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Centering Anti-Racism and Social Justice, Toward A More Perfect Union: A Conversation with the Authors, Cecil E. Canton and Charles Toombs

Gary Rhoades,¹ with Cecil E. Canton² and Charles Toombs³

On March 2, 2023, the California Faculty Association (CFA) held an event to dedicate the Dr. Cecil E. Canton Social Justice Room in the union offices, honoring his “decades of racial and social justice advocacy,” as the “CFA News” headline read. CFA President Charles Toombs said,

You have mentored us. You have shown us that we can do it. You have shown us that it is really not about changing individuals, it is about changing structures. Because of the seeds you planted, there are so many of us here, and we are trying to carry that work forward.

In Canton’s words during his speech,

We lifted our gaze and focused our will on democracy and justice. . . . To be a more perfect union is to be a more democratic and inclusive union. To be a democratic and inclusive union is to be an equitable and just union.

Those sentiments are at the heart of his 2020 book, *Journey toward a more perfect union*, as they are at the heart of Dr. Charles Toombs’ 2021 *Academe* article, “Anti-racism, social justice, and the California Faculty Association.” Each of these men, individually, together, and in concert with many other activists within (and beyond) CFA, have embodied and embedded those themes in their union work and writing. What ensues is a conversation with them and their work, focusing on the history and strategies of building a union that centers anti-racism and social justice in its own organization, in negotiating its collective bargaining agreement, and in its efforts to shape the university system, labor movement, and society.

It is so appropriate that CFA’s honoring of Dr. Cecil Canton involved dedicating a room to him. A central part of Canton’s story, from the early days of his activism, was literally and figuratively fostering and expanding space within the union for people from a variety of marginalized populations. As he and Toombs have related, given the dominance of White privilege and White Supremacy at the time within CFA, it was essential to cultivate spaces in which minoritized members could be their genuine selves, in their full, authentic humanity.

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As Canton relates in his book, in 2002 he was asked by the new CFA President, Susan Meisenhelder to join the Affirmative Action Committee, which a decade earlier had convened a conference on “Strategies for Diversity in the 21st Century.” The “deciding factor” in his taking this committee assignment was the 1996 anti-affirmative Proposition 209, passed in 1996.

The CSU absolute capitulation and faculty acquiescence to the unfairness of that proposition angered and upset me and became my *raison d’être* for picking the AAC. My union needed to fight for justice! (Canton, 2020, p.23)

In a proactive, progressive process, that structural organizational space became a launching pad for expanding the presence and power of faculty of color in the CFA, and for challenging and transforming its Whiteness as well as that of the university system.

At “the beginning of the journey,” Canton related in the interview how in the early years he would look around at various union events and gatherings and think, “How am I one of the few African-Americans here—where are the others?” With his four other colleagues on the AAC, they requested an expansion to seven members and resources for what would be the CFA’s first equity conference, in 2004, a few years after the union’s first Women’s Conference, in 2000. He also was involved in creating the Africa-American Caucus (now Black Caucus) at the same time as the Latino/a Caucus (now the Chicana/Latinx Caucus formed. Not long after, a number of other “identity caucuses” were formed, including the Asian Pacific Islander (now APIDA), the Disability, and the LGBTQ+ caucuses. These followed the earlier creation of the Teacher Ed Caucus in the 1990s, and at the end of the 90s, the Women’s Caucus, in which many of the activists who won in the contested leadership election in the CFA were engaged (much later, in 2019 the Native American and Indigenous Peoples’ caucus was formed, and most recently, the Palestine, Arab, and Muslim Caucus). Within a few years, that led to a further enhancement and establishment of a more central place for “minority” faculty in union governance, in a Council for Affirmative Action (building on the CFA’s existing council structure, as in the Presidents’ and Lecturers’ Councils, with members from the CSU’s 23 campuses). Canton became Chair of that Council and by virtue of that position an Associate Vice President on the CFA Board of Directors.

