

In the trial itself, they did not get important specifics of the homeless situation to the jury, fearful of censure by the judge. Crucial witnesses like David Silva and Free Radio reporter Bob Duran were not called to the stand. Silva could have impeached the testimony of the chief prosecution witness, Sgt. Andy Crain, and revealed the police-created climate of fear at the council meeting — whose chill was matched by the courtroom proceedings. Many of these attorneys were not comfortable with activists except as well-controlled clients and were sure the jury shared their prejudices. Defendants themselves were allowed to testify only because they insisted on it.

Responding to criticism afterwards,

attorney Kate Wells suggested that hard attorney work produced the hung jury victory, and that activists would do better commending and supporting this attorney work, and that a “communications breakdown” caused some of the difficulties. “Robert Norse is a great source of information in these cases,” she added. “It’s too bad he was ostracized.”

Courts need to be crammed with cases that homeless people have learned how to argue themselves. With training, it’s not hard to master the legal skills necessary to effectively represent oneself against specific laws. We need activist-attorneys willing to teach people the paralegal skills necessary to defend themselves. People need to do this in groups.

Legal scholars tell us that someone who acts as her own attorney gets a fool for a client. But the activist rejoinder is this: At least such a “fool” knows that she is not fighting simply to get acquitted or to make a brief statement, but to achieve basic justice too long delayed, not just for herself, but for a whole class of people.

Those struggling in Santa Cruz need to arm themselves with legal knowledge and a greater solidarity with each other.

Attorneys who want to volunteer their time and energy to assist in this training process should contact Homeless United for Friendship & Freedom (HUFF): (408) 423-HUFF. Or write Robert Norse, 309 Cedar #14B, Santa Cruz, CA 95060. E-mail: norse@netcom.com.