

March 2001

Reporting from the Center of the Struggle

Rising Up: A Tasty Tale of Free Soup and Hot Radio in San Francisco

Rising Up: Class Warfare in America from the Streets to the Airwaves

by Richard Edmondson
Librad Press

Review by Robert Norse

How did a relative handful of Food Not Bombs cooks successfully hold off the entire San Francisco Police Department, city attorney's office, and the mayor for 12 years and get hot, free food out to hundreds of hungry homeless people each day? How did a homeless idealist living in a van put together a renegade radio station that held off the Federal Communications Commission for nearly a decade and broadcast stories that no one else would touch over the airwaves? Read Richard Edmondson's new book, *Rising Up: Class Warfare in America from the Streets to the Airwaves*, and find out.

Edmondson is the 48-year-old founder of San Francisco Liberation Radio (SFLR), a 40-watt "pirate" station operating at 93.7 FM since 1993. It covers a radius of 5-10 miles and tens of thousands of potential listeners. He was also an "illegal" soupslinger with the San Francisco chapter of Food Not Bombs (FNB).



Micropower radio grew out of the homeless movement as a new form of resistance.



A Food Not Bombs member is arrested.

***Rising Up* exposes the sloppy misreporting and unconscious bigotry of the national and local media around police treatment of homeless people in San Francisco. In response, activists launched San Francisco Liberation Radio and Free Radio Berkeley — pirate radio stations that spoke truth to power and challenged the bias of mainstream media.**

Edmondson, along with nearly 1000 fellow "criminals," went to jail defying the City's campaign to shut down the group that insisted on "making poverty visible." He and his vegetarian vigilantes fed the homeless and the hungry in front of San Francisco City Hall and at the entrance to Golden Gate Park week after week, year after year, transforming leftover veggies and day-old bagels into healthy vegan cuisine.

Last year, after traditionally "leftie" publishers turned him down, Edmondson self-published a 360-page, quality paperback, *Rising Up* (Librad Press). His book chronicles the food felons, the radio renegades, the heroic homeless struggle, and the grim San Francisco class and corporate landscape that produced these movements. It is also a moving and expressive personal journal of his involvement with FNB and SFLR.

Here you will learn about the death of Marcelino Corniel, an African-American homeless man, at the hands of the Washington police; a handy list of components to start your own micropower radio; the homeless version of "O Sole Mio;" and much of the text of the "FCC Klutzes vs. Grandma Denney," now a comedy classic. All this, plus the saga of the rise of free food and free radio.

The Food Not Bombs idea prompted the formation of nonviolent, anarchist, consensus-based groups in over 175 cities and towns throughout the world. Nowhere was the struggle so heated as in San Francisco, a city with a misleading liberal reputation, a largely treacherous mainstream media, and an inveterately corrupt police force and judicial system.

From 1990-1993, Edmondson braved truncheons and pepper spray each day to get bagels and rice out to hungry homeless people in downtown San Francisco and in the Haight-Ashbury, while living "illegally" in his van with his dog Elsa.

I must have met Edmondson in the summer of 1990 at a well-attended "sleep-in" protest near the Civic Center Plaza fountain, though we only realized it years afterwards. Coming up from Santa Cruz with activist Linda Edwards to provide "jail bodies" at the protest, she and I were hauled off to the paddywagon in "guest arrests." Edmondson went on to take regular abuse as a mainstay of Food Not Bombs.

Throughout those years, Edmondson was a tight friend with FNB co-founder and court jester Keith McHenry, and was close to the center of the whirlwind. The police, District Attorney, and media closely targeted McHenry in their capture-the-carrots campaigns against the guerrilla grub-masters. Edmondson chopped vegetables, distributed flyers, and served soup in the face of armed police terror determined to drive FNB out of town or at least out of sight. Even the sympathetic weekly alternative press couldn't report all the beatings, bagel-nappings, salad-dumpings and vehicle seizures as fast as they happened.

So in 1993 Edmondson started San Francisco Liberation Radio (SFLR). SFLR and its bigger sister Free Radio Berkeley sparked a micropower revolution across the country. Hundreds of grassroots, independent, pirate radio stations sprang up, "illegal" but cheap to run (frequently under \$1000) because they broadcast at wattages less than 100. These stations gave a new voice to taboo topics and previously excluded community groups — punk, African American, Latino, fundamentalist, rural, or racist. Once-censored perspectives ranging from rabid right to radical left were suddenly on the air in a dialogue with their neighborhoods.

