

THE
**Final
Straw**
A WEEKLY ANARCHIST SHOW

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HOMELESS ORGANIZING IN OAKLAND

THE FINAL STRAW RADIO - OCTOBER 13, 2024



become a part of. It's not the future that I want. It's not something that Democrats or whoever should be proud of.

F: Right. And that's the scary thing, all the people that we're talking about, Governor Newsom, Mayor Sheng Thao of Oakland, London Breed in San Francisco, all of these people are supposed to be the Democrats. They're supposed to be the "progressive" ones, and they're pushing as hard for the erasure of an entire population of people. That terrifies me. If that's what the Democrats are doing, what the hell is in store with the Republicans? Or the more right wing. That's an absolutely terrifying thought.

TFSR: Freeway, thank you for having this conversation. I really appreciate it, and good luck with the bike ride. If you want to send any organizational links or if any other groups occur to you, or places where people can keep up with perspectives of people that are experiencing houselessness or houseless destabilization, who are talking about these issues, I'd be happy to populate the show notes with that stuff.

This week we're featuring an interview from Freeway, a houseless activist in Oakland, CA, about the recent series of sweeps of homeless being promoted by Governor Gavin Newsom. Freeway has been a member of Wood Street Commons and is now a member of Oakland Homeless Union.

Wood Street Commons: <https://woodstreetcommons.org/>
Instagram: [@oakland.homeless.union](https://www.instagram.com/oakland.homeless.union)

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Freeway: My name is Freeway. I go by they/them, and I'm with Wood Street Commons, as well as the newly formed Oakland Homeless Union.

TFSR: Thanks a lot for taking the time to chat. I appreciate it.

F: Thank you for having me.

TFSR: You said the second group is the Oakland Homeless Union? I want to ask about that, then.

F: We're a newly formed organization. We are a group of either unhoused or formally unhoused, like newly housed individuals that are organizing to fight back. The city and the state have issued a lot of policies that are really not in our favor, so we're trying to have our voices heard.

TFSR: Cool. The name would denote to me that it's folks that are currently in some precarious housing situation, whether living in vehicles or living in tents or maybe in shelters or on peoples' couches. How do you define homelessness?

F: Basically, anybody that is housing insecure. That could be couch surfing, that could be, like you mentioned, in a shelter, in a tent, on the street, in a car. Even those who are newly housed or that are housed, but housing insecure, we're trying to align with some of the tenants' unions out here as well because what people don't realize oftentimes is that even though you own a house, that doesn't mean anything, we're all one check away, as most of us that have been unhoused for some

time know. It doesn't take very much, and especially in California, the rent is so high and the property value is so high out here, it's very difficult to find affordable living situation.

TFSR: We had mentioned the Wood Street Commons. There was a physical location for that, hence the name. But I wonder if you could talk a little bit about that project, what it has done, and maybe what it continues to do, if it's not in that space anymore.

F: Sure. To back up a little bit and give a little bit of history lesson, the name Wood Street Commons comes from our first central location. We were living at 1707 Wood Street, and over the span of about a decade, the city ushered a lot of people down to Wood Street. In fact, many of us were told specifically by law enforcement, by other city officials, if you go down to Wood Street, you won't be messed with. A lot of us did and then over that span of time, we organically formed this community and we filled in the gaps where the city wasn't serving people. We had a community kitchen, we had a free store, we had LifeLong Medical that would come and do medical visits right there on site. Donations were dropped off there. People knew that it didn't matter when they showed up, where they came from, how much they had, how much they didn't have, if they showed up at Wood Street, they would have their needs met. They would be fed, they'd have a safe place to be.

