The Final Straw is a weekly anarchist and anti-authoritarian radio show bringing you voices and ideas from struggle around the world. Since 2010, we’ve been broadcasting from occupied Tsalagi land in Southern Appalachia (Asheville, NC).

We also frequently feature commentary (serious and humorous) by anarchist prisoner, Sean Swain.

You can send us letters at:
The Final Straw Radio
PO Box 6004
Asheville, NC 28816
USA

Email us at:
thefinalstrawradio@riseup.net
or thefinalstrawradio@protonmail.com

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This week on the show, you'll hear from Doug, Onion and Papi, three folks involved in the Aston Park Build, a daily event to hold space in Aston Park in downtown Asheville, creating art, sharing food and music and a wider part of organizing here to demand safer space & redistribution of wealth to care for houseless folks and relieve the incredible strains on housing affordability in Asheville. We talk about the park actions, the housing crisis and service industry wage woes, local government coddling of business owners and police repression of folks on the margins.

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Doug: Hey, my name is Doug. I used to be homeless, now I am not. I have an apartment. And yeah, that's pretty much it.

Onion: I'm Onion. I use they/them pronouns.

Papi: I'm Papi. I also use they/them pronouns.

TFSR: Would y'all maybe talk about what brings you to talk about the housing crisis in Asheville and the way that the city and the police are dealing with homelessness. Some might think that, Doug, if you're in a place right now... that since you got yours, you could just kind of chill and wouldn't be worried about the stuff that the city is doing?

Doug: I could, but that's not me. I worry about people that I know out there. I worry about if I was homeless again. I would want things to be fixed better, you know? I don't want to be treated bad like we used to be - when you're homeless getting kicked in the head by cops. I think if I was not to care, or just to give up to be in my apartment, or whatever, I wouldn't feel right. Because there's a lot of things wrong in this scene that have to be fixed.

Onion: I've been evicted twice myself. I'm a single parent. It's kind of a miracle that I'm still able to live in Asheville. So I feel that it's personal for me. But it's also a collective issue that if we don't push hard on right now, it's gonna get extremely worse.

Papi: I've lived in western North Carolina all my life. This is my first time being on my own, can't afford it... can't do it. I'm actually living with... well, my family's living with me now. My family can't really own places on their own because of documentation status and being immigrants here. So that's like a whole thing on its own. That's where I'm at right now.

TFSR: Could someone give a definition or a description of what's happening right now in Aston Park in downtown Asheville? During the summer Asheville police, for instance, evicted of a bunch of camps around town. And that was during milder weather, despite the fact that it was also amidst a pandemic. Also, could someone give a definition of what Code Purple means?

Doug: It's a little easier with an apartment I can just stay in there and eat and not have to go outside. But I hate it for people who don't have housing. I was just there not too long ago. And I could be there again. If things were bad, but I'm gonna do my best not too.

TFSR: I guess any of us could. It's kind of the point, right?

Doug: Most of us are one paycheck away from it. Me. Me and my ex-wife we were doing fine, two jobs, kids in schools, both the cars, and then both cars died. We were off the bus ramp. But then, here we are. Yeah. Well, she's not here anymore. She's here but not here.

Papi: Yeah, I was living outside to after leaving an unsafe relationship. And I had an infant. And so I was in a really precarious situation. And so I was living in a vehicle for a while and you know, it can happen to any of us.

Doug: People lived in a tent with their children. It was okay.

TFSR: Yeah, thank you all for the work that you're doing and for being willing to come on this and talk about it. And I really hope that it it gets more folks out there. And yeah, thanks for sharing your perspectives.

Papi: Thanks for having us.

Doug: Yeah. Thanks, man.

Onion: Thank you.
Doug: We want your routing numbers! To your bank accounts,

TFSR: And do a damn thing about it, not just show up and listen and go back to their heated offices, right?

Doug: No, I want them to just come and listen. They’ll hear something but they just come and they’re not listening.

Onion: They hate having to listen to us. They hate it.

Doug: When you’re able to put up a tent and be homeless. That means you’re comfortable there, it’s feel like a safe spot. And then when the police come and sweep it or tell you to move, it’s like you’re being evicted from your home back to first time being homeless. Every single time. I went through 18 tents in two years. That’s ridiculous. You know, police take them down or weather. it just sucked. Fuck the police.

Onion: Yeah, and how many campsites have been burned down in the past couple of years. People need a safe place to go where we have folks watching out. There’s just been a lot of danger for people living outside in every every kind of way.

Doug: Unfortunately when there happens to be like an OD or something. And they shut it down. Like take the OD and deal with it, and not police it but support. Not just beat us down and make us want to go get high. I’ve been clean for a couple weeks now. It’s a struggle. When they get on me and bad days, I’m gonna want to go out there and you know, do that bad thing. Stay warm.

When I was homeless, I ain’t gonna lie I got high everyday. Because I needed that to get through to get up and get my food for the day, my clothes, my shelter for the night. Take care of my girlfriend’s dog. God they don’t understand. Sometimes you wait 4 hours for a shower at AHOPE. And for lunch, more time. We’re not just sitting around doing nothing with our time, twiddling our thumbs. So this is the south and we are in the Bible Belt, right? This is the holiday season. We need some love like Jesus from these people. I hate to bring religion into it, but show us where your hearts are.

TFSR: Congratulations on keeping sober.

Doug: Yes, Asheville did. They did a lot of people earlier this year. They put some people in hotels, and if you weren’t on the list, you were just basically stuck out in streets. I was on the first list of people to be in the hotels, and I still haven’t gotten a hotel. All the hotel stuff that happened when COVID first hit was because Buncombe county got money to put to put us in housing, hotels, or create tent cities for us that were safe with toilets and washing. That never came. Came and went, we never had any of that. So we’re still stuck in the woods. Some people are in hotels now. The Ramada, I guess. But it’s institutional living, it’s not happy there. So scratch that.

