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# Book Review

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## The Injustice That Is Homelessness

by Carl Osgood

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### **Looking Up at the Bottom Line: The Struggle for the Living Wage**

by Richard Troxell

Austin, Texas: Plain View Press, 2010

308 pages; paperback; \$22.95

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Jan. 3—The best way to understand what it means to be homeless is to be homeless, or, at least, live and work among the homeless. This book may be the second best way to understand homelessness. Richard Troxell has been an advocate for the homeless for three decades. He has been there, has lived among, and has fought for the dignity of homeless people. Troxell is the president of House the Homeless, Inc. of Austin, Texas; a board member of the National Coalition for the Homeless; a Vietnam veteran, and many other things. This book is as much his own story as it is a book about homelessness and what to do about it.



What hits the reader the hardest, in the first part of the book, is the injustice of it all: the suffering that is imposed on people who lack the resources to keep a roof over their heads, and the indifference, and even denial, among those who have never known poverty, except from a safe distance, when passing beggars on the streets of their city.

Troxell puts faces on the homeless in a way that can

only come from knowing them and being among them. Among them was Diane Breisch Malloy. Malloy had worked for MCI in Austin for ten years, then lost her job when she developed bronchitis. While expressing sympathy for her condition, her employer simply discarded her because, he said, the company needed “reliability” from its personnel. Two months later, she died on the streets of Austin.

Troxell never met Malloy while she lived. He found her body in a flooded creek in 1992, a few days after a distraught client, who had known her well, come to him and told him how they had struggled to survive a heavy downpour a few nights earlier, without any shelter. It was then, after reflecting on the death of Malloy, that Troxell realized that he had known 23 homeless people who had died, just between 1989 and 1992.

At the time, Troxell had been working to provide legal aid to the homeless, to help them get disability and other benefits. “When you help someone who is homeless get disability benefits,” he writes, “you get to know them. You learn about their families, their wives and their husbands; you learn about their mothers and fathers. You learn about their bad decisions, their addictions. You learn about the incredibly hard choices they had to make that meant they would leave their children.”

Following Malloy’s death, Troxell organized a memorial service for all the 23 homeless people who had died in the three-year period. He was one, among 100 people at the service, who recounted their personal stories, said their last goodbyes, and told what Troxell describes as “our final truth: that we were human beings, and yet we were homeless, and did not want to be homeless. We were homeless on the streets of one of the richest cities in the richest country in the world—that we were living and dying on the streets of Austin.”

### Criminalizing the Homeless

Anybody who has lived, worked, or visited any major urban center in the United States has encountered homeless individuals, whether sleeping on benches, in doorways, or asking for help outside the door of a corner convenience store. In downtown Washington, D.C., as this reviewer has experienced for nearly 20 years, it is



Austin American Statesman

*Cody Michaels, homeless for ten years, protests the Austin, Texas “no camping,” ordinance aimed at homeless people.*

impossible to walk more than a block without encountering a homeless individual trying to beg enough money to buy a hotdog from a street vendor or a hamburger from a nearby McDonalds.

Because mental illness is common among the homeless, occasionally, such encounters can turn unpleasant. It’s also not unusual for the homeless to do in public, what most of us only do in private, since they have no place else to go. Unfortunately, the response of many municipalities has been to criminalize such behavior, with “no camping” or “no panhandling” and similar

types of ordinances rather than address the underlying problem.

Troxell documents the case of Austin's "no camping" ordinance, first passed in 1995, in great detail, since he fought it every step of the way. The ordinance has been supported by downtown businesses whose only perception of the homeless is as vagrants harassing their customers. The business owners say they're not against the homeless, only certain types of behavior, but Troxell documents that the ordinance has only been used against the homeless. Austin is a university town, and it's not unusual for college students to camp overnight on the sidewalk in order to be a step ahead of the crowd in the race for tickets to sports events, rock concerts, or even to buy the latest high-tech gadget. Why are they left alone, while a homeless man sleeping under a bridge is hauled off to jail, and sentenced to pay a fine he obviously doesn't have the money for?

"To punish the homeless for their status rather than their behavior is cruel and unusual punishment," Cecilia Wood, House the Homeless Inc.'s attorney, told the Austin City Council in August 1995. The homeless are not troublemakers, but people who need help, others told the Council. Their appeals failed to sway the Council, which proceeded to pass the measure, under pressure from the mayor and the business community. It's a stupid response to a complex problem that ties up thousands of hours police and court time without contributing anything towards finding solutions to homelessness. And, yet, it remains a common approach all across the country.

### **The Universal Living Wage**

The central paradox that Troxell is up against is the large number of jobs that pay far below the minimum income required to maintain minimum housing and other basic needs. The U.S. Conference of Mayors, in its latest survey on hunger and homelessness in American cities, released Dec. 22, reports that while unemployment is the leading cause of homelessness, 19% of homeless adults actually are employed. Their jobs simply don't pay enough to enable them to afford housing.

Homelessness is a complex problem, as Troxell relates. Veterans make up one-quarter to one-third of homeless adults. The social safety net has collapsed. There are the disabled homeless, for whom disability benefits, which start at \$647 per month, are grossly in-

adequate. Troxell's efforts to develop programs to help this wide range of people who had fallen into hard times and lost everything foundered for one basic reason: "We had gotten downtrodden people engaged, brushed off, detoxified, job trained, placed in jobs and into housing, only to realize that they were destined to fail *as the wage, set by the Federal government, would not sustain them*" (emphasis in the original).