In about June of 2022 the city started the first tier of evictions. By the time they came to evict us, we had expanded to about three city blocks long, and approximately a little over 300 people were living there. When they started the evictions at the north end of our community in about June 2022 we were in and out of court for a while. We reached out and had volunteers come down and do eviction defense with us and we fought a good fight but eventually it came to an end in April of 2023. When that happened, many of us were forced either to relocate on the streets, or a good portion of us actually were forced into the tiny sheds, or what they call here the community cabins. We like to call them the tiny tombs. The conditions were deplorable, so much so that the architect of them actually reached out to us and was like, "I've made a serious mistake. What can I do to make this better?" We'll get to that in a minute. But basically, we were watching these so-called service providers rake in millions off the backs of services that were supposed to be provided to us that weren't being provided. We didn't have toilet paper, we didn't have drinking water. There were ADA violations constantly. You name it. There was abuse of from the staff. I was physically assaulted by a staff member more than once. The worst conditions, and we couldn't get the city to take it seriously. It didn't matter how much we went to City Council, we raised these concerns, we talked about it on news shows. It didn't matter.

you could talk about what inspirations you have, or what steps you're hoping to take.

F: I personally have a lot of positive influences. Some of my mentors are in other organizations that do similar types of organizing. Just to name a couple, the Love and Justice in the Streets is another grassroots organization here. And Boots is one of my all time heroes, the League of Revolutionaries partner with us. They've done some organizing with us. Homefulness, POOR Magazine. I don't know if you've heard of Tiny and them, but they're also really close to us. We are extended family. And the Poor People's Campaign, just to name a few. The people that are in these organizations, like Miss Kimberly King, Nell Myhand, all of these really strong women have somehow found their way into my life, and I've been able to learn a lot from them, and I'm still learning. Also the other homeless unions, like the Sacramento Homeless Union. Crystal Sanchez is an amazing superhero woman. I don't know how she does everything she does, but there's definitely quite a large pot to draw strength and inspiration from, and they've all been really, really influential. [Freeway later added a shoutout to Punks with Lunch as a solid crew].

TFSR: Cool, is there anything that I didn't ask about, that maybe you wanted to touch on, or that occurs to you now?

F: If I don't mention the bike ride, John's going to strangle me. One of the things that we do every year is we have this annual bike ride. And we ride from Oakland to Sacramento. There's a little bit of history there. But to save time, I'll fast forward. This is our third annual one, and we are leaving out Friday, and the goal is to ride our bikes to Sacramento, and we should get there by Sunday evening. Once we get there Monday morning, we have a huge rally planned at the Capitol. We also got a few meetings with different representatives lined up, and we're gonna bend their ear and discuss with them why the policies that are in place are not working, and what we would like to see them do differently, and make some noise on the capital steps.

TFSR: It's really important for people that are in the listening audience to recognize that, as I understand, Newsom is coordinating to work towards a presidential bid and moved from being mayor of San Francisco under some sketchy circumstances to governor. If they're going to be voting for a federal policy, the thing that they want is a federal policy where it's obviously putting profits of property owners, which is a minority of the general population, over the well-being of communities and whole swaths of the population that any of us who's listening to this and paying attention could

of having that report, she gave a few excuses, and in that conversation, she did say that they really don't do background checks oftentimes. It's actually pretty uncommon. That's really not so much the issue, the issues that keep people from being put into transitional housing, more often than not, are the lack of beds. That's overwhelmingly the issue. Past that, a lot of them are inaccessible. There's a lot of people out here on the streets that are disabled, or they have some disability in one way or another, and these shelters don't really cater to that, and besides that, they don't really make it accessible for you, truthfully. For example, about a week ago, there was another major closure of another community, and two of the individuals had been told about this. There were two openings at one of the cabin communities. They said, "Absolutely, we'll take it." They got in the van, went with them to do the intake. They got there and there was no openings, and they said, "Okay, well, I guess we'll try again later." Turned around and came back. And by time they came back, everything was destroyed. What do you do at that point? That's disheartening. It takes your faith in the people that are supposed to be helping you and smashes it. And things like that happen all the time. Girls are trafficked out of some of these places. People are abused in every which way you can think of. That's really where the barrier lies, is in the lack of the lack of quality.

TFSR: I like to try to end conversations towards where do we go from here? What are some helpful things? Especially when people who are most affected have agency in that decision making. I wonder if you could talk a bit about what the union's doing. The union that you were talking about, that would be working with some of the tenants unions also because that's such a divide that doesn't need to be there between those two organizing frameworks. How it engages, how meetings happen, and tenants unions that you're also working with?

