

WORKING CLASS HISTORY IN EUGENE'S WHITEAKER NEIGHBORHOOD



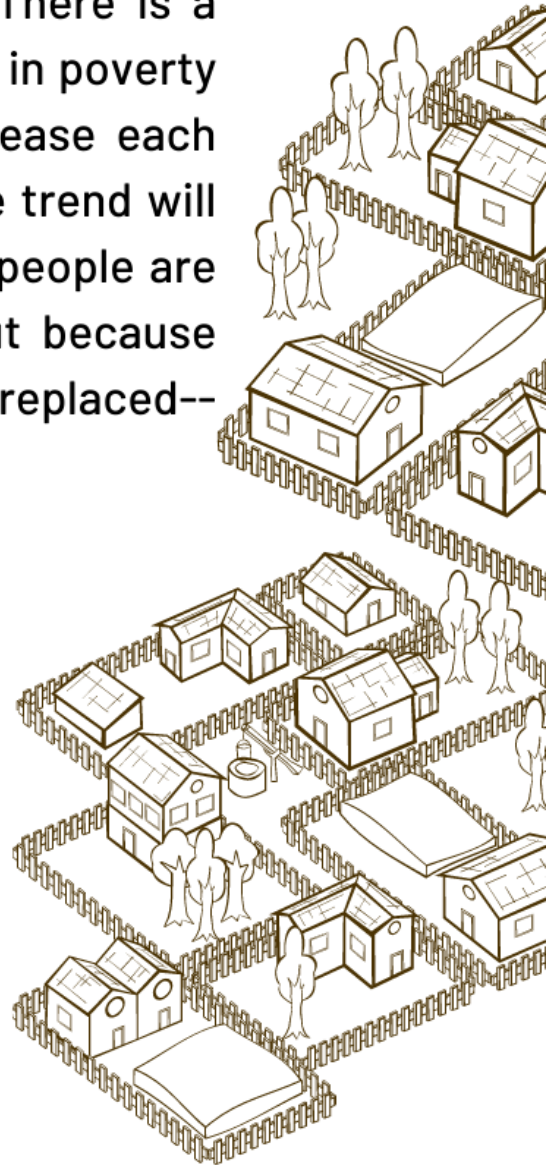
DISPLACEMENT, STRUGGLE, RESISTANCE

Eugene Housing & Neighborhood Defense

INTRODUCTION

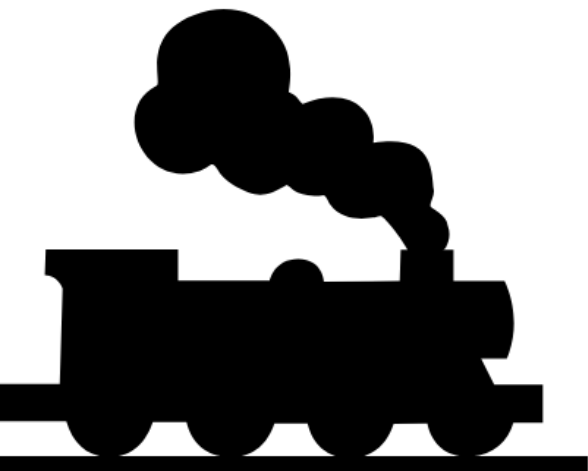
The Whiteaker neighborhood is sometimes called Eugene's "oldest and poorest neighborhood." There is a high concentration of tenants and people living in poverty living here, and the numbers continue to increase each year as wages fall and costs rise. However, the trend will eventually reverse, not because working class people are becoming home owners or gaining wealth, but because the working class are being displaced and replaced-- unless something is done to stop it.

Like much of the city, the Whiteaker is currently experiencing rapid development and rising rent prices, an intentional process of capitalist displacement sometimes referred to as "gentrification." By looking at the history of the neighborhood, we can see how its working class character came to be and how we can fight to unite and protect the working class from further exploitation and abuse.



NEIGHBORHOOD OF CONTRADICTIONS

In the Whiteaker a pristine rose garden lays blocks from large homeless camps, derelict apartment complexes sit across the street from renovated houses worth half a million dollars, and shiny new breweries and restaurants fill old industrial warehouses. As we can see, contradictions are stark in this neighborhood, especially between the needs of the working class and the desires of the developers, landlords, and other members of the capitalist class.



The layout of the neighborhood has contradictions itself. It is split north and south by a railroad and east and west by a highway overpass. This creates noise and air pollution. However, the neighborhood was also designed to preserve some natural areas, so it's bordered with large green park spaces and bike paths, primarily to the North along the Willamette River.

