

Four Lessons From Minneapolis Camp Defense 2021-2022

Anonymous

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In recent years, Minneapolis and neighboring Saint Paul have witnessed a surge of people living in tents as a least-worst last resort.

The “Wall of Forgotten Natives,” a groundbreaking encampment beginning in 2018, gave some sense of safety in numbers to hundreds of residents and, until it was dismantled by the city and collaborator nonprofits, made the local houselessness crisis more visible than it had been previously. After the emergence of COVID-19 and the George Floyd uprising in 2020, houseless encampments grew in size and number again, with no significant increase in services or supports. The night the Minneapolis Police 3rd Precinct was set on fire and destroyed, people took over an underused hotel two miles away and turned it into sanctuary housing for two weeks, giving hundreds of unhoused locals a bed, meals and some modicum of safety in a time of National Guard occupation.

When the hotel sanctuary fell victim to collaboration with the owner and to volunteer burnout and overwhelm, large encampments sprouted at nearby Powderhorn Park and at other parks across the city. Minneapolis’ jurisdictionally independent parks board, swept up in the fervor of post-uprising racial justice pretense, initially allowed these camps to exist relatively unbothered, but soon cracked down and dispersed their residents who now can only find temporary havens on the city’s most marginal properties. One long-standing camp is on a superfund site, while all throughout the city unused lots are fenced off as people seeking a place to rest are sent off to find another sliver of empty land. (Needless to say, the shelter system is inadequate, traumatizing for many, and simply impossible for others.)

Mutual aid efforts and resistance to camp sweeps undertaken by housed accomplices has ebbed and flowed as well from year to year and month to month. Striving to defend camps from displacement, and to support people moving time after time after time, can often feel like several losses for every partial victory, leaving everyone burned out and overwhelmed. As people cycle in and out of different aspects of the struggle, it’s important to pass on what works and what doesn’t.

Local conditions and contexts differ everywhere. Minneapolis does not have the same type of occupying army of a police force that New York or Los Angeles do, nor as draconian of anti-camping laws as states like Tennessee. Minneapolis does have a lengthy winter (although this can be used to defenders’ advantage), a robust nonprofit industrial complex full of eviction collaborators, and other factors that may be less relevant elsewhere.

We offer the following lessons to all those seeking to defend neighbors in tents, whether in Minneapolis or somewhere else, with the hope that you will discuss them with your crews, refine, adjust, and put them to use.

Get There First, With the Most

Around 7 a.m. on Thursday, March 18, police attempted an eviction of the Near North houseless encampment. Scuffles erupted between Minneapolis Police and people defending the camp which led to numerous injuries and five arrests. This incident came after the city's Department of Community Planning and Economic Development (CPED) posted eviction signs at the camp on Monday morning ordering people to leave by Thursday.

— Unicorn Riot

A pattern has emerged over the past 12+ months: when camp defenders know, or can make a reasonable guess of, an eviction date, and amass more community forces willing to physically confront a smaller number of eviction agents (including police, public works, private landowners, nonprofit city collaborators, etc), we are usually able to prevent the eviction. If the city moves to evict by surprise and defenders do not mobilize in time, eviction agents typically succeed in their cruel acts of displacement, theft and brutality.

The top example was the March 2021 defense of Near North. A gathering was organized very early in the morning, when prepared camp defenders and accomplices suspected the city was likely to move in, with other allies and supporters invited to arrive for breakfast later in the morning. Scout crews, scanner support and communications were arranged. Sure enough, at 7am, police arrived to attempt to tape off the block. They found community defenders were there **FIRST** and with the **MOST** forces. Crucially, police were confronted as far away as possible from the encampment itself, at the other end of the block. Not expecting physical resistance, police called for backup and made a handful of arrests, but then retreated, outnumbered and outmobilized. Jail and court support for the captured defenders were quickly put together; a flood of supporters to camp the rest of the morning made sure the cops didn't come back. In fact, when a neighboring right-wing business called 911 to say that an independent journalist was brandishing a gun [the "gun" was his camera], 911 dispatch announced over the police scanner that due to the morning's events, police were advised to avoid the area.

Deterrence is Critical! Let them know we're willing to fight for our lives - because we are!

Continuing the story of the Near North Defense in 2021, defenders organized daily “cop-watches” for the following weeks and months. Unlike a regular copwatch, these camp cop-watches served two crucial purposes: documenting the activity of potential eviction agents (not only including cops, but also public works, city bureaucrats, etc), and telegraphing the continued willingness to defend the camp and providing a space to organize and plan defense strategies alongside residents.

