

San Jose Housing Protest Ends In 23 Arrests

by Robert Norse

In the second action of a "Poor People's Campaign" organized by Rev. Scott Wagers, 23 people were arrested in San Jose City Council Chambers on February 15, as they stood before the public microphone awaiting a reply to their demands for housing from Mayor Ron Gonzales.

Announcing they were ready to use the nonviolent, civil disobedience tactics of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., the Community Homeless Alliance Ministry (CHAM) leader led the group in prayer as Mayor Gonzales and the City Council declared a recess and vacated the chamber. They were replaced by 17 policemen, who used pain-compliance holds on several of the protesters to force them to move.

Nearly 100 supporters showed up of all ages and colors, and all walks of life, to pray and sing in the San Jose Council Chambers as the police led the San Jose 23 away into custody.

Wagers and the protesters demanded that Gonzales commit himself to immediate action to address the shortage of affordable housing, critical lack of shelter space and services for the 20,000 homeless people on the streets in Silicon Valley. Gonzales offered the protesters a downstairs meeting with an aide and motel vouchers for the night.

Mayor Ron Gonzales was last visited by CHAM congregation members and supporters on January 26 when 15 people were arrested for nonviolently occupying the mayor's office for three hours. Gonzales has steadfastly refused to meet with CHAM or take any action on affordable housing in spite of huge expenditures on gentrification projects in San Jose.

CHAM has called for city officials to immediately

provide shelter for all homeless people on the streets of San Jose, to allocate \$5 million to a housing-for-families program, and to establish a realistic long-range housing policy for the city.

Accusing the mayor of indifference to the poor, Wagers said that resources must be found to meet the needs of those forced to live on the streets in one of the wealthiest cities in the state. Many renters also face the specter of eviction because of prohibitive rent increases and housing speculation.

Among those arrested were Adrienne Lawton, Rev. Larry Sweeney, Judith Light, Robert Norse, homeless mom Christy Wong, Lennox Sweeney, Sandy Perry, Nancy Nichols Chase, Roy Stevens, Paul Schusser, Albert Sandoval, Rev. Wagers and 11 others, including a disabled man in a wheelchair.

The San Jose 23 were cited for "disrupting a public meeting"— a misdemeanor carrying penalties of up to six months in jail and/or \$1000 fine. They were released the same evening on their promise to appear in court in early March.

A week after this protest, Wagers announced a third planned action targeting the Fairmont Hotel. The Fairmont is notorious as a luxury hotel that has eaten up \$13 million in city subsidies. San Jose spent that amount to relocate the nearby Montgomery Hotel 100 feet from its prior location, to allow expansion space for the Fairmont. The Montgomery is a former SRO hotel that has lain vacant for years in spite of the demands of homeless activists that it be reopened to public use.

Call Mayor Gonzales at (408) 277-4237 to urge his support for the housing goals of the homeless community. For more information, call Rev. Wagers at (408) 345-2353, or CHAM at (408) 454-0378.