Code Purple is when it’s gonna be 32 degrees or below freezing. They say it’s unsafe for people. So they provide emergency shelters - a men’s one and a women’s one. Usually we go out, pick people up at night or have a ride to get you there. Last year we got dinner in the evening and breakfast in the morning. I don’t know what they are getting this year. But I haven’t heard anybody complaining. So Code Purple is basically just to keep people alive - from freezing.

Papi: This year was different. Last year, and I guess 2020 shelters didn’t want to open for Code Purple because of the pandemic. So the city decided after a minute to open one up in the civic center. It was a more centralized bigger space. And this year, they didn’t do any of that. No one opened. So there was Code Purple happening. The city calls it when the weather hits. They call Code Purple, but there’s still nowhere to go at the beginning of the winter this year. So it lasted for a bit of time. People can die or lose their limbs or all of that. We decided to start pressuring the city to create and find Code Purple shelter so that we wouldn’t see loss of life.

Doug: Code Purple is weird because if it was 33 degrees and raining or drizzling or just wet outside. There’s no Code Purple. There’s no shelter. But 32? You are in there. Last year the VRQ did it - which is the Veterans Administration Quarters. But they kind of hate homeless people. And I get it because some of my comrades out here are just rude, crude, and they have no respect. But if you offered a service, like VRQ did, no matter what people come into the door you still have to keep your composure and put your hat on and say “Come on in. How are you today?” Yeah, I was gonna go off on a tangent there.

I wasn’t done answering your question, but I got to thinking about the way that we don’t hold ourselves accountable for our own actions out
here. People just do what they want and screw people over. Rob and steal, some call it survival. Survival would be like stealing a rabbit or some meat from the store, not my backpack. And we act obnoxious, and we do drugs in places where we probably shouldn’t do them. And people don’t like that. So they hate us, and they don’t help us anymore. And that’s not cool.

**Papi:** Another thing with the Code Purple is that the city might put some funding into it. But oftentimes they wait. And this year they waited and so the only Code Purple for a minute when it was super cold around Thanksgiving, or before that, was volunteer run, and they had no funding. So there’s a bunch of people running it that are just signing up for shifts overnight and everything. It’s totally inappropriate. It’s not well done or safe, or careful. So, the city is sitting on $26 million of federal funding that they got for relief, specifically this year. They still haven’t, to my knowledge, apportioned it. So they’re just sitting there on piles of money. And people are dying. Right now. They’re dying around us in the streets, like... currently.

**Doug:** Yeah, not just from the cold. Other things, too. COVID and sicknesses, illnesses. It’s just like, are you gonna wait till there’s five of us left and then help people? Or are we gonna put this thing in action now? I know things cost money but it’s not really hard to say to a bunch of people “come line up and get your shots or get a checkup. Here’s a house.” There’s plenty of abandoned buildings out here. I know a lot of people, even myself, who has taken over abandoned houses. Go inside, black out all the windows, and some have electricity, just live in there. It’s kind of scary, because you’re trapped. But it’s a nice place, but still it’s illegal. The city could take this house and offer the person money.

We need shelter for everybody. So this house is not being used or your family is not using it? Why can’t we? Require us to keep it clean, and to keep it up, just to not be like, disgusting pigs. I myself have been a disgusting pig. And I recommend people to do this stuff. Because as homeless we already got a bad look and then we’ll just do this other stuff. Sorry, I went off again.

**Papi:** Well, Asheville is full of money, there’s no lack of money. You know, there’s a lot of money moving through this town via tourism. And it’s just that we don’t see any of the money it’s ported. The Tourism Development Authority has a budget of I think it’s $15 million a year for advertising to bring people, tourists, to Asheville. We don’t see any of that.

check those out. And that’s a really good way to get in touch and plug in and find out what we’re doing.

**TFSR:** Cool. Is there anything that I didn’t ask about that y’all want to bring up and mention?

**Papi:** I do have something. I remember asking some folk because I’m pretty new to just a lot of stuff. So I was like, anybody want anything to be said, and someone brought up about just what happens when when sweeps happen, and friends and family are displaced Is that you no longer know where your friends are. You no longer know where your family’s at. And it just makes it a shit ton harder to get yourself okay. And shit around you okay. If you’re constantly being removed from your area, and you can no longer make appointments, and you can no longer take care of your dog or go to doctor’s appointments, or go to school or anything like that. And the main thing that someone had told me that they were really thinking about was how you can no longer find your friends and family. And that’s very scary. Fuck sweeps. Fuck DOT.

**Onion:** I think I wanted to say Fuck them all. Yeah, definitely echoing that. I wanted to say that, to city council, we see you. We see what you say and how what you do doesn’t match up with it. And so we’re coming for you. There is not anybody that’s safe sitting on the city council, because the furthest left member of city council on the first day of Code Purple, when there was no shelter, put up a Facebook post saying “it’s my birthday. Oh, it happens to be Code Purple. What you can do is donate to this tiny nonprofit who doesn’t even do emergency housing support. Give them money, because the city can’t handle our shit.”

And basically, that’s the furthest left that it gets in Asheville is like passing the buck. And so we see you passing the buck. Kim Roney. We’re here watching what you do every day. And you haven’t shown up at Aston Park yet. And we see you. So there’s an invitation for city council to open up your wallet of the city coffers, and give us what we need. Or we will come for you.

**Papi:** For city council to come down and to shut up and not say anything and hear houses folks and hear them at every single thing they have to fucking say. Everything.
And when I came from Connecticut here, the only thing that was cheaper was cigarettes. Meat was the same price. It was terrible. I had $1,000 month rent up there, it was a two bedroom. Everything was $1000 month, pay utilities, all your bills to come here and be homeless.

