

Why Didn't KPFA Defend Its Journalist?

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Some newspapers defend their journalists, at least once in a while. When the charming prince of Saudi Arabia had Journalist Jamal Khashoggi sawed up into little pieces, the Washington Post expressed outrage, and the bad press cost the Saudis some embarrassment; for a while it even looked like they might not get to bomb Yemen any more.

The Post is of course every inch an establishment newspaper which houses neocons, neoliberals, warmongers, regime changers and more. It does not support Julian Assange, though it used and printed information he made available. Nevertheless, the Post did speak out for Khashoggi.

So imagine, for comparison, how KPFA 94.1 FM, our famously progressive, leftwing, radical radio station in the San Francisco Bay Area, might respond to the abuse of one of its journalists.

Well, here's what happened.

Last September 17th, 2021, KPFA journalist Frank Sterling was arrested at a demonstration. Several activists were protesting a "Back the Blue" event honoring Antioch's outgoing Police Chief Tammany Brooks.

Chief Brooks had protected officers involved in police brutality and had even hired a former San Francisco policeman who'd [killed a homeless man](#). Some of the police chief's admirers hassled the protesters, and the police moved in and arrested three people, including Frank.

"I was out there at the park as a protester and was documenting the rally and police abuses. And when I was documenting the arrest of [demonstrator] Shagoofa Khan and the brutality they were bestowing upon her, violating our civil rights, I was then attacked and tasered and held to the ground," Frank reported.

Here's a 13-minute [video](#) of the demonstration and the arrests, or watch the video below.

This happened in Antioch, an East Bay town on the San Joaquin River; it's where Frank lives and covers local as well as regional news for KPFA 94.1 FM. He also attends Antioch City Council meetings to speak on matters concerning Native Americans, tenants' issues, the rights of homeless people, police accountability and the need for police body cameras. He's well known to city officials and to the police in Antioch.

Fortunately for Frank, this isn't Saudi Arabia. In comparison, the Antioch police are mild and gentle. Although they occasionally [choke and strangle](#) people, they mostly prefer not to. And they've absolutely never, ever been known to "saw up" a journalist. In relating to Frank, they merely assaulted him, tasered him, arrested him, and confiscated his journalism equipment.

Those are occupational hazards for journalists, at least for those who raise uncomfortable issues. Frank Sterling does that and more. Journalist, activist, and Native American, he wears several hats both in the community and at KPFA. In addition to covering news events, he's the technical director of the KPFA Apprenticeship Program. And he contributes to "Full Circle." On Friday evenings, the station's listeners hear his familiar voice: "Welcome to Full Circle . . . broadcasting from right here in Huichin — in that part of occupied Ohlone Territory known to settlers as Berkeley, California."

Another hat he wears is that of Staff Rep on KPFA's Local Station Board, the LSB. The day after that arrest was the board's September meeting. "Are you doing okay?" board members asked him. "We saw a message that you got hurt."

"I'm okay," he assured us, though appearing still slightly stunned, and he briefly told us about it. "Thanks for everyone that reached out," he said as he finished. "Thank you for your concern."

The Contra Costa County DA, Diana Becton, was endorsed by progressives as a reformer. But we soon learned that she was charging Frank with resisting arrest. And as happens in court cases, it dragged on, month after month; at each court hearing a date was set for the next hearing.

(This same DA Becton [declined to press charges](#) against the Antioch officers involved in the death of Angelo Quinto.)

The Oscar Grant Committee mobilized support for Frank. They and members of the LSB's minority caucus, [Rescue Pacifica](#), accompanied him to court hearings.

A petition was circulated on his behalf. Veterans for Peace wrote a resolution in support of him.

Several non-corporate journalists publicized his case. The hosts of [Hard Knock Radio](#) and UpFront interviewed him. Steve Zeltzer of Work Week Radio also covered this, and Ann Garrison did an interview for the [Black Agenda Report](#). Ann Garrison's article is at several websites.

Although several KPFA programmers had interviewed Frank, there was also something the station itself could do. It could air "carts" (recorded messages) and send out emails to the membership list — these are things KPFA does during fund drives, and to announce speaker events, the crafts fair, and other events the station takes an interest in.

Although KPFA's board is deeply divided on many issues, support of journalists would presumably be something that both sides could agree on. Moreover, Frank was well liked by people on both sides.

At the March 19th meeting, board member James McFadden brought this up with General Manager Quincy McCoy, who curtly dismissed the request.

"We're not a political party," the Manager replied.

There may've been some loud gasps, though not heard during this Zoom session where most microphones are muted.

This was KPFA, the radio station that stood up to Joe McCarthy & Co, bravely opposed the Korean War in an era when it took incredible courage to express a dissenting opinion. Likewise, KPFA strongly opposed the war in Vietnam and has spoken out against security state policies many times since. That has been KPFA's traditional anti-establishment, anti-imperialist, antiwar stand.