F: I need to clarify. When I mentioned the tenants' unions earlier, that was more in reference to something that we would like to see happen. That's not currently something that's happening at this point. The homeless union, the local that I'm a part of is still very, very new. We've just started, and very shortly after we started, our friends in Berkeley that are one city away, started up theirs too. We're growing together. It's still very new. Check back with me in about six months, and I'll be able to give you a better answer than that.

TFSR: Cool. Are there any models of groups that you all are basing it off of? I remember back 20-30 years ago in Ontario, there was this really interesting leftist working class organizing group called OCAP, the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty, and that's just like one group. But I wonder if

Instead of sitting around and waiting for the city to do something, we decided to get together and get our 501(c)(3) and continue what we had been doing at Wood Street, which is feeding people, clothing people, informing people of their rights, and organizing our community. We've kept on with that since. As I mentioned we now have a 501(c)(3) and our main two focuses are the outreach team, which I have a lot to do with, and also our vision for the self-sustaining community that we're in talks with. We're in negotiations with the city right now of getting a plot of land for that, and it's an expansion of what we already had at Wood Street. It's self-run by the people that live there, self-governed, and it has everything you could possibly imagine. There's vocational opportunities, there's educational opportunities. We have a harm reduction clinic. There are living situations for families with kids, there's housing for people who are single, or for couples. A portion of it is for RV dwellers. Very comprehensive, very service-rich. And the best thing about it is that every person that lives there, when they come there we take the time to figure out what their niche is, where their strengths are, how they can contribute to the community. Each person that comes in finds their place, finds their role, and then they pass along that knowledge to the next people that come in. It's like this each-one-teach-one mentality, and in doing so it creates job opportunities. It creates living opportunities, people learn life skills in doing this, and it also offers us the opportunity to maintain this community with less of a worry about overhead and things like that. We're very excited about it. We've been working on it for a while now with the architect, Mike Pyatok, who is actually the architect of the tiny sheds that I mentioned before. This is his way of reaching out to us and making things that the city messed up right.

TFSR: Keeping on the Wood Street Commons project, the name of it is pretty interesting, and it seems to really fulfill... the commons were this part of communities that were protected by common law in what is now the UK in England, at least, where everyone would go collect what they needed, share resources, share fields, have their animals grazing or whatever. It was a commonly held and protected community resource that was privatized through the enclosure movement which displaced communities, displaced individuals, and pushed people into factory jobs, or criminalized them and pushed them out of the country. I think that got them sent on ships to the US for the colonies, or to Australia, or to Canada or whatever. That name is really interesting. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about when y'all were coming up with that name, what you were thinking about.

F: I'm going to be honest, I was not there for the naming part, but it does resonate with me that the meaning of Commons and, like you were talking about, how it

was supposed to mean something that was protected and served the community and was shared within the community and then ultimately was privatized. That's pretty much exactly what happened with 1707. We had a safe space that we were told by the powers that be that we could be there and nobody would mess with us. And ultimately, what ended up happening is they displaced over 300 people, and very violently so. It's a very sad fact, but in the time since we've been evicted from 1707 Wood Street, we've actually buried more of our community members than we've seen housed. That's a trend that continues to show up, and it's showing up even more now with Governor Newsom's Executive Order and with Grants Pass being issued. We're really seeing the negative effects of the privatization of land.

TFSR: Could you talk a bit about that executive order and we can skip around and move over to that question about what the Supreme Court said and how it's been enacted by Democratic Governor Newsom?