**Onion:** We also want to make the explicit invitation of people that have nowhere to go to come and visit if they can and see if there’s anything there for them that they want to build with us. So it’s hopefully a space that welcomes people that really don’t have anywhere else to go right now.

**Doug:** You see our community. See how we shoot, we love each other. How we try to look out for each other. I’ve given people the shirt off my back out here. The food off my plate.

**TFSR:** Well, I guess if you’re new to town and having difficulty keeping up on stuff. It’s a good place to come and meet people and also to find out about resources that are available. And Doug mentioned ASP before, that seems like a cool place to interface with that with the street side of ASP or the Free-store.

**Doug:** They talk to us with sincerity, not condescending. I love this group. Like, I’ve never met anybody like that, the people from ASP. I guess that would be me too, I volunteer to help. They’ve taught me a lot. I learned a lot. They keep me in check. I’m grateful for them. Grateful for everything that we do,

**TFSR:** Where can people keep up on this if they’re not in the area and they want to apply pressure. Or if they want to get involved, but maybe don’t want to show up immediately? I know there’s some Instagram accounts that have been broadcasting news about when police have been coming in or the really cute flyers that have been being made. Yeah, how can people find out more?

**Papi:** It’s kind of an autonomous group that is forming this project, but it’s being supported by a coalition of collectives and groups. And so you could go to any of those pages to find out about what’s going on. Those could be Asheville Solidarity Network that has a Facebook and an Instagram. There’s Asheville Survival Program. Same thing Asheville For Justice. DefundAVLPD - the movement to defend the police here. So yeah,

**Doug:** Yeah, that’s why a lot of crime doesn’t get reported. Or a lot of cases get dropped. I believe this. If it was all be reported and everybody’s get charged the tourism would stop coming. They would be like “this place really sucks, I don’t want to go there.” We need to get some of our people off the street because they walk around, not in their head, they’re out somewhere. Just go one day to Pritchard Park. Sit down in the corners and just watch the show. You can just see why we need help. If they got the money they gotta take that money and if you want to budget it? Get a bunch of military tents. Make a tent city for us. They were supposed to do that two years ago. That’s not asking for much. I mean I’m asking for a house and walls. I mean, I am. I want that. But we’ll be happy with a canvas tent and a cook. I’ll cook for them!

**TFSR:** It seems like a lot of those things are intertwined with each other. Like if someone has easy access to privacy, they’re not going to be doing drugs and public. Plenty of people with houses do drugs. You know, if you’ve got a shower and a place to wash dishes, you’re not going to stink as much you’re not going to be walking around. You can do your own laundry. And you’re not going to probably be suffering from as many mental health crises. If you have a place to lay your head and you’re not going to get rousted in the middle of the night or get your backpack stolen or whatever else. It just contributes to this problem. But the city as Onion said, and as both of you have said - has the money to spend on it, but it’s just choosing to hold that back. It would rather use a bludgeon against people that are on the street than actually help them out of that situation.

**Doug:** Yeah, they make it worse. I don’t understand why they don’t do anything. They can still keep a lot of money and still help us out. We’re not going to go anywhere. We’re not gonna die off. And quite frankly, a lot of people here do have mental illnesses. That’s why they’re here. They need medications, they need a good safe place. Not necessarily a hospital, or a house. A house, but like a maybe halfway house type situation, where there’s somebody there to give them their meds every day to help them clean their self or their whatever. Some people need to be retrained into life.

**TFSR:** Or assistance with addiction issues or counseling or access to medication or... right. There’s solutions out there. Folks’ camps have...
been getting broken up by the city. I wonder if ya’ll could talk about that and what’s been going on in Aston Park and some of the solutions that people are calling for immediately that we could do to resolve the unsafe situations that folks are in right now. If they want to find shelter, what could the city or mutual aid be doing to provide some sort of alternative to what’s going on now.

Papi: So the city of Asheville has gotten some flack this year for sweeps. But the thing is, most of the sweeps that they do aren’t public knowledge. It’s a policy that the city has, to do them constantly. So we’ll hear about one every once in a while if it makes the news for some reason, or if it’s in a prominent place. But it’s kind of ongoing all the time. So it could be in any weather. If enough people call in, in a neighborhood or whatever to complain - they’ll sweep.

There was an encampment underneath the overpass, and one tourist made a complaint through this complaint website to the city. And they decided to sweep right then, right before a cold snap in February. With extremely cold temperatures that day. The larger city found out about that one because people were witnessing people having to walk away from that site and having their tents destroyed by the Department of Transportation and Asheville Police Department. They were bulldozing all their possessions and people were walking away without shoes with nowhere to go. And so that is obviously violent and deadly. The city caught a lot of flack for that. But the thing that most people don’t know is that it’s customary. It’s their policy.

Doug: Yeah. Not to be on the side of the city. What they’re doing is very wrong and very bad. But they are doing it a lot better now than they were two years ago. Like two years ago, they would just come in and slice your tent up and throw all your stuff everywhere and make you go. Now they’re not giving us enough time but they are giving us some time. Tents aren’t being slashed, but they don’t let you take it.

When they closed down the camp by Haywood Street Church. They got people and their bags and put them in cars and took off. I went by there later that night and it was like a free for all with everybody’s left over belongings. It was like a free flea market. I collected lots of it. Everybody was pilfering all the stuff. Why would you kick them out of there and say they can’t take their stuff and leave the stuff there. When they kick us out they don’t have a contingency plan. I don’t know if they’re supposed stretches. Tools! Bring ingenuity. Bring a good attitude. Just be genuine and sincere to be there helping some people that need housing. Don’t just come for the show. Cuz you’re gonna love that.