It seemed unthinkable that the manager of this station would refuse to defend one of its own journalists. This manager was Quincy McCoy whose voice we often hear on KPFA airwaves, telling us: "This is a community station," "Vigilant as always," "Truth to power," and "We have your back!" The manager who ends his emails with the slogan: "In times of crisis, unity is the only solution."

Unity? Maybe not this time. Or, was there some misunderstanding here?

The board's minority caucus, Rescue Pacifica, had written a resolution in support of Journalist Frank Sterling and asked the secretary to put it on the agenda. Although [Rescue Pacifica](#) is a one-third minority on this board, it did seem possible that this resolution might pass when put to a vote. But there was no vote. The secretary and chair, Carol Wolfley and Christina Huggins, kept the resolution off the agenda.

More was said about Frank Sterling's case during Public Comments. This is where KPFA listeners, people attending the meeting who are not current board members, get to speak. [The audio](#) is about 35 minutes, and here are some excerpts:

"I'm disappointed this body did not even discuss support for Frank Sterling," said KPFA staff person Sharon Peterson, "This is a news story that we should, in our ever vigilant position, be covering."

"Why don't you report the news of the journalist who was attacked twice by the Antioch police and tell people his next court date is in April?" asked Nancy Saibara-Naritomi from KPFT, the Pacifica sister station in Houston. "That is important."

"I'm very concerned about the lack of support for Frank Sterling by the LSB," said Steve Zeltzer of Workweek Radio. "And the manager said KPFA is 'not a political party.' Well, when does KPFA have to be a political party to support a journalist? . . . Journalists are under attack in this country. And for KPFA to be silent . . ."

Stan Woods, labor activist and former KPFA board member, said:

"[At any news outlet] if one of their journalists is under attack, falsely accused and

arrested, the management of that station or newspaper or website comes to their defense.”

Several more spoke likewise, expressing support for Frank. The one public speaker who advocated non-support was former board member Sharon Adams. “The LSB’s role is not to make political pronouncements,” she declared. “One reason perhaps to avoid having the LSB make political announcements is that there are news reports about what happened there. For example, the [Antioch Herald](#).”

The Antioch Herald, which Sharon recommended, is a conservative newspaper, a “Blue Lives Matter” and “Back the Blue” supporter. Its publisher has also been called out at city council for homophobic and transphobic remarks on his social media. Although investigative journalists and researchers do consider it important to read reports from across the political spectrum, including the Antioch Herald, it seemed strange that Sharon would not want KPFA to give its own views. After all, the very reason for KPFA/Pacifica’s seven decade existence has been to give independent news and views that are not likely to be heard from the commercial media.

Sharon Adam’s speech came as a surprise, even to those of us who are used to hearing her. She’d spent six years on KPFA’s board; she had been the treasurer, and at board meetings she had often functioned as spokesperson for the majority faction. And she is an attorney.

At the next LSB meeting, after the Pacifica National Board (which represents all five stations & 200 Affiliate stations) had stood by Frank and passed a resolution in his support, Sharon doubled down in her attack on Frank and accused him of assaulting a police officer.

So was Sharon speaking for herself? or for her faction? Her group, which uses several names, including “SaveKPFA,” “KPFA Protectors,” “New Day,” and Safety Net,” has a two-thirds majority on the KPFA LSB.

I wrote an email to all of the board members of Protectors/New Day, asking them if she spoke for them? I received no reply from any of them.

I suppose I shouldn’t have been so surprised. These are some of the same people who are [petitioning the FCC to deny](#) renewal of the WBAI license—if successful it will cost the network an asset valued at somewhere between \$20 to \$50 million. This fight has been going on for years, [decades](#) actually, and during the [last couple of years](#) it has become more [intense](#).

Then, as endnote to all this, came a letter of resignation from Quincy McCoy, effective August 15th. He was general manager for nearly a decade and worked closely with the “Protectors”/“New Day” faction. There was controversy over various matters that happened on his watch, such as the [non-payment of property taxes](#), and reports of an as of yet unexplained seven-month delay in presenting the financial documents needed for timely audits. Nevertheless, the “Protectors” loved him and praised him, and they refused to fulfill their yearly duty of evaluating his performance. They also said it’s “racist” to criticize this manager who is a person of color, (McCoy is African American). But when Frank Sterling’s supporters pointed out that to be consistent with that argument, the “Protectors” should also support Frank, also a person of color (Native American), they didn’t respond.

Why did Quincy McCoy resign? He didn’t say. But he did list his favorite people at KPFA, and among these was Sharon Adams, that star player of March 19th, as well as Carol Wolfley,

the Secretary of the LSB, who sent a [letter of support](#) for the petition to the FCC.

This and [other happenings](#) at KPFA may indeed sound discouraging to KPFA listeners, and it is at times hard to be optimistic, but I don't think it does any good to try to cover up the bad stuff. KPFA's listener-members need to know what's going on. We have to hang in there and work to preserve KPFA's traditional antiwar voice and defend our journalists.

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This article was originally published on the author's website, [Daniel's Free Speech Zone](#).

Daniel Borgstrom is a member of the KPFA Local Station Board [Rescue Pacifica](#) Caucus.

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