



The National Union of the Homeless
A Brief History



The Homeless Union History Project
Poverty Scholars Program

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The heart and soul of the National Union of the Homeless is to commit our lives to ending the oppression of all Homeless People and work tirelessly for economic justice, human rights, and full liberation. We dedicate ourselves to transmitting our awareness of our sisters and brothers, to planning a sustained struggle and to building an organization that can obtain freedom through revolutionary perseverance. We pledge to deepen our personal commitment to end all forms of exploitation, racism, sexism, and abuse. True solidarity demands that we create not only the new society, but also the new human being.

National Union of the Homeless mission statement, May 1988

In the late 1970s and early 1980s the United States economy underwent a series of changes that led to a sharp rise in homelessness. Homelessness was no longer characterized by down and out individuals living on skid rows. For the first time in US history, families were increasingly becoming homeless, and the shelter system was created to house them. Out of this common experience of dislocation and dispossession grew a national organization of homeless people that mobilized thousands



NUH leaders Ron Casanova and Leona Smith at the Housing Now! Rally in Washington, DC, 1989

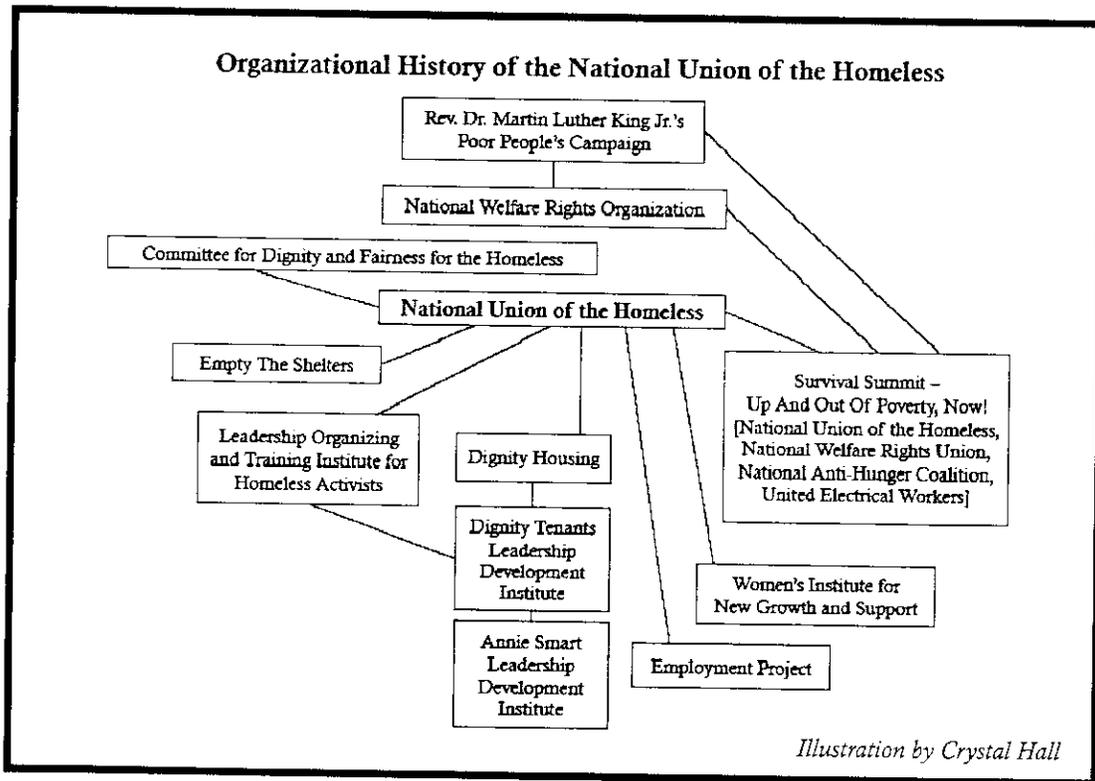
throughout the US in the 1980s and 1990s. At its height, the National Union of the Homeless (NUH) had over 20 local chapters and 15,000 members in cities across the US. Most importantly, it implemented a model of organizing involving the poor and homeless thinking for themselves, speaking for themselves, fighting for themselves and producing from their ranks capable and creative leaders. This was contrary to the prevailing stereotypes and misconceptions about homelessness. Almost twenty years after the decline of the NUH, its history offers important lessons for building a movement to end poverty today, in the midst of continuing concentration of wealth among a few and expanding poverty for many.