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San Francisco makes sleeping or eating in one's vehicle at night a crime — only one of the many anti-homeless laws and policies that makes this "liberal" city one of the harshest in the state, perhaps in the nation. When this 1971 anti-hippie law proved to be insufficient to stop FNB, San Francisco's Recreation and Parks Commission criminalized serving free food in the parks, eliminating the permit process for it. The City Attorney then got a permanent injunction barring FNB from serving food anywhere in the City and County of San Francisco. FNB shrugged and served food anyway.

Rising Up begins with a preface that exposes the sloppy misreporting and unconscious bigotry of the national media around police treatment of homeless people in San Francisco. Edmondson carefully analyzes the November, 1998, *Washington Post* coverage around Mayor Willie Brown's plan for shopping cart confiscation and his proposal to impose jail or forced treatment for street drunks. *Rising Up* also exposes the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Examiner*, and the local TV stations with their shmooze-the-police and smear-the-homeless bias.

In a book that exposes many myths, Edmondson methodically debunks the bogus "even liberal San Francisco is tired of the homeless" stereotype.

In fact, we learn that San Francisco was never "liberal" towards its homeless. Through four bigoted mayors — Feinstein, Agnos, Jordan, and Brown — city cops and bureaucrats have never faltered in their 24-hour-a-day, low-intensity war against the visible poor. The police pogrom against the homeless has been by turns indifferent, abusive, violent, and even accessory to murder.

Edmondson's analysis of the 1998 "vampire stalker," who slashed the throats of four homeless victims in one month, shows how police deliberately delayed announcing that the killer was targeting the homeless, in such a fashion as to unnecessarily endanger more homeless people.

As a wry, humane voice from the street (though he is now housed and in fact hosts SFLR in his living room), Edmondson describes battle-by-battle the City's class war against the homeless, the cold, the sick, and the poor.

He describes in detail the City's elaborate, exhaustive, and phony demands that Food Not Bombs "get a permit," followed by the brutal, unprovoked police assaults on FNB and Keith McHenry. For the first time, we can read about the mind-boggling prejudice and corruption of the local courts — chillingly reminiscent of Southern courts ducking segregation and lynching issues. Edmondson's is the first extended treatment of judicial ratification of the San Francisco Police Department's daily and systematic violence against homeless people and their soup-slinging allies in FNB.

Out of these struggles and his boundless idealism, Edmondson turned to the radical technology developed by Stephen Dunifer in Berkeley for cheap, low wattage, micropower radio. He founded SFLR, community-based people's radio, to put out stories too hot for the hothouse media to handle.

His book overflows with untold tales. Edmondson's account of his personal involvement with the villains and heroes of the struggle is by turns gripping, amusing, and thought-provoking. He names the bad cops' names. His determination to tell where the bodies are buried seems equal parts payback, deterrence, and the traditional passion for truth which puts real journalists in the way of trouble.

Mild-mannered and self-effacing in person, Edmondson is taking real risks with this book since he is still at the center of SFLR, with a weekly program that focuses on homeless issues. He risks his own personal liberty and, in theory, everything he owns, if the FCC ever decides to play hardball and enforce the \$100,000 fine for "unlicensed broadcasting."

When I interviewed Edmondson recently, he explained that he is but one of a number of people on the board of directors of SFLR. Their group has gone through the legal process in search of an approved FCC license with the aim of showing an intent to be legal if the FCC stormtroopers ever come knocking.

SFLR, however, can't get legal under the FCC's Catch-22 rules because, to name just two reasons: (a) licenses are not being given out in urban areas; and (b) licenses are not being given to those previously operating an "illegal" radio station. Edmondson summarizes the tangled history of the FCC and the decline of public access to radio in Chapter 7, "People vs. Government."

Rising Up chronicles "pirates versus FCC" with the same meticulous, methodical, and ironic pen that delivered the accounts of "homeless versus police" and "FNB versus bureaucrats." Edmondson illuminates the FCC's role as a pawn of the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) and runs us through its early history stamping out independent radio. He returns repeatedly to larger issues of class and power and to free radio's significance in the struggle to restore human rights.

