

SoupCrime in S.F.

from page five

Guardian columnist slipped into County Jail 8 to interview me. I found many of the prisoners were homeless; HIV-positive and AIDS-afflicted men were left to bleed on their bunkmates below without medical care with other prisoners directed to clean up the lethal leavings.

With the millions spent on the "glamour slammer", there was no direct access to a law library. The vaunted new jail was more comfortable than the old one, but if you wanted to fight your case, you were told you had to transfer to the more violent, dangerous CJ2 or CJ3, and then enter a lottery for a once-a-week use of a library whose books were often mutilated and outdated.

While in prison, I served meals, circulated petitions demanding access to a real law library, put inmates on the local Free Radio station, began filing grievances when my mail disappeared without a trace, and began muttering about a hunger strike. The authorities decided it was getting to be too much trouble to keep me inside. I was literally whisked out the back door on County Parole early, without requiring me

to agree to the normal conditions required of other "hardened" criminals.

These guys, many of them homeless, seemed mostly there for nonviolent drug sales or parole/probation violations that involved no injury to anyone. They were in fact involuntary consumers supporting the prison-building, drug-forfeiture, police-expansion, politician-electing juggernaut which has eaten the Constitution and now munches on what remains of our economy. They served several functions: as units of production that "require" the fastest-growing prison system in the world, as bogeymen used to scare up more money, and as grim examples used to keep the rest of the population from protesting.

While I was inside, Food Not Bombs hit the streets outside. Carly, Chris, Keith, and Melinda coordinated a daily oatmeal 'n raisins, bagels 'n breadsides vigil on the front steps of the Hall of Justice every workday, and put hundreds of fliers into the hands of dazed and angry members of the public who filed in and out of the court system, suddenly realizing they were not alone.

Mayor Brown showed his hand the day after I went in when his police made their first injunction arrest of the year on Keith

McHenry for serving food at the vigil in front of the courthouse. As word began to spread, the charges were quickly dropped.

My full sentence would have kept me in jail until August 17; with good time off, my "out date" was July 27; I was actually released on July 15. Two days after I emerged from jail I served food again — still in violation of the injunction, the injunction still undissolved. . .

Fifty people greeted me at noon on the 17th, with tofu burgers and tea, with "Support Our Prisoners" banners and "Feed the People" fliers. Marin County activist Bob King denounced city pressure to close the King of the Homeless Dining Halls at St. Vincent's in San Rafael. A beautiful 6-foot-by-8-foot painting of cops, all with Mark Fuhrmann's face, beating up a black man was the backdrop for a half dozen cardboard headstones imprinted with the names of recent victims of San Francisco police brutality. People's poet Jack Hirschman celebrated my "conspiracy to commit lunch."

It wasn't that the police were being good-hearted in releasing me early, or the Mayor's office sensible. They were just shrewd. With more food servers ready to

take the place of those taken to jail, with newspapers finally beginning to report the facts, with jailers and judges shuffling their feet and averting their eyes and noses, it was time to wait for the hubbub to die down and the protesters to go home.

But there are no homes. Bulldozers are destroying buildings that could be homes in the Presidio. Mayor Brown's cops are ousting campers from their tents in Golden Gate Park. Civic Center Plaza shopping-cart people watch while their few possessions are seized and compacted. So the protest continues and grows.

And not just in San Francisco. While I was in jail, Santa Cruz authorities continued to arrest, ticket and harass its homeless citizens under the City's Sleeping Ban. In Santa Cruz this challenge is an "illegal" five-month vigil outside City Hall. In San Francisco, the challenge is Food Not Bombs' daily servings of "illegal" free food. Protesters in both cities are forcing the human-rights issue into the public dialogue and bringing the night closer when sleeping, eating and simply living are acknowledged as basic rights for the whole human community.