Each of the above organizational steps certainly constituted an enhanced representation of these faculty in governing the CFA. In Toombs’ words at the March 2023 dedication event, “We have created a space where more voices, more people can actually contribute to what a higher education labor union has to be today...It can no longer be the way it was.”

Yet, more and deeper than an expansion of “compositional diversity” of voices in the CFA governance, the organizational structures referred to above provide(d) expanded space for

marginalized faculty to share, recruit, and build and advance an agenda. This was evident in the interview. Cecil spoke of the importance of providing spaces where minoritized faculty could “tell their stories,” to “help overcome a sense of isolation.” Such formal spaces are important. Places where marginalized faculty can be “at ease rather than on guard,” be “authentic,” and “where they could feel free to share their experiences and concerns with and care for each other.” As Cecil said, “When folks started realizing that these were spaces where they could be real,” it drew more people in. “The word got out; the caucus is okay.” They were places where “you could vent what you can’t share elsewhere.” And they were “freedom spaces, empowering spaces,” “spaces of good energy.” The importance of that human dimension of being real was not just Cecil’s perception. At the March 2023 dedication, as one CFA member/leader recalled:

It was Cecil who always made sure to check-in on me. It wasn’t a check-in on ‘how is CFA going?’,” said Margarita Berta-Ávila, CFA Associate Vice President, North, who also worked with Dr. Canton at Sacramento State. “It was a check-in on ‘how are you doing, the person?’ Because we know that this work that we are doing – anti-racism and social justice, countering the days in and days out of white supremacy—is taxing. Every single day. Our body carries it. And Cecil has always (checked-in on me).

Here, the affective, visceral, and human dimensions of the literal and figurative spaces that Cecil E. Canton helped create should be emphasized. In my direct experience of Cecil, those human dimensions of care have always been present. Life matters. And that, too, is part of the important cultural contribution that Canton has contributed to CFA and the labor movement.

Moreover, the above quote and Canton’s work point to really good examples of the valuable connection between the personal and political dimensions. The sorts of experiences that faculty were sharing in the African American Caucus about student evaluations of faculty of color led the CFA Bargaining Team to propose building language on the matter into the collective bargaining agreement. That led to a Task Force, chaired by Canton, which made policy recommendations to the CFA, the Statewide Academic Senate, and the Chancellor’s Office. A decade later, the Council for Affirmative Action pushed the union to address cultural taxation, and at the next round of bargaining, language was built into the collective bargaining agreement embodying the spirit of this issue, providing for compensation for faculty engaged in “exceptional levels of service to students.” Commiseration was translated into contract language.

There are other examples of key justice-centered spaces contributing to organizational and policy changes in the CFA. Canton writes of how the African-American Caucus,

[S]trengthened its utility as a recruiting tool for African-American faculty to become union members and therefore more engaged and influential in the union. The idea was to use “social justice” activism as a means to open up space in the union.

Therein lay some of the origins of CFA taking on and eventually centering, taken to new levels under Charles Toombs’ leadership an anti-racism and social justice purpose.

The 2004 Equity Conference was another such space, joining the personal and political.

[It] allowed those faculty who did not see a place for themselves in their union to coalesce, congregate, and mingle. More importantly, the conference gave them a place to discuss their status and struggles. (Canton, 2020, p.35)

The conference embodied an inclusive, energizing, and action oriented space. The networks of Latino/a members of the Affirmative Action Committee (particularly of conference co-chair, Dr. Sally Hurtado) led to the keynote speaker being the Hon Justice Cruz Reynoso, a former California Supreme Court justice who challenged the CFA to not resign itself to Proposition 209 “killing” affirmative action, but rather to overcome and work around it, toward justice.