Since knowledge is power, cheap and accessible information gives the community the tools long denied by government and corporate censorship. His description of his hide-and-seek pirate broadcasting in the San Francisco hills with police and FCC agents on his tail is funny and frantic.

Like a camera that zooms in and out, Edmondson covers Mayor Jordan's Matrix program; PG&E's successful power grab in San Francisco; and the emerging national struggle for a legalization of micropower radio. The struggle was lost at the paper/legal level when the NAB and National Public Radio successfully pressured Congress into passing and Clinton into signing the Oxley bill in December, but continues on the day-to-day/broadcasting level each time a micropower transmitter beams out a signal.

Edmondson's story of free radio, free

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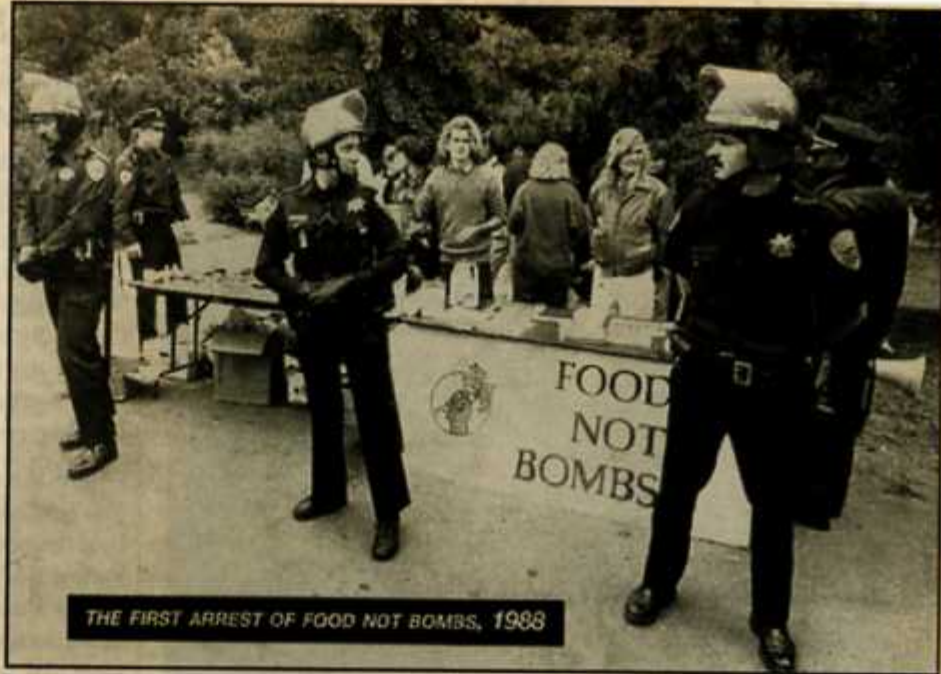
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food, and homeless people is particularly appealing to me because it draws together all the individual incidents about which I've written detailed stories and flyers over the years. As an out-of-town "guest" supporter of FNB who served a month in jail in 1996 for illegally serving soup in San Francisco, I'm pleased to see *Rising Up* complete the FNB odyssey that I so often wanted to put down on paper.

Edmondson's professional radio work on SFLR (which goes out to other pirate stations) rivals that of any mainstream radio production company. A less-diplomatic, less-sanitized Stan Freberg or Tom Lehrer, Edmondson has done some fine satirical radio work in the hilarious and much-missed Jolly Roger Comedy Troupe skits. His collaboration with composer, singer, and Berkeley activist Carol Denney, as well as Jo Swanson and Richard Cicerone, produced some remarkable satire on a shoestring budget.

Much of Food Not Bomb's history has a zany absurdist edge to it — picture lines of armed and helmeted police, truncheons drawn, separating homeless people from buckets of vegetarian soup and platters of bagels. FNB, we learn from *Rising Up*, actually began as satire — a mock soup-line with real soup in front of the stockholder's meeting of the First National Bank of Boston in 1980 to protest its financing of Seabrook's Nuclear Power Plant. To everyone's surprise, homeless people gobbled up the props, launching Food Not Bombs on its destiny — to feed people in earnest, even in the teeth of fascist police, politicians, and judges.



This photo captures the first wave of police repression against Food Not Bombs.