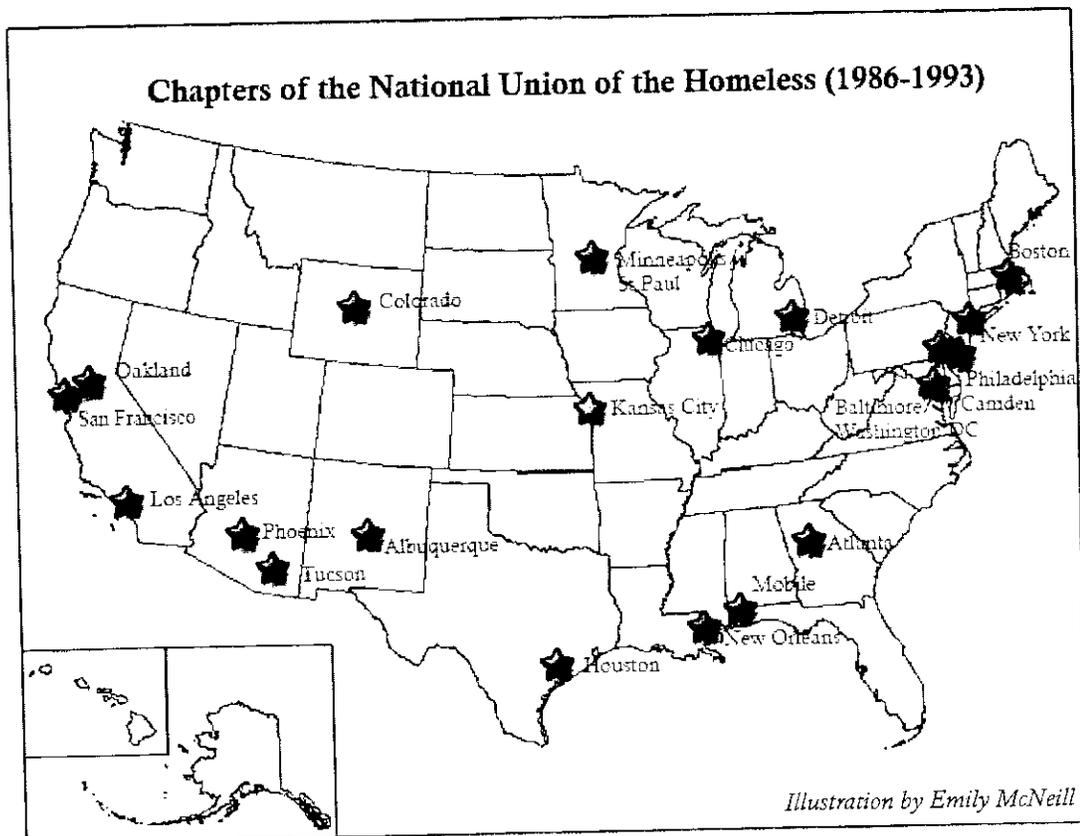
Economic and Historical Context

The NUH emerged during a period of increasing poverty and inequality due to significant changes in the structure of the US economy. Through the 1970s, the US economy was shaken as a result of competition from reconstructed Japan and Europe, stagflation, rising oil prices, and the end of fixed exchange rates, which weakened the dollar. These factors coincided with unprecedented de-

industrialization, “downsizing” of middle income jobs, and the rising popularity of neoliberalism among the economic and political elite. Neoliberal policies, first implemented under the CIA-backed Pinochet regime in Chile, were pursued in the 1980s by President Ronald Reagan and UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Reflecting major shifts in the structure of the economy, these policies included large cuts in public spending accompanied by tax cuts, deregulation of the banking industry and the financial markets, and anti-union policies.

