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The California Faculty Association: Keeping Racial and Economic Justice at the Forefront

Jennifer Eagan¹

Good Afternoon.² I bring greetings from our President, Dr. Charles Toombs, a faculty member at San Diego State University. I'm going to take this opportunity to reflect on where the California Faculty Association (CFA) has gone over the past four years, what we've built, and which I think other education unions can relate to.

At CFA, we have been building on a foundation of three inter-locking components: bargaining a fair contract and protecting the rights of the faculty, quality debt-free higher education, and anti-racism and social justice. And I would like to say a bit about all three.

As I envision the foundation of our union's work, it's not three parallel sets of train tracks or a three-legged stool, but a pyramid, where the walls we are building support each other and the construction of the three together moves upwards. The three concepts are dynamic, and in process, not static. We continue the work on building up each without rest.

Since bargaining a fair contract is the most obvious function for any labor union, so I'm going to start with the component where I think CFA is doing the most innovation. First, anti-racism and social justice. Recently, lots of activists were posting about Black Panther leader Fred Hampton on the 50th anniversary of his death (a murder by the state). I was reminded that he was a great theorist and knew very well the connection between racism and class struggle. In his sharp rhetoric, Hampton invoked the intrinsic linkage of the struggle of race and class, seeing the need to unite all people who were being disadvantaged. During a mock people's trial, Hampton said,

We've got to face the fact that some people say you fight fire best with fire, but we say you put fire out best with water. We say you don't fight racism with racism. We're going to fight racism with solidarity.³

¹ Jennifer Eagan, is a faculty member at Cal State East Bay in Philosophy and Public Affairs & Administration, past president of the California Faculty Association (CFA), and current Political Action and Legislative Chair of the CFA. The CFA represents the over 29,000 faculty of the 23 campuses of the California State University, including tenure-line faculty, lecturer faculty, librarians, coaches, and psychological counselors in the same unit.

² Opening remarks at the National Center for the Study of Collective Bargaining in Higher Education and the Professions West Coast Conference at California State University, Long Beach, CA on December 6, 2019.

³ "This Speech by Fred Hampton Shows Why the Establishment Found the Black Panther Party So Threatening" by The Hampton Institution Blog on Films for Action, March 12, 2016. <https://www.filmsforaction.org/articles/this-speech-by-fred-hampton-shows-why-the-establishment-found-the-black-panther-party-so-threatening/>

I take from this that you can't make adjustments within racist structures, and you can't just open the access to racist structures to more people, but rather unify to change those structures. That has been the approach of the CFA.

Solidarity is an obviously union concept, but it's only fully realized in certain rare moments and requires our constant work and vigilance to maintain. Solidarity is a verb, not a state of being. And solidarity isn't really possible without racial and social justice.

Cool theory, but paraphrasing Fred Hampton, empty without practice. At CFA we're putting our anti-racism work into practice by:

- Providing our home grown workshops on unconscious bias and how to interrupt racism to our members and even some administrators.
- Protecting undocumented students and faculty by supporting legislation and by encouraging CalPERS (our pension fund) to drop their investments in private prisons at the border.
- Sponsoring legislation that establishes an Ethnic Studies requirement in the CSU so that our students have the tools they need to dismantle racism.
- Advocating for more tenure track counselors who look like our students and have specific expertise in counseling college students.
- Supporting legislation and organizations that are trying to change policy regarding police accountability, and that includes speaking out against militarized police equipment and tactics on our own campuses and at our Board of Trustees meetings.
- Recognizing in our meetings and gatherings that the land we live and work on in California is unceded territory of still existing indigenous people and influencing our employer to do the same on the campuses (which has been surprisingly difficult).

None of these advances happens by accident. These campaigns emerge from structures in our union that have been built over time. For example, our first workshop on unconscious bias was created by faculty in our Council for Affirmative Action (now named the Council for Racial and Social Justice) which was established in 2006. The council supports eight caucuses (African American, Asian Pacific Islander, Disability, Indigenous Peoples, Chican-x/ Latin-x, LGBT, Teacher Education, and Women's) and was the driving force in the union embarking in an ongoing Anti-Racism and Social Justice Transformation Project which brought more member leaders, and especially white leaders, to work of transforming the union. As a result, a much larger and broader coalition of member leaders worked to create our second workshop on interrupting racism. The ripple effects of this work have led to more connections between our work and what our students face. For example, in using a racial justice lens our Counselors

Committee has brought forward the issues that students face being turned away from our psychological counseling centers due to not only inadequate staffing, but the absence of enough counselors who look like them and understand their issues. These are just some examples of the how making anti-racism and social justice central to our identity as a union has deepened and strengthened our connections to each other and to our students.