Any city officials, public works personnel, or police driving by on those mornings to scout things out frequently saw several people dressed in all black (*scary antifa!!*) with backpacks, umbrellas, barricade materials, and other tools of revolt. These defenders were friendly and inviting to camp residents, neighborhood passerby, nearby workers, and camp supporters, but uncompromisingly hostile to likely eviction agents. Passersby also saw them helping to build defenses around the camp in the form of fortified community murals made of pallets and plywood, and piling tools such as tires and bricks to defend against potential incursions. The surrounding neighborhood was flyer'd and canvassed and a robust social media presence - sharing appropriate non-secure information only - also helped to make eviction agents aware that if they wanted to sweep Near North, they'd have another fight on their hands.

Although these forms of deterrence do not allow us to point to any particular day and say “we prevented this eviction,” we know it works *because the cops and authorities say it does!* In a trial of a defender arrested at the Peavey Park eviction in fall 2020, a Hennepin County Sheriff deputy testified that scheduled evictions had to be canceled “five or six times” because defenders maintained a regular presence at the camp and were usually too quick to **Get There First With The Most**. (The defender in this case was found not guilty on the most serious charges.)

Similarly, in late summer 2021, Hennepin County officials expressed to the media their reluctance to evict the Franklin/Cedar encampment because “the violence at the Near North camp” that March made them scared of attempting to evict without a large, multi-agency force. (The Franklin camp was eventually evicted with the aid of many collaborator nonprofits using tactics like short-term hotel room bribes; nonetheless it lasted much longer than it would've without deterrence, enabling residents to last longer without going through even more traumatic moves and property theft.)

The Near North 2021 defense has occupied so much rent-free space in the minds of city officials that in April 2021, when the city shifted responsibility for camp evictions to the regulatory services department and announced a no-tolerance policy, bureaucrats like Saray Garnett-Hochuli spun wild lies about the events of that day, including that a police officer's leg was broken.

(Alas, we only broke their spirit.)

It's time for the class war to have 2 sides: We chant "Stand up, fight back?" Then let's fucking fight back

Make no mistake - camp sweeps (evictions) are just one type of attack in the class war waged by a city's elites against the rest of us: those of us unhoused and those who one day may be. These evictions and the accompanying displacement and property theft are one of the cruelest tactics in this war, able to be waged solely because elites believe they have consent merely as a result of our neighbors' unhoused status. Imagine a fleet of bulldozers rolling up to a city block of apartments and single family homes, dragging residents out of their beds or giving them 10 minutes to get out with only the opportunity to carry what fits in their arms, leveling all structures and throwing all salvageable belongings in dumpsters. This is a regular reality for those living in tents. For the rest of us, they serve as a warning that if we don't keep that shitty job, aren't productive enough for the bosses, and don't toe the capitalist line, it could easily be us being roused by the bulldozer and riot cop at the crack of dawn.

The best deterrence activities involve letting the enemy know in no uncertain terms that without overwhelming force, they will not succeed in their objective. Tactics like calling council members, advocating for unlikely policy changes, posting sob stories on social media, or peacefully rallying outside politicians' offices or homes do not contribute to physically stopping evictions, because they require no force to neutralize. Harm reduction and social service activities, like those undertaken by so many nonprofits and liberal volunteer efforts, contribute to stopping evictions only insofar as they free up energy for others to focus on defense/counterattack rather than mere survival.

We know that non-threatening tactics like the ones listed above don't work - because those people responsible for evictions encourage us to do them! One prime example of this (among many) is notorious camp counterinsurgent/collaborator Sheila Delaney. Delaney, with a background in social service, calls herself "best friends" with poor-bashing council member Lisa Goodman, and contributed to Jacob "The Eviction Guy" Frey's mayoral re-election. She's paid \$110/hour by the city to disrupt radical/militant mutual aid and camp support/defense efforts, under the guise of providing services (which frequently consist of her sitting around while unpaid workers do the work they were going to do anyway).

Delaney spent weeks encouraging residents of Near North camp to move to a lot owned by volatile multimillionaire developer (and her friend) Hamoudi Sabri, which later became known as the North Loop camp. Not many Near North residents took her up on it, but the North Loop camp eventually became home for dozens of people. Not surprisingly, Sabri -

being a multimillionaire capitalist shitbag - continually stirred up trouble, trying to pit residents against each other, gatekeeping basic services, and destroying tents and belongings of people he didn't like.