The subsequent organizational step was the creation of a Council of Affirmative Action. With the growth of the identity caucuses, some within the CFA Board and its Chapter Presidents (for each of the 23 campuses) were articulating concerns about the “balkanization” of the union. The pushback was not unlike what sometimes gets articulated about various cultural centers on campus. Charles and Cecil related the sort of comments that surfaced, from “Where is all this diversity stuff going to end,” to “Why can’t they wait their turn and ‘earn’ their way into leadership positions like the Lecturers and Women.” A Task Force was appointed by the then CFA President, John Travis, to develop ways to increase minority leadership in the union. Chaired by CFA Treasurer Kim Geron, and including Canton as a member, the Task Force proposed following the existing Council structure of the union, adding a Council for Affirmative Action, the chair of which would also be an Associate Vice-President of CFA. Despite initial resistance due to concerns about “costs,” again, not unlike what is experienced on campuses with regard to inclusion initiatives, the new Council was established in 2006.

One of the questions I posed in the interview was to ask about what contributed to the remarkable character and success of CFA in bringing in and cultivating new leaders, as well in sustaining in an iterative path and gains over time, though as Cecil said (and wrote in his book) “the path is neither straight nor easy!” Some of the answer lies in some of the structures identified above. More than that, though, the answer lies in a combination of a spirit of being

open to new voices and ideas alongside a strength in directly confronting issues in processes that Cecil and Charles both related were “uncomfortable,” “difficult,” and “challenging” for many in the union (in offering these words, there were many pauses and shared chuckles between them), including White leaders who, as Toombs wrote, “were not aware of how their leadership practices and policies supported and sustained White Supremacy culture, or how they were both the problem and (potentially) the solution.” And here, on a human dimension, lies part of what Charles contributes as a leader, within CFA and beyond, a calm, firm, inclusive, matter-of-fact determination in “dismantling racism,” the term in the subtitle of Cecil’s book.

On the foundation of what came before, in his *Academe* piece, “Anti-racism, social justice, and the California Faculty Association,” Charles Toombs details the ongoing journey of the CFA on its “Arc of Justice” (Canton, 2020, Preface). Toombs is explicitly working to foster that journey on the foundation of what came before. He opens his article by speaking about the “racial reckoning” in the CFA which long preceded the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery. At the heart of that reckoning was a conviction on the part of BIPOC officers, members, and activists that to effect significant change in the California State University System, “[W]e resolved that our union must be better, or working toward being better, than the CSU in dealing with systemic racism, the lack of real inclusion, and inequity.” Toombs’ own story, and narrative speaks to the intergenerational passing and taking of the baton that is so key to the duration and strength of activism within union locals. And part of that taking of the baton is continuing the work within and beyond the CFA to California and the broader labor movement. Toombs closes his piece by speaking to CFA’s initiatives in regard to policing, in state law and in the CSU, much as Canton connected his work within CFA to California’s Proposition 209 and to mitigating its adverse effects within and beyond the CSU by continuing to work towards diversity and inclusion.

At the core of CFA “being better” was centering anti-racism in a more pro-active way than before. It involved more directly confronting White Supremacy culturally and spiritually, beyond the important steps of developing organizational structures to increase the presence and influence of people from marginalized populations. In a 2015 resolution, under Jennifer Eagan’s Presidency, CFA committed to “Anti-Racism and Social Justice Transformation” as part of its mission, indicating that “‘Diversity and Inclusion’ are not enough.”

Part of embedding that commitment in concrete cultural change, beyond what are sometimes/often non-performative mission statements, was CFA committing material resources to hiring national consultants to develop anti-racism and social justice training (a precursor to this work was an “Unconscious Bias” workshop developed by the Council for Affirmative Action (which apropos of the CFA’s evolution became the Council for Racial and Social Justice)

during Lil Taiz' CFA presidency, which eventually morphed into a video with professional actors, directed by a PBS award winning Director. The training sessions were for CFA leaders at the statewide and chapter (local campus) level. As Toombs has written,

These training sessions were intense, difficult, and painful, as we all worked through the racial narratives that support and give credence to institutional and systemic oppression, discrimination, and racism in our nation, in California, and in the CSU.

The above difficult work translated into organizational commitments of driving principles that are embedded in ongoing workshops and training at the campus level. Indeed, "campuses started asking for more, asking for facilitators." And as Charles and Cecil said, it was built into the union's meetings, in ways, for example, that translated into "interrupting Whiteness, and Whitesplaining." The lens of anti-racism and social justice is embedded as well in CFA's research and communications, its government relations, bargaining, and community engagement. Again, we see the connection between the very personal and visceral and the political.

