight momentarily broke the silence of the mainstream media and the rhetoric of many politicians and academics. The (un)natural disaster of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast provides a recent signpost in attempting to understand the potential impact of neoliberal policies. Writing just days after Katrina hit, Adolph Reed insisted, "What happened in New Orleans is the culmination of twenty-five years of disparagement of any idea of public responsibility" (2005). Drawing on Foucault's notion of biopolitics, Henry A. Giroux explicitly points to the dissolution of the social contract as entire populations become disposable, 'collateral damage in the construction of a neoliberal order' (2006:11). While Giroux is particularly attentive to racial disparities embodied in the Ninth Ward, Reed also warned that public debates would likely focus primarily on 'manifest racial disparities,' threatening to obfuscate historical and structural consideration of how race has been constructed and manipulated to maintain an unjust, unequal system to the benefit of an elite few. Neither the failure of federal, state and local government responses; the privatized and unaccountable

rebuilding process; nor the use of disaster by those with economic and political power is unique. Turning to New York, Julian Brash has charted the use of the 'myth' of 9/11 as both cause and justification to deepen the political and economic dominance of the financial establishment, conforming economic development policies to their interests while strengthening the city's dependence on the success of the financial industry.

Brash observes with as much caution as optimism, "...crises are merely openings, which must be seized upon by an organized and coherent social movement if they are to become anything besides missed opportunities" (2004:97). As one sign of growing grassroots resistance, Picture the Homeless, based in New York City, is undertaking political education, building widespread alliances, and engaging in direct action to challenge current housing policies at all levels of government. In a recent report based on participatory research, members of the organization counted vacant housing units in Manhattan, finding that 24,000 apartments could be developed, exceeding the number of homeless households in the city. Raising powerful questions about private property producing instead of regulating scarcity, the organization began their report with a quote from one of their allies in the academy, Peter Marcuse, namely: "The housing crisis does not exist because the system isn't working. It exists because that's the way the system works" (2007:2). Finally, despite the demise of the National Union of the Homeless, many of its leaders have continued to build grassroots organizations, drawing on its numerous lessons and successes. Veterans of this earlier struggle are today central to the progressive Radio Free Georgia, to organizing day laborers in a successful living wage campaign in Baltimore, and to fighting water privatization in Detroit. Significantly, many of the students that participated in Empty the Shelters have also remained central to ongoing struggles to end poverty in the United States. In 1993, the Women's Institute for New Growth and Support, founded by Savina Martin, secured a building in Roxbury, with seven rooms for homeless women recovering from substance abuse and space for its programs. The building was renamed to honor Martin in 2007, with WINGS still remaining an important presence in the Greater Boston community. In the mid-1990s, Martin took time to pursue formal university education, but she has continued to struggle for the rights of the poor and homeless in partnership with religious communities and social service agencies in California. Ron Casanova, who served as the Vice President of the National Union of the Homeless and as the editor of the Union of the Homeless National News, has since recorded his experiences and development in an autobiography entitled *Each One Teach One: Up and Out of Poverty: Memoirs*

of a Street Activist, while starting the New York-based Artists for a Better America and co-directing the School of Arts and Culture of the University of the Poor. He continues to inspire many to action with his insight and calls for justice, whether as part of the 2006 National Truth Commission on Poverty in the US or as part of his activism related to HIV/AIDS. Beginning in the early 1990s, Willie Baptist served for a decade as the Education Director of the Philadelphia-based Kensington Welfare Rights Union. Recipient of the prestigious 2007 Alston/Bannerman Fellowship, Willie Baptist is now the Scholar-in-Residence at Union Theological Seminary, where he directs the Poverty Scholars Program of the Poverty Initiative, and he continues to be the Co-Coordinator of the University of the Poor, which includes the continuation of the Annie Smart Leadership Development Institute. In these roles, he is actively educating and organizing new generations of grassroots leaders.

Note on Sources

As a brief note on sources, I have been in initial conversation with several former leaders. This group of leaders had originally agreed to come together for a series of discussions and interviews at the end of October 2007; unfortunately, this meeting was cancelled due to the forest fires in San Diego, where one key leader now resides and continues to work and organize among the homeless, and due to the unforeseen health issues faced by another leader. This paper is therefore based on preliminary discussions held with several leaders in September and October of 2007, as well as a number of archival materials, held at The Poverty Initiative of Union Theological Seminary, in New York City. I have also drawn on newspaper articles from different cities and on brief accounts in a few books, as well as the Skylight Pictures' documentary "Takeover." As a result, this paper is best read as a preliminary survey, framing questions for further ethnographic and historical research.

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