TFSR: Musicians bring their instruments DJs bring their setups. It seems like a lot of the more inspiring things that I’ve seen in town around housing... I feel excited having conversations like this with people, because it’s just real that living in the city is much more difficult than it needs to be. And there’s people on the top that are skimming off. And then there’s tons of bureaucrats and cops and whatever and middle management in the middle that make their money off of keeping us out of empty buildings and keeping us from getting the food that we deserve.

And not only that, but also because this city sometimes feels like it doesn’t have actual community. It’s got the drum circle on Fridays, maybe. Especially during pandemic, the uprising felt to me, like the first time for a bit in that year that I felt a real sense of community and inviting people out to a space to share music to share food to be inspired by each other. That’s amazing. Personally, I feed off of that.

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Doug: Yeah, and it’s not just in Asheville, it’s a lot of cities. A lot of big cities, small cities, it’s happening everywhere. People need to pull together and get it right. And because if we don’t, then not just us, we’re all gonna be a load of crap. I don’t know how people don’t see it. It’s totally gotta be flipped. Put us in power and power underneath us. I love people that want to challenge people to come out here with us for an undisclosed amount of time. Depending on their attitude they can leave tomorrow go home, are they can leave in 30 days.

You have an undisclosed amount of time of how long you are going to be in the streets like we are. You’re stripped of your whole life and put on the streets and you’re homeless. And then what? Anybody can survive if they know they are going home within a week. Like I can last all week. But if there’s no hope for tomorrow, no, stale sandwiches or nothing. You really get down and hate life. And I would challenge them to come see how we do it. We don’t want to live like this. To see how hard it is to survive some situations.

It’s cold. I don’t know if any of y’all have been outside all day in the winter, but I hated it. I was warming my tent. Because I don’t like the cold. I moved from New England, because I thought it was cheaper here.
**Onion:** We’re out here, you know. So by the time this airs, Friday will probably be over but it’ll be after Christmas. We’re going to have a big Christmas party and with lots of music and stuff like that. So this is ongoing. And yeah, I think that by the time people hear this on the air, they can just come on out at any time. We’re oftentimes picking up the festivities around four o’clock.

**Doug:** Yeah, if they don’t have anything... They can come with nothing. They can come with themselves or something, but just as support. They don’t have to bring sodas. A lot of people bring donations. Great. Because we can use them, but if you don’t have anything still show up. A big crowd is better than a little one.

**Papi:** It’s a nice big park. So there’s space for really a lot of people.

**Doug:** You play pickle-ball and tennis. They took the tables out. So we need a picnic table.

**Papi:** We got to bring tables in. But yeah, like anybody’s Welcome. Come over. You don’t have to bring anything. Everyone brings a little bit something. If you have the means and the money, yes, bring something, bring furniture. We people like to sit. We like to be cozy. Bring that. Drinks are always appreciated. Hot warm food. Very appreciated. Of different varieties, please, not all of us can eat everything.

**Doug:** Bring your Christmas tree.

**Onion:** Yeah, we like to like build things too, we get really crafty. And so we usually build structures every day. Engineering and stuff like that. And so we go high up in the trees, and we make our art and it’s really a cool scene.

**Doug:** Yeah, we want to make a birdhouse.

**Papi/Onion:** Ladders, you want to donate a ladder? Give us a ladder.

**Papi:** Bring a ladder, bring your client climbing gear!

**Doug:** We can go get a ladder tonight. I got a big one. Well, I think it to but they should because they have to take care of the people. They say they do. But they don’t.

“**You have to move. You can’t be here. We’re gonna put you here. You have to go. We don’t know where you are gonna go.” And that’s that. There’s a lot of land out here. This is western North Carolina. I know BeLoved got a big donation a couple years ago. They were going to build a tiny home village and Buncombe County didn’t want to have it in Buncombe County. So they had to go outside of Buncombe County somewhere. I don’t see why that would be the problem. I would live in a tiny home homeless village. But that’s cool. Like, we want more of those. That’s a whole ‘nother story.

**Papi:** Yeah. So what we’re trying to do now is open up space that’s safer and that’s sanctioned by us. So that’s why we decided to start holding space in Aston Park, which is south of downtown in Asheville. It’s a central location that’s convenient for people and it’s good for camping. We’ve got a lot of flat space and it’s accessible. So we are focusing on that space to create sanctuary camping which a lot of other cities have done in the so called United States. It should be a done deal. It’s very easy to do. It’s been done. It’s not complicated, but the city is holding out because they would rather basically enact social cleansing.

**Doug:** All they have to do is put in some hand washing stations it’s important out there. And garbage pickup. They will not pick up people’s garbage. Their job is sanitation, to keep the place clean. Every time there’s a homeless encampment, the garbage sits there for weeks. I’m like “well, you guys complain that we look bad but you’re leaving the garbage here after we’re gone.” People know it’s us, but it’s like the tongue to a wall. They’re complaining and complaining but they don’t do anything about it. Like they’re just showing up, shut them down and take off. Couple weeks later, same thing happens again. Who’s door do we gotta go knock on to get this done. All they have to do is put tents in Aston Park... it’s flat. Just throw some Port-a-Johns, a hand wash station, and a dumpster.

**Onion:** I feel like we kind of skipped where we were saying, why we’re doing this or something about what brought us to this.

**Papi:** I think a lot about what Doug said about what the city could be bringing, and how the city is not going to do shit. So it’s like, “okay, just
let us do it.” Because we’re capable of resourcing and finding things. And if it’s so bothering... just get the fuck out of our way. City don’t bother us. Cops don’t bother us. We’ll put hand washing things there. We’ll put Porta-Johns there. We’ll put things there and we’ll take care of it. And I mean, people have been showing up every weekend to Aston and been doing that. So we’re capable. We’re very capable, the community is capable of coming in and taking care of each other and continuing that.

