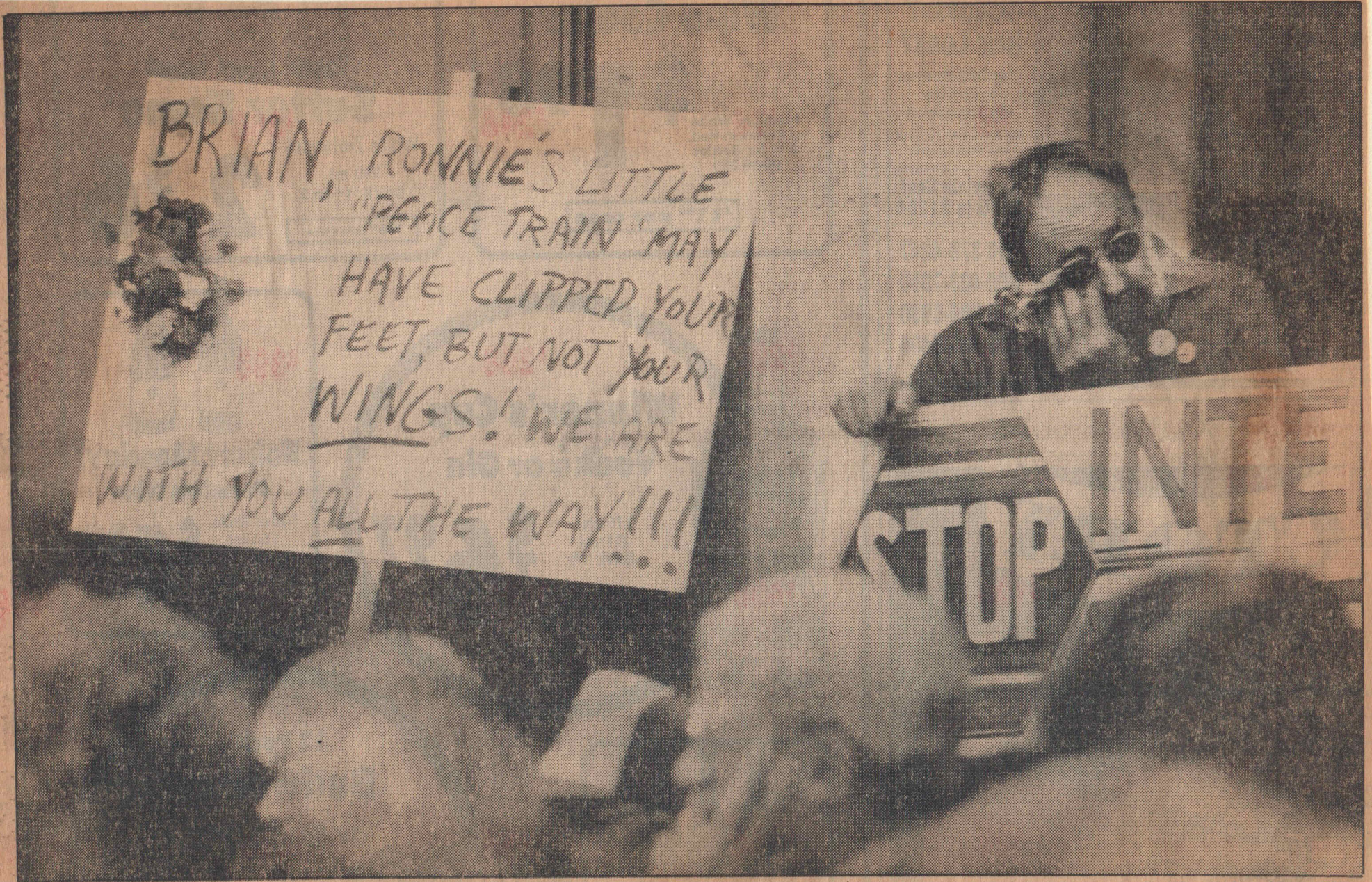


SEPT 4 1987

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Paul Kitagaki Jr. — Mercury News

David Banghart wipes his eyes during speech at Santa Cruz rally attended by veterans and peace activists



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# Maverick post again heading for dispute with national VFW

By Christopher H. Schmitt  
Mercury News Staff Writer

A renegade Veterans of Foreign Wars post in Santa Cruz once again seems headed for a clash with its state and national superiors — this time over a march to support a member who was hit by a Navy train.

Wearing VFW colors and carrying their VFW banner, members of the Bill Motta VFW Post 5888 plan to march in support of S. Brian Willson on Saturday outside the Concord Naval Weapons Station. That's where Willson, a Vietnam veteran, was run over by a Navy train as he knelt on the track during a peace protest.

But if the Santa Cruz post members do go to Concord, they'll put themselves at odds with national VFW policy, and they'll also violate a 1985 agree-

ment that settled a bitter dispute between the post and the national organization, state VFW officials said.

That could mean suspension or withdrawal of the post's charter, the VFW's state commander, Joseph I. Romano, said Thursday.

The 170-member Santa Cruz post embarrassed VFW leaders and drew national attention in 1984 when members passed a resolution criticizing the Reagan administration's policies in Central America. A member later carried a copy of that resolution to Nicaragua, where it was delivered to President Daniel Ortega.

In response, VFW officials yanked the post's charter in 1985, and the post lashed back with a lawsuit. A settlement later brought the post back into the fold, but the agreement stipulated that the post not

break VFW rules and that it not adopt positions against the national line.

But that's exactly what members will be doing Saturday if they go to the weapons center, officials said. By standing with protesters who oppose aid to Nicaragua's Contras, members will be at odds with national VFW policy supporting aid to anti-communist forces in Central America, Romano said.

They'll also be speaking for 100,000 VFW members in California and 2.5 million members nationwide without permission, he said.

"Their post agreed not to participate in any of these protests, and that they would abide by the laws and (resolutions) of all the VFW," Romano said.

But Steve Brooks, the Santa Cruz post's commander, said members aren't trying to go against the

national line.

"We are responding to a member of our post, at his request. We're not trying to get into semantics, or philosophy or whether (Willson) brought it on himself," Brooks said. "At a post level, we have some rights to carry on with our business. Part of what we are is to respond to a member in distress. That's what the national (leadership) has to understand."

Neither the post nor VFW officials were willing to say in advance what would happen if post members march Saturday. "If they choose to be in conflict with the agreement they made with the national organization, they're going to have to defend themselves," said Howard VanderClute, adjutant general at VFW headquarters in Kansas City.