Affordable housing in the US was hit particularly hard during this period. Gentrification pushed families out of city neighborhoods as the government decimated funding for public housing. From 1981 to 1988, the Department of Housing and Urban Development’s budget was cut from \$32.3 billion to \$7.5 billion. Rising commodity prices and dwindling job opportunities combined with severe cutbacks in social services saw the beginnings of the breakdown of the so-called “middle class” into the newly impoverished. The NUH’s slogan “You are only one paycheck away from homelessness” was true for more Americans than ever before.





The Rise of the National Union of the Homeless

The NUH had its roots in Philadelphia. In 1983 Chris Sprowal, Tex Howard and Franklin Smith, all of whom had been unemployed and homeless for over a year, founded the Committee for Dignity and Fairness for the Homeless. Within nine months, they had over 500 homeless members. In 1984, the group opened a shelter run by the homeless and formerly homeless – the first of many “projects of survival” that would become a key component of the NUH’s organizing strategy.

In April 1985, the Committee for Dignity and Fairness held the Founding Convention of the Philadelphia/Delaware Valley Union of the Homeless. The meeting brought together over 400 homeless delegates, union leaders, religious leaders, lawyers and politicians. They developed a constitution expressing a commitment to collective action for the rights of the poor and homeless, uniting



*Savina Martin, president of the
Greater Boston Union of the Homeless*

across race, gender, sexual orientation, age, religion, national origin and political affiliation. The group won a series of early victories, including the right to shelter, 24-hour intake in public shelters, the right of homeless to vote, and public showers. The Philadelphia/Delaware Valley Union of the Homeless quickly grew to 6,000 dues-paying members supporting their work.

By the mid-1980s the NUH began to expand nationally. The Leadership and Organizing Training Institute for Homeless Activists, a six-week intensive program based in Philadelphia, graduated leaders from around the country for the purpose of carrying out a national organizing drive. In the Winter Offensive of 1986, organizers began traveling around the country to help build affiliate chapters. Groups in Los Angeles, Chicago, New Orleans, New York, and Boston all acquired bases of operation. Chapters also started in Oakland, Tucson, Albuquerque, St. Paul, Minneapolis and Detroit over the following year. By 1993, affiliates had also formed in Baltimore, Camden, Atlanta, Mobile, Houston, Phoenix, Kansas City, Colorado and San Francisco. Parallel to many of these local NUH chapters emerged chapters of Empty the Shelters, Fill the Homes, an ally student organization of the NUH.

A major effort of this period was the 1988 "Take Off the Boards" Campaign, in which takeovers of vacant houses were



*Logo of Empty the Shelters, a student
organization connected with NUH*

National Union of t

1983

- * Chris Sprowal, Tex Howard, and Franklin Smith found the Committee for Dignity and Fairness for the Homeless in Philadelphia

1984

- * February – Sprowal, Howard and Smith establish a shelter run and managed by currently and formerly homeless people

1985

- * April 6th – Founding convention of the Philadelphia/Delaware Valley Union of the Homeless, where its constitution is adopted
- * Philadelphia/Delaware Valley Union wins rights to shelter, 24-hour shelter intake, voting for homeless persons, and public showers
- * Beginning of effort to build a national network of chapters

1986

- * Leadership and Organizing Training Institute for Homeless Activists developed
- * October – NUH holds first national strategy meeting and elects officers
- * Winter Offensive Strategy – Calls for simultaneous actions among affiliates under slogan “Homes and Jobs: Not Death in the Streets”
- * Chapters/affiliate unions established in Los Angeles, Chicago, New Orleans, Philadelphia, Boston, New York, Baltimore and Washington D.C.