**Doug:** They are coming in and make us look bad. Like they come in to throw their shovel in there. We’ve done all the work. But they take all the credit and make us look bad. But you know what? Ya’ll know where Hopey’s was? You know it’s empty now. There’s a nice building where people sleep. I don’t know they have plans for it. But that could be a shelter, a temporary shelter.

**Papi:** We could make plans for it.

**Doug:** We could just go in there and claim it. But we gotta do it right, though.

**TFSR:** Well, if you plan on doing that, I can cut that portion out of the radio broadcast. One of the ways that this has been framed recently: the taking space in Ashton Park despite the police evictions has been under the name of Aston Art Build. And I’m wondering if ya’ll could talk about how there’s public invitations for people to gather and create art and to make it a multi generational space.

**Papi:** Yeah. So when the invites went out... by the way the invites are so cute! I love them! They’re very fun to me. We should make some more. We started Sunday. It’s been pretty fucking cool. I think before we even had donations come in, everyone’s been able to resource around, calls out. Before calls out to social media we were just asking friends and people that we see “bring anything and everything that you can.” It’s pretty cool how quickly people can find furniture everywhere. I want to bring a bed. There’s been multiple beds bought and built. And a house to put it in. And there’s lots of art. There’s lots of art and very large banners. And so far it’s been very cool. Just yesterday, there was music finally, because we were really lacking in the music area because it’s kind of awkward.

combe County Jail. Yeah, shout out to Jacob Biggs. He was a good guy. He just gets lost like most of us. We fall. Some of us stumble and we get back up. Some of us fall and we’re like, “I’m still falling. I can’t get up.” And we don’t need much. Just like hope, like a job, paycheck or something to look forward to. Like the promising of a house. I finally maced somebody at AHOPE because he was threatening me, he attacked me. And that same day is when they told me I had an apartment.

Because if you go through floating like regular “Hey everything is cool” you’re not in danger, your life is not at risk. But if you go in there stressed out every day, and you’re suicidal, and you want to kill the dog you want to kill and you start being irate they will move you up faster. And I don’t see how one person’s life is more or less than another one’s. Some people just lose their minds in the streets because they’re waiting for housing.

**Papi:** For housing. Yeah. For years.

**Doug:** I just want a roof over my head.

**Onion:** That’s the thing at this point. The city doesn’t understand where we’re coming from, which is that we’re not leaving the park. We’re not stopping. You’re not going to push us out. We’re not budging. So, you know, they’re going to have to find some way to compensate and open up their wallets and deal with us because we are here to stay. We have nowhere else to go.

**TFSR:** Yeah. And the “not in my backyard” approach doesn’t work anymore when people won’t stop being pushed away. Yeah. So y’all are holding space, you’re doing direct action by holding space publicly. You’re inviting families. You’re making art, taking the opportunity to make public art and make statements about it. We’ve already talked about how city council and county commissioners will do their best. People are trying to engage it, but they’ll do their best at silencing people actually making any changes and the city manager calls the shots anyways who is an unelected official. Do you want more people to show up at the park? What do you want people to bring? How long do we expect y’all are going to be out there? What’s the next stepping stone that y’all are reaching for?
**Onion:** Pay a living wage with parking space. They consider that part of the wage.

**TFSR: Or like when you consider the tips getting figured into it.**

**Papi:** Exactly. Yeah. And then there's no enforcement. So it's not really a thing. It's not a real thing.

**Onion:** I love riots. I'm tired of being like, palatable. I don't care to be looking nice, being pretty and telling people like “Oh, can you give us this pretty please?” No, I'm gonna scream. I'm gonna yell until you give me what I want. Like, give me more money, stop having rent like this. Stop killing our friends in the streets. I'm ready. I'm already screaming.

**Doug:** We've ain't even gotta get more money. We just got to stop your price of things going up.

**Onion:** I mean, all of it. You know? It's time for us to call the shots. I remember during the uprising here, when downtown was full of anger and we took downtown and the cops couldn't handle. You were there? Well, there's a lot of video. And so it was pretty amazing. Because downtown, which is always full of tourists, like completely dominated. Like 95% of people from South Carolina or Atlanta or Knoxville or some shit. Well they were gone. It was just us. And you would never see the surface of the... what's that hotel called the IRIS? It's a big fancy new hotel in the center of downtown that spared no expense. That shit was covered. It was covered in tags and people were having a time of their lives. Windows did get broken.

**TFSR: So much anti ICE graffiti.**

**Onion:** It was a happy group of people until we got tear gassed.

**Doug:** I would have been helping y'all smash things and loot and carry stuff out. (laughing)

**TFSR:** in Minecraft.

**Doug:** Our buddy got caught in that riot and he ended up dying in Bun...
all our meetings, and children are extremely welcome in all our spaces, and parents, and so on and so forth. We try to make the most accommodation for everybody that’s around.

**Doug:** That’s for sure. You talking about ASP? Or just us in general. Yeah, we definitely help make everybody stay comfortable, more comfortable. I’m very grateful for that. Because when COVID hit it was bone dry. There was nothing. You couldn’t get a cup of coffee. And then one day, in comes — and I think it was — and —, — was there. And here we are today. We are doing big things. So do they have a problem with the art because we can go to beer because it’s also the beer city. We can star making beer! We could make a homeless ale. [laughter]

**Papi:** If art is controversial...

**Doug:** Yeah, bring out the little... What do you call that? A still?

**Papi:** We could just call it a hotel and then they would let us do it.

**Doug:** Right? Do we have people going to these meetings where they vote? Like zoning meetings? If nobody ever goes to the meeting then zoning gets passed.

