

Santa Monica Activists Challenge Church and State

by Robert Norse

More than 1500 homeless people need shelter each night in Santa Monica, the well-to-do beach suburb of Los Angeles. But there are fewer than 400 emergency shelter beds, and temperatures regularly dropped below 50 degrees this past autumn with El Nino-provoked rains sweeping the region.

To prevent winter illness and death, homeless civil-rights activists Jennafer Waggoner, Linda Armstrong, and David Busch of Food Not Bombs/Homes Not Jails, along with dozens of homeless people, publicly and peacefully opened up the abandoned, boarded-up Flamingo Motel on November 13. The building, empty for more than five years, is slated for demolition in a few years to make way for a new Civic Center; it had provided low-income transitional housing until closed two years ago as part of a redevelopment scheme involving developers MacGuire-Thomas.

Before the occupation, the activists asked that an emergency Red Cross shelter or the Santa Monica Civic Auditorium be opened. Their plea was spurned immediately by Tracy Scruggs, Santa Monica Homeless Coordinator, who pleaded poverty, saying that job was the County's.

MacGuire-Thomas Partners, the owners, refused to sit down with the penniless residents, who were fixing up the derelict building to provide shelter during the rains, while the cold-weather shelters at the National Guard armories were closed. Those homeless people trapped on the streets were not only wet and freezing but officially criminalized at night under the Santa Monica Sleeping Ban.

For eight days, the Flamingo was home for more than 100 people. A city inspector, invited in by the activists, found the oceanside building usable. With local support, the rooms were opened, cleaned and

put to use. The City was urged to declare a state of emergency, but stonewalled. City Manager of Human Services Julie Rusk sent a letter to the Flamingo homeowners on November 18, refusing to provide alternate shelter or enter into negotiations to legalize the refuge.

Waggoner replied: "If there were 2500 housed people out on the streets [made homeless by an emergency or earthquake], the city would have to do something, but it won't declare an emergency for 2500 homeless people. So we did something. Without city funding, we have set up this emergency shelter, fed hundreds of meals and given physical and emotional support to many Santa Monica citizens."

On November 19, more than 40 police officers raided the Flamingo Motel, arresting Waggoner, Busch, and legal observer Michael Reinsborough. The "Promenade Youth," a group of 40 homeless teenagers

with no safe place to go, were sent out into the night. They had returned to risk arrest in solidarity together in recognition of the fact that they'd be risking arrest wherever they slept or squatted that night.

Busch and Waggoner locked themselves into a metal bear claw of the sort used recently in environmental actions defending the redwoods in Humboldt County. Police cut through the metal device, lacerating Busch's wrists in the process, ignoring his cries of pain. Waggoner reports: "I just remember David and myself screaming in agony as these officers were twisting our necks and twisting our heads to force us to unlock."

Police dragged Waggoner across the property, according to local columnist Lyn Gerry. Even though fully secured by six officers as she was being hauled away, Waggoner was subjected to "site torture," also known as "pain compliance," a pro-

cedure in which arms and wrists are torqued violently to speed up an arrest.

Police announced they would bill Waggoner for this procedure. She found out later that police had given her a concussion and a three-inch laceration on her skull. At the jail she received no medical attention. In response to Waggoner's peaceful noncompliance tactics, learned from the civil rights struggles of the '60s, she was denied release until bail was raised. Video-journalist and legal observer Michael Reinsborough also was arrested for trespass as he filmed the brutality.

After the arrests and eviction, homeless refugees were not allowed to retrieve their sleeping bags and clothes. City officials dumped their property in the trash and hauled it off to a landfill. City spokesperson Judy Rambo said that Santa Monica spends \$2 million annually on homeless services and is one of the most generous in the nation towards the homeless. Why then, wondered Waggoner and other critics, are the available facilities more than 1000 beds short of meeting the need? Why does the city criminalize covering up with a blanket in public, outlaw recycling cans from dumpsters, and require permits to sell the local homeless newspaper?

"Making criminals out of people without homes does not solve the problem," Busch said. "It just makes homeless people's lives harder to live and it distracts them from focusing their attention on solving their problems."

Waggoner, recently homeless herself, is the editor of the local street newspaper, *Real Change*, a point person for the California Homeless Civil Rights Action Network, and an HIV/AIDS worker for the City. Last July, she and Side by Side activists successfully embarrassed City authorities into reopening public showers to the homeless by washing their hair in

the City Hall restrooms in a demonstration they called a "Shower Stall." [See *Street Spirit*, October, 1997.]

Waggoner says this protest is the first of many in a plan to boycott Santa Monica for human-rights violations resulting from development plans and legislation that favors tourism and industry over the rights of all citizens — homeless or not. The activists are demanding that the City repeal its anti-homeless ordinances and create a "safe zone" on public property where homeless Santa Monicans can get access to sanitary, medical, and camping facilities on a year-round basis.

On December 16, Waggoner and the homeless community took the issue to the Santa Monica City Council. Their issue was postponed a month to make room for a two-hour discussion on whether a park should be kept open for dogs. Activists then brought up homeless survival when the agenda topic was amnesty for parking tickets in the Promenade Mall; homeless activists asked for amnesty for "sleep-crime" tickets. In response, Mayor Robert Holbrook turned off the microphone, cut television transmission, and with most of the City Council, left the room. Police physically removed the 15 homeless sup-

porters as the mayor closed down the meeting to shut off the homeless speakers.