1987

- * Affiliate unions established in Oakland, Tucson, Albuquerque, St. Paul, Minneapolis and Detroit

the Homeless Timeline

- * Stewart McKinney Homeless Assistance Act – secures funding for emergency shelters as Reagan administration drastically cuts HUD budget
- * October – National Tribunal on the Plight of the Homeless in New York City
- * Founding Convention of the New York Homeless Union – 1,200 delegates assemble at Riverside Church

1988

- * Dignity Housing incorporated by Sprowal, Leona Smith, and Alicia Christian
- * May – New Executive Board members of NUH draft mission statement
- * July – “Take Off The Boards” Campaign

1989

- * July – NUH leaders (including Willie Baptist and Leona Smith) visit Tompkins Square Park “Tent City” and meet with Ron Casanova
- * July – Survival Summit convened in Philadelphia; chapters of NUH, National Welfare Rights Union, and National Anti-Hunger Coalition attend; “Up and Out of Poverty Now” slogan adopted
- * Exodus March – Ron Casanova and Tompkins Square Park Union of the Homeless lead almost 300 members of NUH and allied groups to Washington, D.C.
- * October 7th – Housing Now! Rally in Washington, D.C. attended by 100,000 people
- * Leona Smith elected President of NUH after Chris Sprowal admits drug addiction

1990

- * May 1st – NUH coordinates takeovers of empty federally-owned houses in New York, Minneapolis, Detroit, Los Angeles, Tucson, Oakland, Chicago and Philadelphia

coordinated in 73 cities. In the summer of 1989, a Survival Summit was convened by the NUH, the National Welfare Rights Union, the National Anti-Hunger Coalition, and the United Electrical Workers, District One. The slogan "Up and Out of Poverty, Now!" was adopted. Nationally, the NUH prioritized the demands for permanent, suitable housing as well as decent jobs and job training.

In October 1989, NUH participated in a massive Housing Now! March on Washington, DC along with the National Coalition for the Homeless, the National Low-Income Housing Coalition, and the Center for Creative Nonviolence, among other groups. The NUH, under the leadership of Ron Casanova of the Tompkins Square Park Union of the Homeless, led a 400-mile Exodus March from New England and New York to merge into the Housing Now! protest and the first National Homeless Convention, also being held in Washington, DC. Despite being marginalized by advocacy organizations involved in planning the



NATIONAL UNION OF THE HOMELESS

action, NUH representatives managed to get a meeting with Jack Kemp, the head of HUD. Kemp agreed to make 10,000 HUD units available to the homeless over the next year, a major victory. However, Kemp did not keep his word and stopped communicating with NUH representatives, instead negotiating with representatives from advocacy groups Center for Creative Nonviolence and National Low-Income Housing Coalition.

In response to HUD's backtracking, NUH launched one of its most successful actions, a coordinated takeover of abandoned HUD buildings in seven cities. The takeovers, which



Poster for the Skylight Pictures documentary Takeover

FIVE MAIN SLOGANS

"Homeless Not Helpless!"

•We, the poor and homeless, can and must lead our own struggle to end poverty!

"You Are Only One Paycheck Away From Homelessness!"

•Homelessness is a class issue. We are homeless because we do not have enough money for a home.

"No Housing, No Peace!"

•There can be no peace in America while people go without!

"You Only Get What You Are Organized To Take!"

•Power in America comes from one place... Organization!

"Up and Out of Poverty, Now!"

•People mobilize in their self-interest. It is in our self-interest alone to end poverty. We know when our pain is over. Therefore, WE must lead the struggle to end poverty. And we must end it NOW!

