



Call for the California Homeless Union Statewide Convention: April 4, 2023, Sacramento, California

To: All officers, members and supporters of the California Homeless Union and housing justice fighters
From: Anthony Prince, Lead Organizer and General Counsel, California Homeless Union

It was seven years ago on MLK Day, 2016, that the Salinas Homeless Union arose from the intense battle to save the City's largest homeless encampment from destruction. From there, the Union has grown thousands-strong and expanded across the state including Marysville, Santa Cruz, Sacramento, San Luis Obispo, Fresno, El Centro, Sausalito, Novato, Pajaro/Watsonville, Sacramento, Ventura County, Chico/Paradise, San Jose/Santa Clara County and into the RV parks, homeless shelters, weekly-rate motels, and hundreds of encampments on the streets, under the freeways, in the parks, atop the levees and along the railroad tracks of California.



Seven years since our formation, the California Homeless Union is now regarded by friend and foe alike as a leading, genuine grassroots organization led by the homeless, formerly homeless and the marginally housed, themselves. We are in the courthouse on the corner and the court of public opinion. We have said “Nothing about us without us!” at the city, county and state levels and we’ve taken on the corrupt, profiteering “homeless/industrial complex.”



Most important, we have built a core of outstanding, diverse and proven leaders who came from the streets, shelters and camps and have learned to love, trust and work with each other. As we continue to attract newer leaders, we are struggling to keep up with the challenges and opportunities. *This is the primary reason for calling the convention; we are at a fork in the road and the convention is the next necessary step.*

Organized by the Thousands, The Homeless Will Become the Next Storm!

Across California, the continuing bomb cyclone storms have brought death, destruction and misery not only to the unsheltered, but to those whose neighborhoods became flooded and whose homes were destroyed, leaving hundreds more facing the cold and wet streets of “the Golden State.” In the midst of the storms, cities continued to sweep encampments and tow RV’s. Thus, we honor Dr. King by *taking up the baton*, the cause of human rights for all, understanding that homelessness is the most visible expression of poverty and that we, the homeless, are at the cutting edge of that broader struggle.

For us, that means today we begin organizing for our **first-ever in-person California Homeless Union Convention** on April 4, 2023, the 55th anniversary of the assassination of Dr. King. The time has come to move from defensive battles to a broad practical, legal and political offensive to demand “Housing, Now! No more death in the streets!”

We can all be justifiably proud of what we’ve done in these seven years:

- In Salinas, Union Leaders Wes White and Rita Acosta led a struggle to repeal an ordinance authorizing police to destroy the possessions of homeless persons. When the sprawling “Chinatown” encampment was bulldozed, they established and defended new protest camps at City Hall and a women-led Union camp at Sherwood Park. As a two-time candidate for Mayor, Wes White made housing and homelessness the issue and garnered thousands of votes.
- In the wealthy city of Sausalito, under the leadership of Robbie Powelson, Arthur Bruce, Jeff Chase and many others, the Union took up for the “anchor-outs”: persons who once lived and worked on Richardson Bay whose modest boats were seized as “marine debris” and crushed by the authorities. Forced to go ashore, they formed “Camp Cormorant” and defied police when they came to enforce the City’s anti-camping law. The Union went to court, obtained a preliminary injunction and 18 months later negotiated a settlement that provided over half a million dollars in direct housing assistance to the most vulnerable campers.



- In Marin County, north of San Francisco, Anita Dixon leads the Union in the city’s only homeless shelter, the “New Beginnings Center,” operated by Marin County Homeward Bound. For twenty years, shelter operators had been charging residents \$270 a month for “program fees” while also requiring them to perform unpaid janitorial and other work onsite. The Union demanded an end to the mandatory fees and went on strike, refusing to pay. Three weeks and many supportive media reports later, Homeward Bound dropped the fee policy.
- In Novato, the Union stopped the city from destroying an encampment and ultimately forced officials to leave intact and make physical improvements to “Camp Compassion.” Under the leadership of President Jason Sarris, the camp is becoming a Union base area where police are prohibited from surveilling or “offering services”



and residents have the right to have a Union representative present if any adverse action is threatened. We also forced the City to establish an official "Committee on Housing and Homelessness" on which the Union is entitled to designate two representatives.

- On the Pajaro River near Watsonville, Monike Tone formed a local largely comprised of Chumash and Ohlone Native Americans for whom the river is a sacred site where they have camped for years. Threatened with removal, the Union is seeking an alliance with other California tribes to publicize this fight and link the issues of state-created danger and the free exercise of religion.
- In San Luis Obispo County, residents of a sanctioned camper/rv parking site organized a new union local to successfully oust an abusive site manager.



- In Fresno, our newest local under Dez Martinez, teamed up with "We Are Not Invisible" "Faith in the Valley" and the ACLU to successfully challenge an ordinance that would have essentially barred Union representatives, advocates and the media from being present at the site of "nuisance abatement" i.e., homeless camp sweeps. Faced with a strongly-worded federal injunction and the determination of the homeless, themselves, the City Council repealed the ordinance.

- During the historic deadly heatwave that saw three-digit record temperatures in the Sacramento area of August and September, police were cruelly destroying encampments under trees, bridges and other shaded areas where homeless people were trying to escape the burning sun. Led by Crystal Sanchez, Donta Williams, Betty Rios and other officers, the Sacramento Homeless Union brought suit, winning two consecutive preliminary injunctions to halt the sweeps, just as in 2020 at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic when the Union won a court order preventing Sacramento police from destroying encampments.



In the course of these battles, our officers and members have learned valuable lessons, changed the false narrative of the "helpless homeless," and challenged the "homeless-industrial complex," the billion dollar racket that has lined the pockets of well-paid phony "service providers" and interfered with right of the homeless to control over their own lives.

Now, with an official estimate of 170,000 unsheltered and thousands more at risk for losing their homes, the building of a powerful, unified movement in California is possible and necessary.

Still, we have no illusions about the situation we face. The war on the homeless is intensifying on all fronts. Even where elected officials are making sincere efforts, they are met with the organized real estate industry, housing speculators, gentrifiers and business interests who want the homeless "out of the way." That is why, on behalf of the Union, I want to invite all serious leaders and organizations in the housing justice movement to learn how you can help us organize, support and participate in our Convention.

Yours Sincerely in Struggle and Solidarity,
Anthony Prince, Lead Organizer and General Counsel
Crystal Sanchez, President of host local, Sacramento Homeless Union

For further information, please reply to this email or contact our convention host Sacramento Homeless Union at sacramento.homeless.union@gmail.com.