The yield of this commitment and work is quite impressive. In his *Academe* piece, Toombs provides a few examples in the realm of state legislation, underscoring the remarkable scope of CFA's work in shaping higher education and society. One is that CFA was the original sponsor of Assembly Bill 1460, eventually signed into law in August 2020, which requires all CSU students to take at least one ethnic studies course before graduation. The CSU system lobbied against it, whereas CFA organized around and lobbied for it. The effects of the legislation, as Toombs writes, go well beyond simply one class.

Campuses are adding new tenured faculty lines in ethnic studies, existing ethnic studies programs are being made independent departments, and some of the smaller CSU campuses are getting ethnic studies programs for the first time...

In short, the union is bending the educational trajectory and arc of the CSU toward justice.

A second realm of institutional and legislative initiative takes the union's influence to another level, within and beyond the boundaries of the campus. And it goes back to how Toombs opened his *Academe* piece, with a framing of examples of anti-Blackness and policing violence. CFA has sponsored several legislative bills about policing that have been signed into law (see Toombs' *Academe* piece for the details). These emerged after CFA's response to the police murders of Black people with, "Anti-Black Racism Demands." Their work here goes well beyond what CFA has proposed within the CSU system, demanding no militarization of campus police, an end to racial profiling, and seeking non-law enforcement based approaches to safety, drawing on mental health and counseling professionals. They have translated these demands into

bargaining proposals. Though the latter have not yet been built into the contract, the thinking underlying this union work is telling and fitting for a public university.

Police reform in California must go well beyond the campuses. It must also include our students' communities. Far too many of our students and their family members and friends have been mistreated, harassed, unjustifiably arrested, physically harmed, or even killed by the police. (Toombs, 2021)

In short, the social justice vision of CFA extends to contributing to and exercising responsibility for the well-being and quality of life of the students and communities it serves, beyond the confines of the campus boundaries.

Toombs' *Academe* piece is in itself an example of reaching beyond the CFA and California to also shape the larger academic labor movement. As Chair of the American Association of University Professors' Committee A (on Academic Freedom and Tenure), Toombs is offering AAUP bargaining units and chapters thoughts about how to organize around racial and social justice. He and Canton have presented on these matters at large locals nationally. That is part of their and other CFA leaders' work in the journey from a business/service union model to a social activist model to an anti-racist and social justice organization, connected to larger social movements. The point of the journey is to transform the union as an organization itself, even as union members and leaders work to embed anti-racism and social justice principles in the collective bargaining agreement, the workplace, and the university, as well as to shape the broader academic labor movement.

As the journey toward a more perfect union continues in the CFA, I was struck in my conversation with Cecil and Charles by the unusual combination of continuity of commitment and inclusive willingness to make space for the next set of ideas and activists to shape that future. That is central to an ongoing regeneration of the union across an expansive span of time and space. At the March 2023 event, Cecil articulated the essence of that spirit when he said,

I remember, Margarita asked me. She said, 'Cecil, what's the next thing? What do you think is the next thing?' And I told her, 'That's for you to do. That's for you to do,'" said Canton. "When it was in my heart to do what I did, I did it. Now it's time for you to do it. And it may be in a whole different direction. Maybe something you've never, ever considered, but it will be right for that time.

Neither of these lifelong activists are lagging in their commitment to the cause that has animated their union work and academic lives (Cecil as a Professor of Criminal Justice and Charles as a Professor of Africana Studies). Both simply have a confidence and intentionality in

the directionality of what they have each and together been part of proactively building at the CFA.

Finally, part of what is also compelling about these two activists, is the open-heartedness and critical hope that pervades their work. That is evident in the last line of Toombs' *Academe* piece: "Although there is much work for all of us to do, there is also love and joy in doing it." And in a closing phrase of Canton in the interview, "What would you be willing to attempt to do if you knew you could not fail." Sentiments and a spirit worth taking to heart.