EARLY HISTORY OF THE WHITEAKER

In the area now known as the Whiteaker neighborhood of Eugene, Kalapuya people lived, traded, gathered food, and used the Willamette River for transportation since time immemorial. After white settlers arrived in the 1800s, the Whiteaker was one of the first established neighborhoods in Eugene. The neighborhood was initially mostly made up of residential homes and farms and saw increased industrial development after the construction of railroads in 1870s. Importantly, Black people were legally prohibited from living in Oregon until 1926, and were prevented from renting and owning property in Eugene until the late 20th century due to redlining and other discriminatory practices. The impacts of these practices continue to this day.

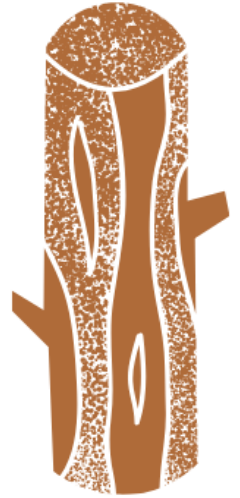


Schools and churches were built in the 1930s. After WWII, the neighborhood offered jobs at new lumber yards, wholesale businesses, nurseries, grocers, warehouses, and gas stations. The early 20th century motor age encouraged construction of highway arteries and motels along them. Apartment buildings were built in the 1960-70s, many of which remain in use and have yet to be updated.

@eug.hand

THE IMPACTS OF INDUSTRY

Like many other US industrialized working class neighborhoods, the Whiteaker saw dramatic economic decline when most production moved out of the country to exploit workers internationally. Many businesses went bankrupt or got bought out by corporations. Oregon's timber industry declined and rural jobs disappeared, pushing more workers into urban areas such as Eugene.



Tenants became poorer, and more workers became tenants as saving for downpayments on home became nearly impossible. Landlords could now easily neglect their buildings and exploit their tenants who were dependent on their landlords to remain in their own neighborhood.

The factories, mills, and trainyards that brought jobs close to the residential neighborhood also brought pollution from trains, road construction, new highways, and heavy vehicle traffic. Those who could afford to leave and then commute from further out of town could avoid the environmental health impacts, but they took their wealth with them.



HISTORY OF RESISTANCE

From the 1960's to the early 2000's, the Whiteaker became known for its residents' involvement in environmental, anti-war, and anti-globalization activism. However after years of failed tactics and state surveillance, only the aesthetics of these movements remain. Some former members of these movements live in insular housing cooperatives in the neighborhood, but these models of housing have done nothing for the majority of working class people. By and large community work and organizing in the neighborhood is not shaped or led by the working class. It is instead carried out by liberal advocacy groups and state sanctioned non-profits. These groups do not seek to change the capitalist system to truly improve the lives of the working class, but instead to preserve it by giving small handouts and stifling real organizing.



DEVELOPMENT AT WHOSE EXPENSE?

Since the Whiteaker developed a "mixed use" character prior to Eugene city zoning in 1948, it has remained a unique mix of residential, industrial, and commercial pockets unlike other areas of the city. Most recently, the Whiteaker has been impacted primarily by commercial development of new service industry businesses, including the sizeable California corporation-owned Nikasi Brewery and Anheuser-Busch owned Hop Valley Brewery.



Importantly, the popularity and financial success of these new businesses does not equate to fair compensation or healthcare benefits for service industry workers. None of the neighborhood's customer service workplaces are unionized.

PRICED OUT AND POLICED

This newest wave of commercial development has attracted capitalists and upper class residents to the once neglected neighborhood. They now want invest in and relocate there. In regards to housing, rather than constructing new buildings like some of parts of town, older homes are being flipped and sold at huge profits to wealthy families, landlords, and short-term rental investors. As the area becomes more desirable, rents are raised to price out and evict long-term tenants.

Wealth returning to the neighborhood means poor and working class people being displaced. Some are forced to find cheaper rentals in different neighborhoods or other cities altogether. But others are forced on to the streets, unable to the afford rising costs of housing. A substantial amount of homeless people live in the parks in the Whiteaker area, especially under the overpass at Washington Jefferson Park. The City has responded to this with increased policing, violence, and criminalization of the poor and homeless.



@eug.hand

WORKING CLASS TENANTS UNITE!

A historical, economic process has led to the displacement of tenants and highly visible wealth disparity in the Whiteaker, not by accident but by design. Collaboration with politicians, landlords, and business owners whose policies and practices created these conditions cannot resolve these contradictions to stabilize living conditions for the working class in the Whiteaker and other parts of Eugene.

We must resist all divide and conquer strategies used by the state that encourage us to blame the poor for their own suffering, call the police on each other, and thank the capitalists for charity or small donations. Working class tenants must organize against landlords and developers to create strong communities that keep workers housed and predatory capitalists out of our neighborhoods.



@eug.hand