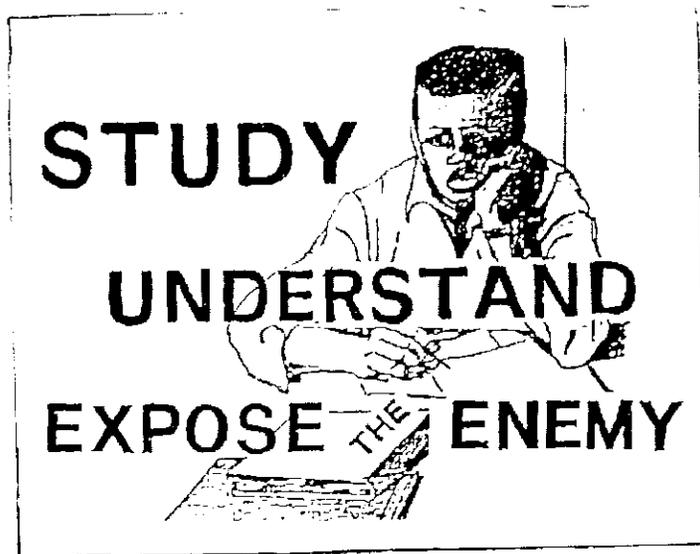
These slogans were developed as part of the National Union of the Homeless's organizing drive and served to both galvanize supporters and contribute to political education.

took place on May 1, 1990 in New York, Minneapolis, Detroit, Los Angeles, Tucson, Oakland, Chicago, and Philadelphia, were documented by Pamela Yates and Peter Kinoy of Skylight Pictures. The action was a success on many fronts. In Oakland, publicity about the takeovers pressured the city government to provide \$2 million in land for the construction of Dignity Housing West. In Minneapolis, activists took over 15 buildings and the city government conceded millions for a homeless-run housing program. In Philadelphia, the mayor refused to evict homeless families from HUD properties. In addition, NUH's collaboration with Skylight Pictures produced the full-length film *Takeover*, telling the story of the takeovers from the organizers' perspective.

NUH's Organizing Model

The National Union of the Homeless used what was called a "Johnnie Tillmon model" of organizing, named for the Watts welfare mother who was the first chair of the National Welfare Rights Organization. This model was based on two central principles: 1) Poverty victims must be at the forefront of the movement to end poverty and 2) You only get what you are organized to take. Stemming from these principles, the NUH stressed five interdependent ingredients of organizing. These included: 1) teams of organizers identifying and organizing around issues on which people are prepared to act; 2) bases of operation often associated with projects of survival; 3) mutual support networks with wide-ranging organizations of poor folks and allies; 4) internal and external lines of communication; and 5) nationally connected leaders educated and trained in political consciousness and strategy able to unite diverse but related struggles.

The Demise of the National Union of the Homeless





Voices from the Front was a newsletter of NUH's Up and Out of Poverty Now Campaign, including news from the movement, poetry and art.

The NUH began to face serious challenges in the early 1990s. The crack cocaine epidemic that swept through American cities beginning in the 1980s hit the leadership of the NUH hard. A number of major leaders left due to struggles with addiction. At the same time, some of NUH's major successes caused divisions within the organization. Dignity Housing programs in Philadelphia and Oakland, for example, acquired large grants, but disagreements arose regarding what concessions would be made in order to win funds. Some of NUH's hard-won victories appeared in danger of being co-opted by politicians and funders.