In January 2022, community defenders were on high alert at both North Loop and Near North, and had just finished a breakfast and training event early in the morning upon receiving word that a spitting, screaming Sabri was threatening residents at the same time Public Works was arriving to evict. A crowd showed up to defend. According to a reportback on It's Going Down:

With the help of 10 feet tall snow piles, accesses to the camp area were easily blocked by defender vehicles... As a bobcat began to move toward camp it was quickly surrounded. Two weary looking police officers moved in but backed off after being confronted by the crowd. A bulldozer was similarly blocked down the street, and a large fire was built at one of the entrances. Defenders made it clear to Public Works personnel they would not back down, and a stalemate ensued. ... With the militancy of the crowd becoming obvious, Public Works and other bureaucrats retreated

Despite the victory that day, the North Loop camp was evicted in March - then, it was the city who *Got There First With The Most*, including dozens of police instead of just two. The "safe space" Sheila Delaney had promised was, predictably, nothing of the sort. In fact, Delaney was there on eviction morning, in support of her friend the developer Sabri - laughing and insulting people trying to help residents. She showed which side of the class war she's on. Which side will we be on?

A successful community defense does not attempt to negotiate or bargain with those on the opposite side of this war, nor to appeal to the humanity of agents of eviction. Nonviolent tactics, it is frequently said, rely on the oppressor to have a conscience; if eviction agents had one, we wouldn't be talking about this in the first place. "Progressive" city council members occasionally turn up at evictions, begging supporters to focus their anger on other politicians or bureaucrats, passing the buck to try and excuse their own choice to play within a system that will never end homelessness until that system is burned to the ground. Meanwhile, city collaborators like Delaney beg defenders to redouble their efforts only on things like making peanut butter sandwiches and buying more dry socks. "You're just here to fight the cops, to not support residents," they say, "Why don't you do something that'll really help?"

By "help," they mean "help uphold the status quo." They're all hoping community members won't do the type of things those politicians or bureaucrats noticeably never do themselves: get off the fence and physically resist attacks on the poor be it with bricks, barricades or otherwise.

No Engagement with Eviction Collaborators!

Paid city agents like Sheila Delaney, and contracted nonprofits like AICDC [American Indian Community Development Corporation], A Mother's Love, and the many others who undermine encampment defense through the guises of "serving the poor," "harm reduction," "cleaning up our neighborhood," etc, aren't the only collaborators to watch out for. [*Sometimes these groups even put out statements in which they'll say they "oppose evictions" - take note whether or not they ever show up to actually try to stop them, or if their opposition is in words only.*]

Sometimes people who we once thought know better, or who speak a militant language, do the city's work for them too.

A prime example of this was the eviction of Camp Nenooaasi, a camp formed specifically for unhoused native women, last November. The camp had an impressive setup at a long abandoned gas station, and a relatively large base of volunteers and community support. Unfortunately, the camp's many advantages were undermined by the two self-appointed (housed) leaders, who devoted untold hours in service of the camp's material needs but whose hierarchical leadership style, along with nonprofit background and liberal politics, respectively, alienated many potential accomplices and made their leadership inept when it came to resisting a threat from the state.

In the confusion of people coming and going, a city bureaucrat (who happened to be a native woman herself) entered the camp unhassled, thanked the liberal housed "allies" doing cleanup, and then started to make the rounds bribing residents with small gift cards, to pack up and leave. When one person angrily confronted the bureaucrat, they were physically attacked by another housed "ally," who was then backed by the self-appointed leaders who allowed city bureaucrats and collaborator NGOs to continue to encourage residents to leave. The self-appointed leaders and their allies essentially facilitated a complete self-eviction, with no police or public works personnel ever needing to show up. To make matters even worse, they attempted to move many residents together to a different lot already known to many to be unsafe. At the end of the day residents were completely dispersed.

Had community defenders - with or without the "self-eviction" leaders - agreed to a policy of no engagement with eviction collaborators, the camp very well could have survived the eviction threat and lasted much longer. Unfortunately, in this instance it turned out that the collaborators were inside the camp itself from very early on.

No tolerance for collaboration also means no doing the work of the state - No putting up fencing, no taking down structures, no moving residents' property without consent, no litter clean-ups preceding scheduled evictions, no telling (or strongly encouraging, or bribing)

camp residents what to do, no peace policing, and absolutely no enforcing the will of police or public works.

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