We learn that San Francisco was never "liberal" towards its homeless people. Bigoted mayors, city cops and bureaucrats have never faltered in their 24-hour-a-day, low-intensity war against the visible poor.

I have some criticisms of *Rising Up* as well. The index is completely garbled and unusable, hopefully to be corrected in an updated 2nd edition. There is little mention of Homes Not Jails nor the struggle to secure the San Francisco Presidio, an abandoned Army base with hundreds of vacant homes, for homeless use as required by the Stewart B. McKinney Act.

I would have liked to see Edmondson maintain and broaden his focus on class

struggle by jumping across the Bay to discuss struggles in Berkeley and Oakland. The fight to preserve People's Park, to save the free clothing box, to protect the People's Café and Food Not Bombs in the East Bay, and to stop the Sitting Ban on Telegraph Avenue are all worthy of blow-by-blow histories. Testament to what can be done when activists unite and stand up together is the tremendously successful Oakland Union of the Homeless, which forcefully occupied abandoned buildings and then successfully transferred them to homeless use. Perhaps Edmondson can be persuaded to write Volume Two.

He also tends to dilute and disperse his tale by introducing other issues such as capital punishment, AIDS as a possible vaccine byproduct, slaughterhouse abuses, and police violence against the public. He does put these issues in class perspective and brings them out as stories censored in the establishment media but explored by micropower radio.

Edmondson's book has, along with its rich digressions into the history of the FCC and the arcane court struggle of Food Not Bombs, a personal spin to it. It is the chronicle of his involvement, his passions, and his reflections in San Francisco, which led him to join FNB and to start SFLR. His own testimony is thoughtful, reflective, ironic, and at times impassioned.

At the end, Edmondson tries to make theological sense out of it all, again leaving me behind. Perhaps he is simply being true to himself and struggling to answer the endlessly frustrating questions that people ahead of their time confront each day: Where is the enduring value of what we do, in an endlessly prolonged battle against authorities who have all the power, propaganda, and wealth on their side? Where is our victory when the San Francisco police are citing or arresting twice as many homeless people for "sleepcrimes" as they were five years ago? How can we take courage when there has been no significant expansion of micropower radio stations in California in the last three years?

For me, the physical existence of

Edmondson's *Rising Up* is itself a tangible answer to these metaphysical questions. Battered but not bowed, Edmondson is still alive, well, and active, beaming out daily broadcasts of what would otherwise be untold tales. As he and his fellow FNB sidewalk chefs risked broken bones and jail time by distributing food, so now he and his SFLR broadcasters risk \$100,000 fines and police invasion of his home by distributing news on the airwaves. He has kept the faith, moving body and equipment indoors to broadcast, but left his heart and soul outside on the streets. That he has completed this hidden history of the homeless civil rights struggle in San Francisco gives me great satisfaction.

Edmondson's three-tiered tale makes us all smarter, more knowledgeable activists and puts back on the public record a rich story buried by the big media. In a very real sense it gives meaning and recognition to the suffering of thousands of homeless people in San Francisco over the last decade. He reads out the names and deeds of those we need to remember if we are to become strong enough and wise enough to continue this struggle and to win it.

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Buy *Rising Up* for \$20 from Richard Edmondson at SFLR, 750 La Playa, Box 852, S.F., CA 94121. Get it on line at Amazon.com. or at Modern Times, City Lights, Bound Together Books, and The Booksmith. Request it from your local library; it's an invaluable resource, since no other book covers the history that it does.

Tune in Wednesday afternoons at 93.7 FM from 5-6 p.m. for *News and More*, Edmondson's homeless news show.

Subscribe to Carol Denney's hilarious, satirical newsletter *Pepper Spray Times* at 1970 San Pablo Ave. #4, Berkeley, CA 94702, by e-mail at cdenney@ic.org; or visit her website at www.caroldenney.com.

Denney and Edmondson will appear at **FM Democracy**, a benefit for S.F. Liberation Radio, 7:30 p.m. to midnight on Friday, March 9, at Cell Space, 2050 Bryant St. at 18th. Admission \$10-15. Featuring music by Orla & the Gas Men, Chemystry Set, Mobius Operandi, and Inch Connecticut. Readings by Edmondson, and talks by Jeff Blankfort on the Pacifica Crisis and Steve Zeltzer on micro radio & labor. For info on the benefit and SFLR call: (415) 386-3135.