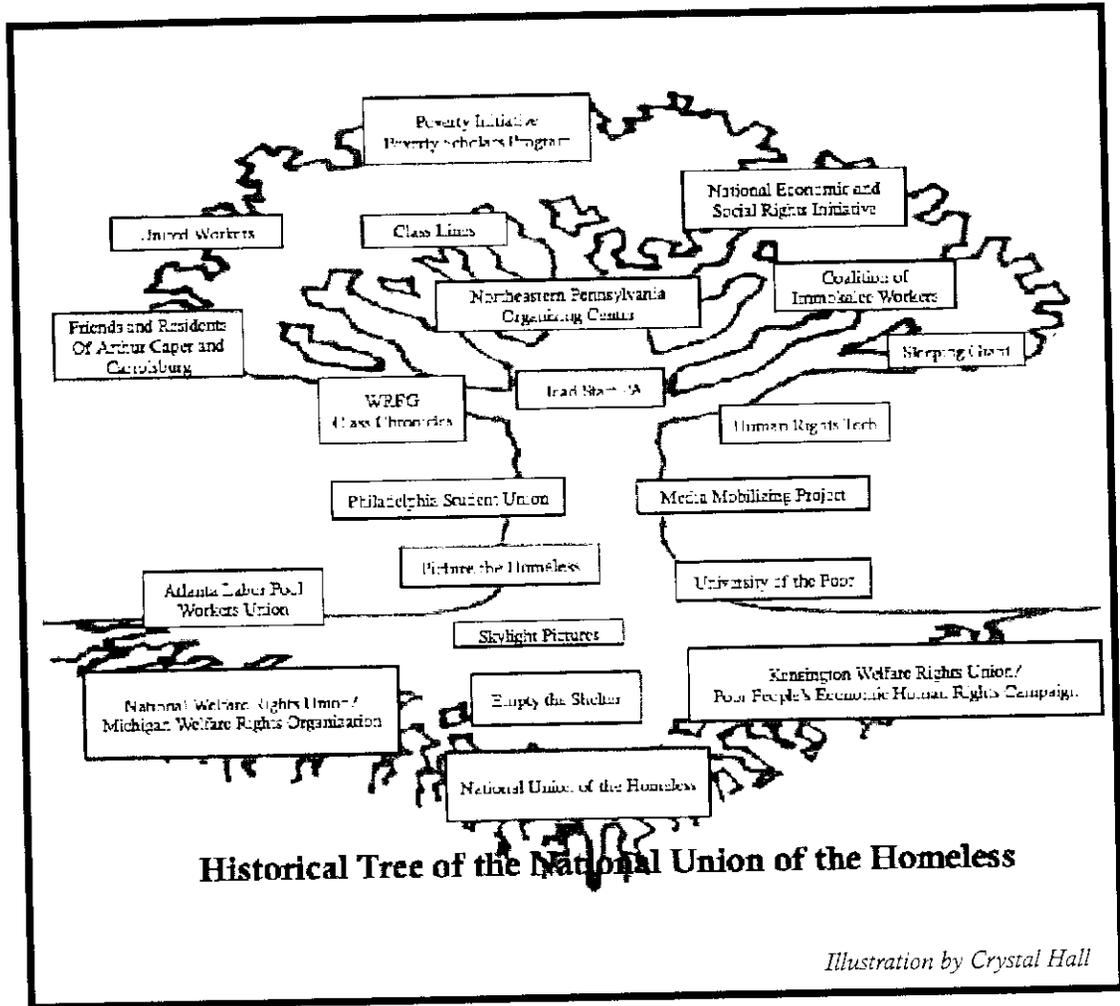
Ultimately the National Union of the Homeless did not survive the stresses of the drug epidemic and co-optation intact. One of the major lessons of the NUH experience was the need for a clear, committed, competent and connected core of leaders. These leaders must be systematically educated and trained if such an organizing effort is to be maintained and able to overcome pressures toward compromise and co-optation of basic goals and principles.

The Legacy of the National Union of the Homeless

Although the NUH went into decline in the early 1990s, a number of its leaders continued organizing for social and economic human rights. The NUH's mission and methods were further developed and carried on through other organizations, including the Kensington Welfare Rights Union, the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign, the University of the Poor, and many others.

The development of a number of the leaders of the Poverty Scholars network dates back to the founding and struggle of the NUH. The Poverty Scholars Program is a leadership development, technical assistance, and skills training program for low-income organizers from grassroots organizations nationwide working on

issues of economic justice. The Homeless Union History Project is part of the leadership development process of the Poverty Scholars Program. This work-study project documents the history of the Homeless Union, conducts research, and develops curriculum for political education. Its research methodology and curriculum production is informed by the political education and organizational development needs of the Poverty Scholars Program's growing network of anti-poverty organizations. The purpose of this process is to develop leaders with a collective understanding and analysis of this history for the purpose of building a powerful broad-based social movement to end poverty led by the poor as a united and organized social force.



Acknowledgements

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Resources

Books and Articles

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Online

Homeless Union History Project, <http://homelessunion.wikidot.com/>

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