

Homeless activist Steve Argue is found guilty of defending a mother and child from police brutality.

by Becky Johnson & Robert Norse

They were all white, all middle-class, and had been detained long enough. When they rendered their verdict of guilty on all charges after deliberating only one hour and 15 minutes, a pall fell over the small group of supporters in Judge Robert Atack's courtroom in Santa Cruz.

After the trial, one of the jurors who voted to convict activist Steve Argue tried to put a philosophical spin on the possible years in jail he now faces, saying that Nelson Mandela did years in jail and Martin Luther King was also arrested. Her parallel seems absurd. Did she consider how the world has vilified those juries who convicted Mandela and King?

Superior Court 5 in Santa Cruz was a cold and uninviting place under the gavel of former District Attorney Robert Atack. The white-haired, iron-handed judge was probably the worst of all the Santa Cruz judges — almost all of them former D.A.s whose background and temperament effectively stack the deck for conviction.

In the case of homeless activist Steve Argue, Judge Atack repeatedly evicted the defendant's supporters for conduct as innocuous as smiling broadly (the criminal smiler was held in custody for three hours in the jail cell below before being released in an earlier part of the case). Atack refused to allow audio or video recordings of any aspect of the jury trial.

Squarely in the crosshairs of police, prosecutors, and Judge Atack was Steve Argue, 30, a homeless activist and *Street Spirit* vendor. The long-haired Argue, whose \$20,000 bail had been raised by supporters, was on trial for assault and battery on a police officer at a May 22nd protest against the bombing in Yugoslavia. Argue, everyone agreed, had punched Santa Cruz Police Officer David Lafaver in spontaneous defense of a woman protester Argue had never met. Argue felt, and four videotapes documented, that Lafaver's sadistic and exotic "pain compliance" technique endangered a mother precariously holding a child.

Officer Lafaver had demanded that the mother move from in front of a parked police van containing arrested UCSC student Kuo-ling Liao, who, protesters believed, had been arrested arbitrarily and without explanation. Lafaver's target, Julienne, was one of a line of protesters who blocked the van demanding to know why Kuo-ling had been seized out of the



Santa Cruz Police Officer David LaFaver, left, brutalized a woman and her child before homeless activist Steve Argue intervened.

Ray Acosta photo