

Assaulted and Arrested for Speaking Out at City Hall

July 2005

A Santa Cruz homeless advocate is brutalized and shackled while the public voice is eroded—all in the name of democracy.

by Becky Johnson

When homeless activist Robert Norse walked into the Santa Cruz City Council meeting on June 7, he had meant to talk about the “No Party” ordinance coming up on the council’s agenda. He never got the chance. He became the first person arrested in Santa Cruz under a rules change that Mike Rotkin had pushed through last March which limits comments on all consent agenda items to five minutes per speaker instead of three minutes per item.

Mayor Mike Rotkin, who was recently tagged as a “Marxist-feminist” by the *New York Times*, may seem hip to his UCSC Community Studies students, but back home in the saddle of the mayor’s chair, he’s quick to resort to armed force.

Twenty minutes before the “No Party” ordinance came up on the City Council agenda, with the hall flooded with the Santa Cruz Police Department’s top brass there to testify, Norse stood in line to speak on an item he had not initially planned to speak on. Testimony by several pro-union members of the public moved him to speak out on the innocuously named item #13.1, “Agreement with IATSE for Services at the Civic Auditorium.”

Under Rotkin’s new “five-minute” rule, Norse had used up all allowable time because he spoke for five minutes total on four previous items. Norse approached the microphone and said, “Mr. Mayor, I would like to speak for two minutes on this item like everyone else, as provided for by the Brown Act.”

Sections 54954.3(a), 54954(c) and 54953(a) of the Ralph M. Brown Act are the relevant sections of the Government Code. They provide (1) the right to speak on “any item of interest to the public” (emphasis added); (2) the right to criticize government bodies; and (3) the right to attend these meetings.

Norse believed that, Rotkin’s Rule or not, he was on firm footing in asserting his right to comment on the council item.

Yet Mayor Rotkin interrupted Norse, forbade him to speak, and ordered him to leave the meeting. When Norse insisted on his right to remain, Rotkin ordered the meeting recessed, ordered the television camera turned away from the podium, shut down audio recordings, and directed police to remove Norse from the chambers.



Robert Norse (at left), a longtime homeless advocate and outspoken journalist, has been targeted by the Santa Cruz police for arrest and harassment many times.