

San Francisco newspaper fires antiwar reporter

Marge Holland**2 May 2003**

The firing on April 21 of technical reporter, Henry Norr, by the *San Francisco Chronicle*, ostensibly for falsifying a timesheet, is the latest incident in the ongoing struggle between free speech and the suppression of dissent. Norr was initially suspended for participating in a March 20 demonstration against the war in Iraq. One month later this was converted into a discharge, with the *Chronicle* claiming as a pretext that he had falsified his timesheet by claiming a sick day.

Norr had not sought to conceal his role in the March 20 protest. On the contrary, he sent an email to his supervisor the day before, saying that he planned to participate and expected to get arrested. He was arrested, along with his wife and daughter, and spent the night in jail. Justifying his use of a sick day, he said, "I was sick. I was heartsick. I was nauseated and I was depressed by the lies, arrogance and manipulation."

Norr is now contesting the termination through his union, the Northern California Media Workers/Newspaper Guild. He continues to be active in protest campaigns. He participated in the Oakland docks protest and was shot in the leg with a wooden dowel on April 7 and was arrested again in civil disobedience outside the gates of Lockheed-Martin, the world's largest arms manufacturer, in Sunnyvale, California on April 24.

At the time of Norr's arrest, the *Chronicle* did not ban participation in demonstrations. The newspaper only cautioned employees against creating the appearance of a conflict of interest and since Norr was a technology columnist, he saw no conflict in demonstrating against the war. However, after his suspension the management made unilateral modifications to the company ethics policy.

Chronicle Executive Editor Philip Bronstein sent an email to staff "clarifying" policy on staff participation

in political activity. They were informed that, in line with the paper's commitment to its war coverage, "our responsibility as journalists can only be met by a strict prohibition against any newsroom staffer participating in any public activity related to the war." Anyone participating in war-related demonstrations was instructed to clear this activity with their supervisor.

The Guild denounced the "clarification" and the new regulations as "a clear violation of the collective bargaining process," because, according to the Guild's executive director, Doug Cuthbertson, he thought the changes represented "a new policy" instituted by fiat. Finally, the paper wouldn't say why it had singled out antiwar activity for its ban, while continuing to support other forms of political expression, including sponsoring the Gay Pride Parade, for example.

Norr had previously come into conflict with Bronstein over his support for the International Solidarity Movement, a group which supports the Palestinian struggle to end the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Norr took a two-week vacation in Palestine with the group and upon his return gave an informal lunchroom talk on his experience. Apparently a pro-Israel editor took offense and reported to Bronstein.

Even before this, Norr had written an article in July 2002 about Intel Corporation's building of a silicon wafer manufacturing plant in Qiryat Gat, Israel, on land disputed since 1948, from which the Arab population had been driven by Israeli soldiers in what Norr described as an early example of "ethnic cleansing." He also gave attention to a lawsuit by the original inhabitants and their heirs, which he compared to successful suits brought by Jewish survivors of the Holocaust.

This article was deemed "inappropriate" by the

editorial staff of the *Chronicle*, presumably because of its pro-Palestinian position. In addition, Norr said in a subsequent press interview, a colleague at the paper accused him of being an anti-Semite for showing a slide show of Palestinians from his visit. Norr was told not to write again about the Middle East.

In the end, Norr wrote on Friday, April 25, in the Berkeley *Daily Planet* that he intends to file a complaint with the California State Labor Commission under Section 1102 of the State Labor Code, which prohibits employers from interfering with the political activity of their employees. Section 1102 states: “No employer shall coerce or influence or attempt to coerce or influence his employees through or by means of threat of discharge or loss of employment to adopt or follow or refrain from adopting or following any particular course or line of political action or political activity.”



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