

# Homeless Protesters Occupy Plush Hotel Lobby

Protesters set up a soupline in the Fairmont Hotel's opulent lobby to emphasize the contrast between San Jose's red carpet treatment of rich developers and its utter failure to act on affordable housing.

by Robert Norse

San Jose's Community Homeless Alliance Ministry (CHAM) switched gears from traditional civil disobedience to soup-serving street theater on Sunday, March 5. Ministers led nearly 100 homeless women and men, community supporters, and church members into the lobby of the plush Fairmont Hotel in downtown San Jose to emphasize the unmet needs of the poor.

After a church service at First Christian Church, Rev. Scott Wagers and Larry Sweeny struck the third blow in recent weeks against an indifferent City administration. The multiracial group staged a five-block march from their regular weekly Sunday service straight into the heart of San Jose's upscale downtown — an area increasingly hostile to homeless people.

The new regime of Mayor Ron Gonzales has refused to give even token attention to the needs of San Jose's nearly 20,000 homeless people and has refused repeated requests from CHAM to meet with its members to form long-term plans for housing and immediate homeless needs.

CHAM protesters charge Gonzales with failing to develop housing for people living on the streets of a city awash with Silicon Valley wealth. Police violence in the last year has spread terror (eight shootings, seven of them fatal) in a city that has no meaningful civilian oversight of law enforcement agencies.



Homeless people gather for food at First Christian Church before embarking on a march for justice through downtown San Jose.

The Sunday march was the third action of CHAM's "Poor People's Campaign," organized in the spirit of Martin Luther King's historic civil rights campaigns of the '50s and '60s and Oakland's legendary Union of the Homeless housing takeovers of the late '80s and early '90s.

CHAM's previous two actions included a sit-in at Mayor Gonzales' office on January 26 and a dramatic appearance before the entire San Jose City Council on February 15. At those two events, homeless people and their housed backers insisted on staying as politicians ducked out and sent in uniformed police officers to remove the embarrassing protesters under the glare of heavy media coverage.

Police arrested and later released the "we shall not be moved" activists, issuing a total of 41 citations at the two protests on charges of misdemeanor trespass and disrupting a public assembly.

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## Solar Eclipse

by Chris Trian

Because the sun is homeless,  
a man with a swastika on his arm  
walked into a day care center  
and shot the little children.  
Because the sun is homeless,  
a white man, mad at the world,  
bought him some guns  
and set out to Cal-i-for-ni-ay  
to kill him some Jews.  
Because the sun is homeless,  
he didn't realize that  
everyone is Jewish in the world today.  
Lost, wandering, hunted like animals,  
fighting for a homeland, when there  
AREN'T any more "homelands."  
We are all in exile from the source.  
Because the sun is homeless,  
our ancestors push shopping carts  
through the streets.  
Compassion has been evicted.  
We are all homeless in our beds tonight.  
Small, greedy men with cardboard souls  
hold the crucible of our survival  
like a tiny bird in a huge fist.  
We don't need conspiracy theories.  
Everything is a conspiracy against reason.  
Because the sun is homeless,  
the stars are orphans  
and we are all lost.  
Cursing, fumbling in the dark,  
like drunks looking for their keys.  
Rednecks of desolation,  
mad at the darkness,  
shooting out the light,  
because the sun is homeless.

Homeless Protesters...  
(Cont.)

The unrepentant protesters showed up in court twice in March to answer the charges and to demand full legal representation and speedy jury trials in a bid to discourage the use of the police force to sweep the poor out of sight. Those going to court face charges that could result in \$1000 fines and up to two years in jail (for those arrested at both protests).

At the third protest on March 5, Rev. Wagers led supporters from First Christian Church, the Affordable Housing Network, local labor groups, and Santa Cruz's HUFF straight into the spacious central lounge of the Fairmont Hotel without a murmur of apology or a glance backward. Protesters carried with them a five gallon bucket of hot vegetable soup and an ample supply of sandwiches and drinks which they distributed to every hungry person who asked for food.

The march put the homeless spotlight on the \$35 million subsidy the Fairmont Hotel has received from the San Jose Redevelopment Agency while nearly 20,000 homeless people are unable to find or afford shelter. Faced with stonewalling from Mayor Gonzales and his City Council, the picknicking protesters set up a modest soup line in the Fairmont's opulent lobby to emphasize the contrast between the City's red carpet treatment of rich developers and its utter failure to act on affordable housing.

Before setting up the mid-day meal, CHAM reserved a \$270 room for the night for a homeless family in one of the cheaper rooms above. The subsequent occupation included a luncheon, a prayer service, an informational picket, and a mass march upstairs to the reserved room.

Nancy Chase Nichols, a CHAM co-founder, noted that the Fairmont lobby and its bathrooms are actually open to the public as a little-known requirement for the Redevelopment Agency's multimillion-dollar corporate welfare handout to the hotel. Some soup sippers smilingly suggested that the luxury hotel owed homeless people at least six months of lodging to make up for the five years it should have been open as a public resource (hotel managers had never pub-

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licly announced this obligation).