And so, by this process, Troxell was led to support the idea of the Universal Living Wage (ULW). The ULW is arrived at by a fairly simple calculation, based on indexing the minimum wage in an area, to the local cost of housing, and ensuring that basic housing, such as an efficiency apartment, can be secured for no more than 30% of that wage. Troxell emphasizes that it is a moral principle, that if someone works a 40-hour week, he ought to be able to afford the basic necessities of life, including food and housing; yet he recognizes that the solution is not to try to force the Wal-Marts and McDonalds of the world to pay their employees an adequate wage. Rather, unless there is an real economic recovery in the United States, and an end to the globalized economy, which low-wage employers like Wal-Mart and McDonalds exemplify, there is little hope that high-paid, high-skilled employment will be created as the long-term solution to homelessness.

Homelessness is just one symptom of the decades-long decay of the United States that began during the Nixon years, *EIR* has shown. The combined effect of the rock-drug-sex counterculture and President Richard Nixon's pulling the plug on the dollar in 1971, was to open the door for the Wall Street looting and shutting down of America's urban industrial centers with their highly skilled and well-paying manufacturing jobs. As *EIR* thoroughly documented in its 2006 study, "The Case of Baltimore: Deindustrialization Creates 'Death Zones,'" (see *EIR*, Jan. 6, 2006), the resulting economic collapse has created death zones in our cities, of which homelessness is only a subsumed part.

The only way to solve homelessness is to reverse this process of decay, by restoring President Franklin Roosevelt's 1933 Glass-Steagall Act; providing emergency Federal aid to our cities and states so that they can maintain essential services; and launching the North American Water and Power Alliance (NAWAPA), which will put millions of Americans back to work rebuilding America for future generations.

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## Interview: Richard Troxell

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*The following is an excerpt from an interview with Richard Troxell on Dec. 21, 2010. He is responding to a question about what inspired him to write the book.*



Courtesy of Richard Troxell

[I]f you can work a full 40-hour week at McDonalds and not end up at the end of the day with a paycheck that will get you into housing, which forces me to have to have a roommate or get a second job, or third job ... that is a disincentive. That is not good.... Right now we have a rejection of that. Of course, now we have a strangulation of jobs, so we have less job opportunities. But nonetheless, people are still surviving, and it is a capitalistic system in which we are living in ... where people buy and sell things. And so people have to buy and sell things in order to survive economically. But at this socioeconomic level, the only things that are available to them to buy and sell are drugs, or each other. And so, that's what's happening.

We have people that have fallen out of the workforce, fallen through the system, now making up 3.5 million people, of which 1.35 million are children. And we have those people living on our streets, and we have people selling drugs, and selling their sister or their girlfriend or some lady down the street, and that's just not the kind of society that I want to be in. And, of course, they migrate to urban areas because those are the population pools, and that's where you can find resources.

Now, in some places, some towns, some cities, you can find lots of resources, some that are provided by the municipalities. Some are not provided by the municipalities or the towns, but nonetheless, that's where the people are and where people are discarding things....

This is a university town—56,000 students—so you have a semester break; they get ready to go home. Their aunt, their uncle has sent them an iPod. You can find these things in the trash, in their plastic wrappers, never

opened, because when it's time to go, they just jettison these things. So, people have figured this out, people experiencing homelessness and they realize that, and they're dumpster diving.

Then you have your entertainment areas. You have [in Washington, D.C.], M Street, Georgetown; for us [in Austin], it's 6th Street. So we have a lot of people [who are] without, approaching people who have things, and asking them for help. And this, of course, is also referred to as panhandling. Now businesses have responded, over the last several years, to this. They see this as a complete affront to their ability—it interferes with their patrons. It doesn't make them happy. It doesn't want to make them spend money at the end of their hard work week. They want to relax, and so then they don't want to be confronted with the concept that somebody's out there, miserable, and needs something from them.

And so, they have begun to pass a series of laws ... that they call quality of life ordinances. There's no sitting. There's no lying down. There's no standing, no camping, no panhandling. All these laws are directed at the condition of being homeless, all the things that you must do, and were you housed, you'd be doing behind closed doors or not at all. So, it's the condition of homelessness.... What they say is "We're not against homelessness; we're against the condition that they're out here doing these things." Well, you know ... it comes with a price, literally a price of between \$200 and \$500 for these ordinances, and these are the people that are least capable of paying that.

For example, in Austin, we have 4,000 people, by head count, that are experiencing homelessness; we have maybe 8,000, the number is nebulous. It's hard to capture. Anyway, the municipal response in this city—we have 607 emergency shelter beds. That's for every man, woman, and child. So that means, on these wintry nights, somebody's going to get left out in the cold, and that's without a doubt. In this town, you've got to go to the shelter, a 100-bed shelter, you've got to apply for a bed through a lottery. Eighty percent of those beds are already taken up by people that are in case management. Twenty percent of those are still available in the lottery. If you don't win that lottery for a bed, you get a chance to go in another lottery, where you get a chance to try to win a mat on the floor. Now, that whole process took three hours, to either get a bed or not get a bed, three hours of your day. That's huge.