**Onion:** I think the zoning meetings aren’t necessarily up for a vote all the time, like they are a council that kind of like rubber stamps.

**Doug:** But these policy changes, they should be open to the public. So we have to get a team to go in there and suit up in their best Under Armor hoodie and jump in there.

**Papi:** I think it’s been interesting to see people going to like the mayor’s lawn and stuff here and just kind of skipping meetings.

**Doug:** There’s no “No Trespassing” signs on the courthouse. We can camp there. But it’s concrete.

**Papi:** And I know people have gone to city council meetings. They give you so many restrictions in order to talk. And it’s because they know that they don’t want to hear us. Like I remember people would sign up and

sandwich because you earned it.

**TFSR:** There’s been a push, it’s a North Carolina wide push. And I think it’s backed by the SEIU. But the NC Essential Worker Movement and the Fight For 15 has really been pushing around North Carolina. I think the Burnsville Bojangles has been striking because of the conditions around people getting infected with COVID and not being given time off. And the managers not paying attention to safety standards inside of the place in terms of customers coming in without masks and co workers without masks.

**Doug:** Plus people tell their stories on the social media of like people working 80 hours a week between two jobs and having a kid and not being able to afford to make ends meet. But these little franchise fast food shops make hella money. And it’s not even like the fancy restaurant that Papi works in downtown. That’s that’s one end of the scale, but even places you don’t have to go in a white shirt or whatever. It’s yeah.

**Doug:** The Chocolate Shops downtown. I don’t have clothes nice enough to go in that damn shop. Like they must make a million dollars off of chocolate. That’s crazy.

**Onion:** Yeah, that’s another thing because that place got off to its start by having the community kind of sponsor them. They were like we pay a living wage. We’re community supported business. And what? Two years later? They changed that to where they were not paying a living wage. And they put all the money that they made into capital resources to build a factory so that they can manufacture their own chocolate and they’re paying worse than they used to.

**Onion:** And that’s really familiar in Asheville to have businesses start out as like, “Oh, we’re socially responsible, small businesses” and then they become these engines of pure exploitation. And so everyone that I know that has worked at that place is like “it’s the worst place to work in town. It’s so exploitative, it’s transphobic it’s disrespectful, the clientele is horrible. It’s it’s a terrible work environment.”

**Papi:** Or stuff like a decade ago was claiming to paying a living wage or whatever. They were claiming that a part of their, they were paying medical to people by giving them kombucha for free. Yeah, their own product.
**Onion:** Something’s got to give.

**TFSR:** It has to stop being us.

**Doug:** I’m 45 years old. I got an apartment with my girlfriend who... she got some issues going on there and I love her to death, but she can’t really work. But even even with her, if I got an $1,100 security check, and she got a little $1100 security check. It’s 2200 bucks, that’s really not much. We get over $500 a month in food stamps. And usually about five days, six days at the end of the month, we’re not shopping. That’s plenty of money to be a lot of food. I have no day of the month that we don’t have any food.

If I get a job, it’s gonna be part time. All these places are hiring. They say they’re hiring, but you fill out an application online, somebody like me who didn’t graduate high school doesn’t have no really real education on paper it just gets tossed out. It’s just deleted right away. So if I went and sold myself to the company, got the job, still would only be $350 a week.

**Papi:** Yeah, it’s like they want it both ways. They want to own their restaurants and pay you a pittance and still make their big profits. The result from their decision making, which is that we don’t have housing, and we are on the streets. They won’t accept us on the streets. And so they sweep us. So they want to have their cake and eat it too. And they don’t understand that this is something that they’ve manufactured.

**Papi:** Oh, and also with COVID with a lot of places hiring, as well as not being paid enough. People are getting long haul COVID. People are getting sick and employees are not letting us have time off. They don’t care about us. And what are we supposed to do? I remember seeing these things and hearing things of like “oh, like nobody wants to come to work or anything like that”. It’s like, “No, it’s because you don’t pay enough. You don’t give us sick time. You don’t give us time off.” And it’s like we have to be there constantly like 45-50 plus hours of our lives working and giving your time and energy. And then once we have the money, it goes right away to rent or living necessities. We don’t have the energy to do anything else. We don’t have the energy to come out and into the park and make art. We don’t have that energy.

**Doug:** You can’t even go to the Chic-Fil-A and get yourself a chicken they would cut you off after a certain time.

**Doug:** You have to beat them at their own game, we have to get our words in a certain time. It shouldn’t have to be like that. But we’re stepping up to the plate. So we are doing a lot anyways. I’m not trying to sound bad, because we do a lot.

**Papi:** I think it’s a question of who calls the shots. And you know, this is our city and we can call the shots and they can listen to us, right? We don’t always have to fit into their framework, they can fit into ours.

**Onion:** It shouldn’t be the other way around. Right? This is our city. We live here. They’re the ones who should be listening to us. But they don’t they just care about all of our money.

**Doug:** I mean, if we had guns and cars, we can make them listen, but we’re not doing that. [laughter]

**Papi:** They will listen.

**Doug:** Yeah, they will. They will. I see the future of ASP changing a lot of things for homeless people. Not just in Asheville, but like we’re gonna set up in Asheville. It’s gonna be city to city to city. We literally can set the standard to better the homeless all over the United States. And then the world, I guess.

**TFSR:** Y’all were mentioning calling the shots. And it’s one thing to demand and say “yeah, we’re the people that live here.” Can you talk a little bit about some of the pressures that maybe people from the outside like Onion mentioned the amount of money that the county and the city budget towards advertising towards the tourism industry? But can you talk about some of the motivations on city council and on the county commissioners that are keeping forward motion on actual solutions with public funds to solve the crisis for houseless folks, as well as the cost of housing for regular folks.