Second, quality debt-free higher education. Obviously, faculty take pride in our profession and in creating spaces where higher education takes place. I think that it's clear that if faculty, and particularly unionized faculty, don't protect our profession and system of public higher education, no one else will.

For those of us working in public higher education, protecting our profession is intimately tied to the economic rights of our students. This is why we advocate for expanding access to higher education for students who have historically, and are still, being shut out of the system. CFA's study *Equity Interrupted*⁴ shines a light on the toxic soup of the thirty-year decline in state funding to the CSU system, the increased costs to students, and the diminished notion of public higher education as a collective good that developed as CSU students were becoming increasingly students of color. These developments impact all students in California. When they suffer financially, they can't get access to our classrooms. Public institutions are for the public and need to stay that way. That's why CFA is advocating for debt-free higher education.

Debt-free higher education, as we see it, goes beyond tuition-free college and far beyond the kind of financial aid that leaves so many of our students, and our faculty members, in deep, life altering debt. It also must be coupled with the fight for enough resources

At CFA we have advocated against tuition and fee increases for CSU students, and for the restoration of free public higher education in California. Why? California students and their families have paid taxes, free higher education would bolster the economy and the lives of our students, and surely the 5th largest economy in the world can afford it.

Lastly, bargaining a fair contract and protecting the rights of the faculty. We bargain a fair contract to support our members and work to protect their rights. I don't need to tell anyone in this room what that looks like. In our last contract campaign, "The Fight for Five" which was won within a week of going on a five-day strike in 2016, we bargained for significant salary improvements for all members of our unit and workload provisions for service to marginalized students. The fierceness of this fight, and our emerging dedication to racial and social justice

⁴ *Equity Interrupted: How California is Cheating its Future*, published by the California Faculty Association, Spring 2017. <https://www.calfac.org/equity-interrupted>

within the context of bargaining, also won us two more years of salary increases in the form of a contract extension. We intend to build upon those gains in our bargaining our next contract. While this may seem to be the most fundamental role of any labor union, and that our other concerns are addendums to our so-called real work, that's not the case. All three parts of CFA's core mission are equally fundamental and interconnected.

The faculty at the CSU are getting ready to go back to the bargaining table this Spring, and we're committed to keep the issues of racial and economic justice at the forefront. Justice for our members, in terms of the basics of salary and working conditions, is connected to justice for our students and for all marginalized people. When a university relies too heavily on contingent labor, not only for lower costs in salary but also for "administrative flexibility," students lose the consistency of building relationships with their faculty. Those relationships help students persist and succeed. When deeply underrepresented faculty of color face "cultural taxation"⁵ – the extra duties that come with adding diversity to numerous committees and the increased mentorship load of students of color who need them – students feel this lack. When faculty are asked again and again to take more students and do it with fewer resources, that impacts students. We have used the slogan "faculty working conditions are student learning conditions" for more than ten years because it communicates the very simple truth that however management treats the faculty, they are treating the students the same way.

After my time as CFA President, I'm back in the classroom, and it's bliss. As anyone who teaches can tell you, teaching is the most revolutionary thing faculty do. Little bits of magic and miracles occur in the classroom on a recurring basis. I am bringing with me everything that I learned about racial and social justice from my faculty colleagues and the student activists who worked with us. I think that's what Audre Lorde, a professor who was once unfairly ousted from an academic post, meant when she said that: "Revolution is not a one-time event."⁶

⁵ Canton, Cecil. "The 'cultural taxation' of faculty of color in the Academy" in *California Faculty Magazine*, Fall 2013. <https://www.calfac.org/magazine-article/cultural-taxation-faculty-color-academy>

⁶ Lorde, Audre. 1984. "Learning from the Sixties" in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Freedom, CA. Crossing Press, p. 140.