F: Democratic, that's a scary idea. Let me start with Grants Pass. Grants Pass was ruled on in I believe June, if I'm not mistaken, and what Grants Pass decision meant for us is that now, whereas before we had certain protections, cities had to offer a certain amount of services when they conducted sweeps, as they're so inappropriately called, and that was in place because of *Martin v. Boise*, which was a court case that said, if a city is going to evict someone that's unhoused, they have to offer adequate shelter. When Grants Pass got ruled on by the Trump-appointed Supreme Court that overturned *Martin v. Boise*, so all of a sudden you see this uptick in intensity and in frequency of these sweeps. Then very shortly after that, Governor Newsom puts out his executive order, which stated not only that he would allow sweeps to continue and to increase, he was actually ordering cities to sweep all homeless encampments. When that happened, all of a sudden, you saw a very drastic change, pretty much overnight. Now you're seeing policies in places in all over California where it's a misdemeanor to be unhoused. They're using terms like "camping paraphernalia" and finding people and arresting them.

You can spend up to a month in jail for being unhoused. If you have priors and you get arrested, it could be up to a \$10,000 bail. The thing is: what happens when those people get arrested, when they come out of jail? Are they healthy? Are they whole? Are they housed? The answer is no, nothing positive comes from this. Nobody is seeing an uptick in services being offered. You are not seeing an uptick in people being housed, just in the criminalization of the unhoused. Also a criminalization of the volunteers that are helping. The advocates that are showing up to sweeps and putting their freedom, their safety on the line because you have places like Oakland where we have a Safe Work Zone ordinance, so now all they have to do is show up with 30 cops and a couple of DPW workers and they say, "Oh, this is a

behind walls, or they're paying to do it in a public space, like a bar, and you don't have a complaint. I live in a town that up until the recent floods has been well-known for its number of breweries and its tourist industry, and people come into town and stumble down the street all the time. It's neighborhoods that are known for, at this point, having a ton of bars and a ton of breweries and people wandering down the street drunk, but the complaints don't come out about those folks because they're getting into an Uber and going to an Airbnb somewhere. And that double awareness of "it's okay for these people to be self-medicating or be intoxicated and enjoying the substances, versus these other people because it makes you embarrassed or uncomfortable," it's a big hurdle for people to get over.

F: It is, and also, if you're going to talk about the contrast and the comparisons, how many people are on some medication, some antidepressant, some Ritalin, or whatever, and they're dependent on that? I'm not comparing opiates necessarily to Ritalin, but I'm saying a chemical dependency is a chemical dependency, whichever way you cut it. And there's lots of things that people who are housed – and it's not exclusive to chemical use – people talk about hoarding all the time. The architect we were speaking about earlier made an excellent point one day when we were talking. Somebody said, "Well, how are you going to control the hoarding?" And he said, "Hoarding is really not the issue. The issue is people don't have a place to put it all. People in houses hoard too. That's why you have attics and basements." That was the first time I really understood he's absolutely right. And that's true in so many other ways too. People who are unhoused, are simply exposed.

TFSR: You've already gone through this. But in terms of infrastructure that does exist, or that people have the option sometimes to be able to access the tiny house or tiny tomb set up that Oakland has been providing...can you talk about some of the barriers that people who are able to get access to a program that would get them transitional housing, or public housing, or vouchers? Let's say somebody, somebody is on the street and they want to get out of the situation. I know it's going to be a lot of different things that are going to be figuring into it, but assuming that they don't have real access to generational wealth, family that can help stabilize them, or friends that they can sleep on couches, how hard is it to get into transitional housing? Is it dependent on what sort of criminal history (that might be related to homelessness) that you have?

F: Surprisingly enough, and this is from the mouth of the person in charge of homelessness issues in Oakland, according to the report she was supposed to give, in lieu

rules. That's why they don't want to take shelter." First of all, there's about one shelter bed for every four unhoused individuals in the state of California. Even if they had the swankiest, most service rich shelters, there would still not be enough of them. That's the first issue. Secondly, to speak to the comment about "they all want to use drugs," that mindset, that division, that dichotomy is so dangerous, and it's something that you hear on both sides. Even in the unhoused community, people would say, "Oh, I'm not your usual homeless person. I don't do drugs." That is such a dangerous mindset to have. There are some people out here that use, they use to self-medicate, and their life is as valuable as the person next to them that doesn't use. And allowing that division, that dichotomy to exist and not to check it is really dangerous.