**Onion:** So the city of Asheville is run by a gang and the gang is not publicly accountable. That’s what I mentioned before, the agency called the Tourism Development Authority. They’re not elected or anything like
that. It’s a private agency. And so, for example, they have this thing that they call “Heads in Beds.” And it’s their way of saying, of all the hotel rooms, because I don’t know how many 1000s of actual hotel rooms and beds in Asheville, but their push is to get all the beds full.

Their way of measuring that is “Heads in Beds.” And so this is to say, they are completely focused on housing tourists in this town and making accommodations for certain people. If they want to put our heads in beds, there’s no resources for that. But all of a sudden, they have millions and millions of dollars to fill the other beds and build other hotels for all these thousands and thousands. Basically, they have a huge priority of creating space for white wealthy people to come in and visit and social cleansing and hyper gentrification for the poor and the struggling.

So the thing is, is this agency runs the city. City council rubber stamps whatever the TDA wants. They might debate it publicly, or there might be a little bit of dissent. But eventually, they just agree to whatever it is. City council is not calling the shot. They are agreeing with a larger entity, a more powerful entity. So the city manager and the planning and zoning office and other city staff work very, very closely with the tourism development entity. And then you have the Biltmore on top of it, which everyone kind of like forgets about, but it’s like a huge piece of land in the middle of town that’s being privately used for huge amount of profit. That’s basically a feudal type of situation. I mean, I’m saying, let’s take the Biltmore. You know? It’s literally a castle in the middle of Asheville.

Papi: And it’s boring!

Onion: It’s super bad. Yeah.

TFSR: Yeah. So for folks that maybe haven’t heard of the Biltmore Estate, the Vanderbilt family built a huge mansion. It’s the largest private residence in North America. It’s run by a foundation now, so that they can, you know, siphon money through a nonprofit, I think it’s like 60 or 70 bucks to get a visit to the actual house. I’ve never been there. I hear the land is really beautiful. There’s like a dairy farm. There’s a winery. There’s the gardens. It’s also apparently got a really, really intense biometric surveillance system, through the cameras that they have there. I just heard about that.

Papi: It’s a lot of money, and they don’t even pay their employees well.

Doug: And we need each other. We need the tourists because they provide jobs for us. And the tourists need us too because we got to wipe their butts and cater to them.

TFSR: It’s interesting, that report talks about how y’all are saying about 48 and a half percent of the population of Buncombe County pays 30% or more on their rent every month, something like a third of the population pays 50 or more percent of their income on rent. What’s recognized as being an affordable amount is a quarter of your income, tops on housing. So that you can pay for food. So you can save money. So you can pay for medical bills. So that you can pay for education for yourself or for your kids or whatever. All these things. It’s not budgeted in.

And what they’re doing is they’re creating a circumstance where in a couple of years and they’re already seeing it, there’s so many employment signs up all around town. Places can’t hire people and won’t pay them a wage that will actually allow them to live here. And I think like Papa said... they’re not going to have anyone that’s going to be able to actually work the jobs are willing to work the jobs. They’re digging their own grave in terms of an economy.

Doug: So you can only get a fast food job or a restaurant job. You’re gonna max out maybe $300 a week take home. So that’s 1200 dollars a month when your rent is 1100. I mean, how do you pay your electricity? How do you pay?

Papi: The actual condition of housing that people are in, too, is really, really messed up around here. Because of the climate so many people are dealing with intense mold issues and suffering from black mold. Their kids are living in that and they can’t get repairs because landlords just won’t do anything and there’s no one making them do anything.

Because City Council’s, is this is not on their radar. It’s not something they care to talk about. But at least half of us are living in that situation. And you know, we’re all like doubled up and tripled up and 10 people to a house, and we’re still paying $400 a month. So it’s getting to a point where the living conditions aren’t livable, even when we’re housed.

Doug: And when it breaks, it’s gonna be not good.
Papi: Yeah, it really is a petty bourgeois situation with that. By the same token, I feel our struggle is becoming something more like the landless struggle in other countries where it’s about land, the bottom line is. With so many people without access to a place and without access to resources, we just have to do what we’re doing, which is go where there is land and take it and sit there and do our thing.

Onion: It makes me really angry to have the cops and DOT come around and evict people while saying things like “Y’all can’t be on city property. Y’all can’t be on this.” When it’s like “okay, well, first off, fuck city property. This isn’t city property.” This is land that’s first off stolen. We’re all living on fucking stolen land. And it’s not the city’s. This is new, no one can own land. I’m still learning a lot about land stewardship and what it would look like to... not not buy land necessary, but to literally give land back to indigenous people. To have indigenous stewardship.

Hearing about how there are people coming in to Asheville. I don’t know if y’all have ever been on “beeped out”. Which is just a housing thing that people post that they need housing or looking for something on Facebook, and it’s so irritating to be on there. Because a lot of people are like “Oh, my gosh, I’m moving from Atlanta to Asheville. I’m moving from California or something.” And they are a bunch of white couples who aren’t even from here who are making like three times more than what we all are making.

And then it’s funny when they post because then people are like “yeah, so this thread... this thing right here is for people who can’t pay more than like 1300 for rent.” And all these people are like “Oh, I can do like $2,000 a month for a two bedroom apartment” and all this shit. And I love watching them get torn up in the comments. I do.

Doug: There are people who pay $2,000 a week to come stay in Asheville for business or for a doctor’s appointment. They pay, I don’t know, maybe anywhere from like 500 to $1,000 for the week, they’re here for two or three days, probably sits empty.