"Maybe we'll do this every Sunday," mused Paul Schusser, who had come over from Santa Cruz to support the protest.

Bernie From, an out-of-work audio engineer, noted the walk was worth it just to see the shocked expressions on the security guards' faces.

"My wife and I met at the shelter and married at the shelter," he said. "We've had two houses. They've both been foreclosed because somebody wanted to build something more expensive there." Without affordable housing, From emphasized, "Silicon Valley will not have people to pump their gas, wash their clothes, take

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care of their kids. All those doing service jobs will not be able to live in this area."

Melinda, her six-month-old son, and her husband have been homeless for three months. They enjoyed the meal at the Fairmont, saying, "We're going to go up to the room that was reserved and just sit back and enjoy the little piece of heaven that we do have." Melinda, an administrative worker, said she'd become homeless because she couldn't afford the rent and was in a winter homeless shelter slated to close on March 31.

Patricia Vayez and her two children, 7 and 16, became homeless to make room for a new office being constructed downtown.

Leading a passionate prayer to the group, Rev. Wagers declared: "We claim that justice in our city will flow down like water like the prophet has said. We claim housing and dignity for all of God's children. No one in this city will be left out. Somehow we can come together and win the battle. No one again will have to go hungry here amid this wealth. And no one will have to die amid the wealth of San Jose. We can move hearts and minds to transform people to see the truth about you and your children!"

Police were low-key and made no arrests as managers scurried back and forth trying to negotiate a quick end to the lun-

cheon. In a bid to hustle the homeless convention out of sight before tea at 3 p.m. (from which the homeless group could not legally be barred), Fairmont General Manager Fred Hampton personally put up one night's rent money for Melody and Haas Kincaid and their two children, Joanna (age 10) and David (age 7).

Hampton also promised to contact Mayor Gonzales, which he later did, and commented, "even my employees can't afford housing here in San Jose."

Hampton's call and the pressure of three homeless protests produced results. Within two weeks, Mayor Gonzales had called Rev. Wagers to set up an early April meeting and a City Council member had also agreed to meet with the persistent protesters. Wagers emphasized that CHAM's demands were unchanged:

- ◆ Stop the criminalization of the poor.
- ◆ Shelter beds for all.
- ◆ \$5 million per year to house people earning minimum wage.
- ◆ A realistic long-term homeless plan.

After filing up to the room to inspect the luxury quarters for the homeless family of four, the protesters peacefully left, giving the Fairmont Hotel three stars for effort (though one diner noted that the management had hastily snatched packets of salt out of reach when he came over to request a little seasoning for his soup).

In addition to opulently subsidizing the Fairmont Hotel, the San Jose

Redevelopment Agency has lavished public money on a variety of luxury projects: the Convention Center (\$230 million); the Sharks Arena (\$152 million); the Tech Museum (\$80 million); Adobe Computers (\$18 million); IBM (\$18 million); the Hilton Hotel (\$18 million); AMC Theaters, which has since closed (\$14 million); the Sharks Practice Rink (\$10 million); the St. Claire Hotel (\$9 million); the Fallon House Museum (\$5 million); and the De Anza (3.6 million).

"Obviously money is not the problem," Rev. Wagers told the crowd. "It is this city's priorities which must be changed."

On March 28, CHAM reappeared outside the Fairmont Hotel in the more highly visible Fairmont Plaza and served food again to more than 100 homeless people. Wagers announced that Mayor Gonzales had agreed to a face-to-face meeting to be held in early April. Wagers said a Tent City would be erected outside the mayor's office during the course of the meeting to provide alternate lodging for homeless participants should housing and shelter negotiations with Gonzales be unsuccessful.

At presstime, CHAM was planning further protests, starting with a mass visit to the office of Redevelopment Agency boss Susan Schick. Wagers predicted dining out with the wealthy would become a weekly tradition. Such giants as Adobe, the Arena, Cisco and other corporations holding conventions can look forward to

Fairmont lobby picnic visits from homeless people in the months to come.

Hours after the Fairmont Plaza luncheon on March 28, Wagers reported that more than 100 people were turned away from the official city shelters that night. Just in time, CHAM revealed that the First Christian Church had reopened its sanctuary to shelter for the homeless again.

Two years ago, CHAM and the First Christian Church had defied San Jose officials by putting up homeless families inside the church, and had refused to bow to city pressure to evict them. Fighting back with a will, church members had successfully pressured the previous administration of Mayor Susan Hammer into finding long-term housing for 50 people.

Emptied under pressure from city officials last summer after two years of defiant service to the poor, First Christian was given written assurance then that any applicants for shelter at their church should be sent by taxi over to the Emergency Housing Consortium — a system that now has apparently broken down.

Once again, First Christian Church's leaders have evidently decided that the needs of homeless people outweigh the threat of renewed city retaliation against the courageous inner-city church.

For more information, call: First Christian Church and Rev. Scott Wagers: (408) 345-2353; CHAM (408) 454-0378. To contact San Jose Mayor Ron Gonzales: (408) 277-4237.