The words that people use in relation to how they speak about people who are unhoused...I was in a city council meeting not long ago, and we were actually discussing the closure of two encampments that are in Berkeley. They're the only two in Berkeley. They were trying to push the closure through. And I kept people saying "Oh, these are the two most dangerous encampments in Berkeley." Well, they're the only two. And they would use words like 'eradicate' and calling people 'dangerous'. And it really upset me that that was allowed to go on. You don't eradicate human beings. And I can honestly tell you, in my entire time being unhoused, I have scarcely felt truly in danger ever, anywhere I've been on my streets. My friend that does advocacy, she's actually a housed individual, but she always tells people when they ask her "Oh, you don't feel dangerous walking around by yourself?" She said "No," because when you have people's backs and you actually listen to them and you befriend them, they have your back too.

It's this idea that people are dangerous because they live outside is actually in and itself dangerous. And also that there's this misconception that danger is being confused for discomfort. You've got all these people that are living now across from 1707 that blow up the complaint lines out here with 311, and dozens a day of "this guy set up a camp here" and exaggerated, ridiculous, very untrue recollections of what's actually going down in front of their house. What I've realized from that is that these people are uncomfortable. They're not comfortable sitting in their house and seeing somebody else unhoused. And they shouldn't be. It's very sad state of affairs that we live in one of the richest states in the United States, and people are suffering like they are. Yes, you should be uncomfortable, but that's not the same thing as not being safe, and that distinction needs to be made.

TF SR: I think also to the point of "everyone's using drugs. Drugs made people unsafe," I'm sure some people may be self-medicating, some people may be unable to control an addiction. That's also the case with lots of housed people. They happen to have the resources and they're doing it

Safe Work Zone now." Well, if that Safe Work Zone is your home, is your tent with all your belongings in it, once they put up that yellow tape or that fence or whatever, you can't go in there. You can't grab any of your belongings. I've heard of people's medicine being thrown out. Their wheelchairs being thrown out, the remains of their dead loved ones. I really struggle to say that out loud. And the people that are showing up to advocate for them are being arrested. People who are showing up to document this such as journalists are being arrested. And that's really scary.

TF SR: That's really traumatic. The state is dealing with people not having secure shelter or housing by criminalizing it and destabilizing people, breaking up communities further, taking away people's means towards survival, and then, if they get arrested, repositing them on the street. It's not offering a solution. It's not saying, "Here's a place to go." It's saying, "Stop existing," I guess.

F: Let's not get it twisted. The cities that are doing this, the entities that are at the hands of this aren't really looking for a solution. If they were, they would have brought the unhoused community and those who were most directly impacted by these policies to the table a long time ago. They'd have offered sanitation or porta-potties a long time ago. Instead, it's much easier for them to create this situation where there is a ton of trash on the street because they won't come and collect it. There's fecal matter and urine in the street because they won't offer bathrooms. It's easier to then demonize the faction of people that they're trying to have a negative view of. Then you can justify putting somebody in jail, you can justify 5150ing somebody-

TF SR: ...which, for folks out of California, can you describe...

F: That's involuntary commitment. They put you on a 72-hour hold. And that's another tactic that we're seeing a lot more of. People who are in a traumatizing situation, who are watching all of their belongings be crushed up in a garbage truck, who are surrounded by 30-some-odd cops with guns and billy clubs, and they're threatening to arrest them, and they're sitting there and antagonizing them. Of course you're going to have an emotional reaction. Of course you're going to be upset and be angry. They're doing these things and then antagonizing people who are already in a vulnerable situation, and then when they react in an emotional way, then they're 5150ing them, involuntarily committing them, also trying to do these psych evaluations on site as all this is happening, which makes no sense whatsoever. Nobody's going to be in a rational state of mind when they're losing everything they own. It's really just more cruelty for the sake of creating an enemy.

TFSR: And when people do find short-term housing that's available, like those cabins that you were talking about. One of the elements of this, obviously, I'm sure that there's a lot of just...cruelty approach that is about getting people out of sight, or punishing people for being destabilized, or going through a hard time, or having a different reality, around mental health or addiction, or whatever that happens to be, access to resources or language barriers, what have you. But can you talk a little bit about what short-term solutions are being offered? If they build these small cabins, are they outside of city centers, away from the eyes of tourists and business people, and also very far away from resource access? Or how does that work? I know there's a pretty robust transit system for the Bay Area, compared to a lot of other places around the country.