Papi: Exactly. Exactly. And how many second homes are here? I have a job where I work for homeowners doing land care and I have a lot of clients that don’t live in their houses. They’re sitting there. There’s a huge number of properties that are under or un-utilized in this area.

Onion: Exactly.

TFSR: There was an article that was published a few days ago by Barbara Durr of the Asheville Watchdog. It’s based on a 2021 Bowen national research piece that was commissioned by the Dogwood Health Trust. And I’ll put a link in the show notes to it. But the numbers are not pretty in terms of how much people spend on housing here and the availability of “affordable housing.” Would you talk about your experience? Papi already mentioned rooming with family now because it’s gotten so expensive And because buying property is so difficult and Onion mentioned being evicted twice. So what does it kind of look like? How does how does housing actually pan out for the people that live in work in the city where the tourists kind of take over the rest of the time?

Papi: Well, just from my experience with housing, and the people that I work around and live around, people kind of have been stuck where they’re at. Working three part time jobs, just to make it as is. Also, it’s now very common to just depend on community which is not bad. Which is what we should be doing. But always it’s like “oh, it’s the first of the month, let’s ask for mutual aid. Let’s get some money in our hands that we can afford to survive and live here in this apartment for the next month.”

I know that’s the thing with housing. And then I just see that and hear that a lot. I’ve had friends who try to game with roommates or things like that, but they don’t work. There’s just so many things. Because if you can’t work or live where you’re at, then how are you going to get transportation and then the bus pass.

Doug: Right now my rent is free for a year, because that’s the program I’m in. But after that it goes up to like $895 for a two bedroom, one bathroom in the projects. You know, it is what it is. That ended the median in Asheville is $350,000 per house. That’s the average cost. I couldn’t work two full time jobs and my girlfriend were two full time jobs and sell anything on the side and afford that!

Onion: Yeah, it’s like turbo gentrification up in here we are one of the most gentrified cities in all of the United States. And we’re also in a region that is historically under organized. There’s no housing advocacy orga-
nization in Asheville. It’s just us. There’s no resource center for renters. There’s no pushback against the landlord’s. City council and other entities don’t do anything. So the City manages to get away with really intense gaslighting, even when they describe what their idea is of affordable housing. What they call that is not really affordable to people that are working class, it’s kind of more accessible to the middle class.

So you have a situation in Asheville, where the conditions here and their decision making on the city level. In name, it’s progressive people on city council, they’re liberals and Democrats. But it’s not in line with that. It’s more in line with the city in California about the same size that had a bunch of wildfires, and half the houses were destroyed. And after people felt generous for a few months, they started to get irritated that there were so many displaced people around them. And so their city council went from progressive, got voted out, and it was a bunch of Trump supporters that got up in there. But their policy that they’re enacting over there, in their city where there’s really immense amounts of people that are completely precarious and have absolutely no resources. Their policy is the same. The same exact policy that our city council is doing every day. So you know, essentially, we have a right wing city government that calls itself liberal somehow.

Papi: I was just thinking about how, in this past year alone, I moved to Asheville last year around this time, and how right now, for a two bedroom apartment where I’m at, when we first started, it was like about 1,000 - 1,200 for a two bedroom apartment. That’s not including all the utilities and everything. Now I’d looked again after six months, for a one bedroom apartment. It’s at 1,400 right now. 1,400 to almost 2,000 for a one bedroom apartment. And no one’s gotten pay raises at all.

All the jobs I’ve worked at are like… what was it called? What did they call people who worked at grocery? Essential? I’ve been working in essential working jobs for all the entire pandemic. And no, I have never gotten a hazard pay or anything like that. Working at one of the hottest tourist restaurants downtown who caters to tourists, and they came around maskless and everything. I have no more money, not gotten more money. Rent has skyrocketed, and they’re like stealing from us practically. That’s all my money right there.

It just fucking sucks. And then eating here also kind of sucks. I always remember going to Walmart and it kind of sucks seeing a lot of the shelves really empty. And then you go to Earth Fare or something like that, and shits three times as much. And it’s like “oh my gosh, I can’t even eat healthy” or whatever that is. I don’t know, everything is already so much and it’s getting worse.

Doug: A loaf of bread is almost five dollars.

Onion: It’s totally getting worse. Especially I feel like since like the summer, it was like August, maybe July. I don’t know, it was like every week. How many friends are getting pushed out their housing? Their landlords are selling the house from under them. They’re living in their cars. They don’t have a new place to go. There’s literally like 20 slots on Craigslist for 300 people looking.

So there’s just absolutely no housing and nowhere to go. And more and more people getting displaced because the market is just benefiting selling right now, so much. And selling to people that are coming from other places in the country are also converting to Airbnb market. So they can make like $300 a night and city council has just kind of let that go wild. So, you know, it’s basically mass hysteria around money.

TFSR: So the last decade or so that I’ve lived here, it’s been consistently getting harder and harder to find housing. There was a 2014 study that showed that the vacancy rate was less than 1% for Asheville. And that’s not even talking about the cost of that housing and my ability to afford it or anyone else’s. But yeah, it’s kind of interesting because the hotels have been such a power player in terms of Tourism and in terms of pushing the city manager to make decisions that are going to be taxable income for the city.

With more and more of these “short term rentals” like Airbnbs, there’s a couple of other companies just gobbling up all of the, in a neoliberal style, just further privatizing all these little spaces that some of us could have long term rental in. So much that it makes sense economically for the owners to hold them off the market and leave the house the room empty for a couple nights so they can charge that $300 A night. It’s weird to see how the city council has bent, instead of how they would have before protected the interests of the big moneymakers in the hotels, and now they’re feeling the pressure of all the little individual bourgeoisie that own the little mini feudal spots. Ah, it’s so frustrating.