F: There is, and it should be noted, I don't think it's possible for them to have found a more out of the way, more isolated area to put these cabins. They literally picked the only sections of the city where there isn't really a bus line nearby, or it is difficult to really get to any services. I know from experience with our time in the cabins...we've actually seen the grant proposal that was written for the money to open these cabins, \$8.3 million was awarded to open these cabins. Amongst the services, there were supposed to be housing navigation, job readiness, help with getting your documents so you can be housed, mental health services, a computer lab. You name it. Literally none of the services, none of the programs that were in that grant proposal ever came to fruition, at least not while I was there, and to my understanding, they're still not implemented.

However, the director of this program, I should say he was the director. He's since been fired, and I believe, is actually on the run from being investigated. But he was notorious for bragging about spending 14 days in Belize. I've got a video of him coming back from vacation, like boasting about being 14 days in Belize. He would always show up to the cabins driving one of two luxury vehicles he owned, one of them being a Maserati. You see the pattern here. We can't have toilet paper, but you can drive a Maserati. There's a problem there, and that's par for the course. Many of the people that exist in this homeless industrial complex have salaries that would house everybody in Oakland. If we took the money that we were spending on the sweeps and paying for these individuals to conduct these sweeps, we could absolutely house every single unhoused person in Oakland. And now I'm not talking about in a tiny tomb. I'm talking about actual housing.

TFSR: You mentioned the everyone being a paycheck away from this housing destabilization. And that makes a lot of sense, and it's really cool to hear about the homeless union. Every everyone, obviously, who becomes home-

less has a personal story of what brought them to where they are today, but the shared spaces of those stories is what could be called a social story. It's definitely individualized, but also it paints a bigger picture when you can pick and pull elements of those and see where they overlap. Can you talk about houselessness as a social condition, about how formally housed folks become houseless, and some of the popular misconceptions around that, like around questions of safety for the individuals who are houseless, or the communities that they're in, or addiction, agency, health, etc.?

F: For starters, I think it's really important for anybody who's listening to this, who's not from California, to understand that the rent out here is too damn high. Period. There's no real other way to say it than that it costs a fortune to live out here. I was actually in a conference sometime last year, and they were showing on a bar graph how much it cost to pay for rent in Oakland, the average rent, and the average income for an adult who's not disabled, and actually the cost of rent was about the same height-it was about double the height on the bar chart. I forget the exact like numbers there, but that shows you in a picture how high it is out here. Everything is more expensive. It's not just the rent. When you have a place like this, where the rent is too high, the cost of living is too high, and people are not making enough, obviously, that's going to contribute to the situation.

On top of that, this is what I was talking about before, the homeless industrial complex. Once you have people who are becoming unhoused, these service providers are making millions off of keeping us in the cycle of getting housed, not actually housing us, just in the cycle of providing "services," "outreach." I'll put it to you this way. The organization that is contracted by the city to do outreach for encampments that are about to be closed. I'm not going to say their name, but their outreach is they show up either the day before the sweep or the morning of, they approach people with a stale bag of chips at most. They might have like a couple other food items. For the most part, it's usually like a bag of chips. And they'll say, "Do you want to take shelter?" They won't explain what that shelter is. If you have ADA issue, you have a disability and you need reasonable accommodations, they won't work with you. It's yes or no: "do you want shelter?" No details about what that is. If you say no, then you are labeled shelter-resistant. Once you're labeled shelter-resistant, you might as well be labeled with a scarlet letter at that point because it becomes that much harder. The police, when they come to do the closures, will target you specifically. It's an ongoing cycle.

These sweeps are so traumatic that once you've been through one, it knocks you off...it traumatizes you. There are a lot of misconceptions. There's a lot of false narratives. You hear people say all the time, "Oh, well people don't want to take shelter. They want to stay out. And use drugs or they don't want to follow