

Picket Line Epiphanies and a Bittersweet Epilogue

By Noel Jacob Kent

On April 5, 2001, I rolled out of bed at 5 a.m. and turned on the news, hoping to hear that the University of Hawai'i Professional Assembly (UHPA) had reached a last-minute agreement with state negotiators to avert a strike scheduled to begin that morning. Instead, the strike was on and my two classes for the day scratched.

Within the hour, I was due—in the role of picket captain—at the East-West Road entrance to the university's flagship Manoa campus.

Since Hawai'i public school teachers were also going out on strike, this day would be historic: The first statewide public education strike in American history.

So why, on the way down to the picket site, did I feel less like a participant in history-in-the-making and more like someone heading toward a major fiasco? The image that kept recurring was of a handful of pickets standing haplessly by as faculty and students cavalierly

crossed our lines.

This image wasn't complete paranoia: The run-up to the strike had been tortured with many UH faculty wondering out loud: "Do we have the strength and unity to mount an effective strike?" This is not to say we weren't, after two years of working without a contract, hugely frustrated and angry.

By taking every opportunity to publicly belittle the university faculty as incompetent, underworked and overpaid, Governor Ben Cayetano had stoked our anger. During Cayetano's administration, state support for the university had declined more than 11 percent, while a steep hike in student tuition had driven enrollment down. At Manoa and other campuses, faculty positions had been savaged by attrition and cutbacks; the maintenance backlog stood at \$167 million.

Throughout this downward spiral, a passive UH administration had proved pathetically inept at

*Noel Jacob Kent is a professor of ethnic studies at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa. His most recent publication, *America in 1900*, examines the American society at the turn of the century. Kent's areas of study include political economy and American history.*

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defending the university.

Faculty resentments had mounted through February and March, as Cayetano's lackadaisical negotiator Davis Yogi scrupulously avoided serious bargaining—the offer: No raise in the first year with the possibility of merit raises in the second. Particularly infuriating was the state's insistence on eliminating health insurance and retirement credit for faculty during the summer months. Buttons began sprouting on various campuses: I DON'T WANT TO STRIKE BUT I WILL.”

Yet, deep-seated doubts as to the viability of a strike continued: Hadn't years of watching the university implode left faculty too demoralized to carry on the good fight? Questions about the Professional Assembly leadership's ability to organize a strike were widespread. In addition, some instructors claimed ethical qualms about holding students “hostage” to faculty demands.

In February, one science professor wrote in an E-mail message:

We have been sucking wind for the better part of ten years without a real raise. Some universities combine a cost of living increase with a form of merit pay, but Ben's fella Davis is not suggesting that. He wants us to cave.

Nonetheless, this professor counseled caution:

We don't make cars, dig coal, form steel, or nurture 4th graders, we teach college students. Is a strike the best model? Maybe we should be finding another way to make Ben feel our pain.

The following day, a philosophy professor E-mailed:

Artists and Humanists: As you may know I am against striking. However, if our union does strike, I will join the picket line and strike. So for me the choice is simple we must do everything possible to get a fair contract and avoid a strike.

A rejoinder came immediately:

Do not create this confrontation. Wait for a new governor and then hire a professional negotiator and go back to the table. I will not strike nor will I involve my students. The union will be broken and the agreement will be dictated by the governor. The result will send us into the stone ages. There is no hope in a strike.

There was another flurry of E-mails in mid-March, as a faculty strike authorization vote approached:

Alarmist E-mails arguing that the governor 'held all the cards' and a strike meant annihilation, continued.

Here's what I see. We have a vindictive thug of a governor who hates the university and the faculty. He wants us to bleed. He profits from our blood. I'm having a hard time seeing any upside to a strike. We have survived without a contract for two years. What is the downside to surviving another two years without a contract?

This message from a speech professor drew a response from the languages faculty:

I say we have already suffered enough... I can barely survive from month to month now....We need to pull together and support the strike. The public is behind us.

A historian weighed in:

Recent calls 'not to strike' and 'not to negotiate' are incredibly simplistic and naive, quite apart from the fact they assume the political and economic climate for bargaining will be better in another two years. The time has come to take a stand and bring about a settlement.

Meanwhile, English professor Joan Peters, an active member of the union strike committee, urged the faculty to authorize a strike:

The strike vote does not guar-

antee a strike, but it does give us some power and we need it ... Without a contract we are extremely vulnerable to the implementation of any vindictive policy the governor chooses to impose.

Union leaders explained that any strike action had to be concluded during the legislative session while raises could be funded.

More than 90 percent of the faculty voted for strike authorization. Still, through late March and into early April, divisiveness and pessimism were rife. Alarmist E-mails arguing that the governor "held all the cards" and a strike meant annihilation continued.

So on the morning of April 5, many of us were wondering exactly who—other than the usual suspects—would show up on the picket lines.

Arriving at the East-West Road entrance, I found a few people in white UHPA T-shirts already moving around in the semi-darkness. Picket signs and more union T-shirts, hats, and leaflets were dropped off by a bearish, gentle man named Jim Semelroth, from the California Faculty Association, one of the tireless, inspirational men and women sent by National Education Association affiliates on the mainland.

At 6 a.m., the first picketers

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stepped out into the street carrying strike signs. People kept arriving, eager to sign in and grab placards. By 8 a.m., 40 people were walking the line—an assortment of librarians, historians, oceanographers, anthropologists—chatting, chanting, moving in time with a boom box belting out “oldies but goodies.”

Picketing arrangements were negotiated with the friendly on-duty police—who faulted the governor for the strike. Departmental secretaries, who weren't on strike, brought around pastries and fruit and left warm notes of encouragement. The vendor of coffee at nearby East-West Center donated a large thermos of delicious coffee. Even my wife, Chelsea, a non-academic not given to joining demonstrations, walked the picket line.

When union leaders came by, we told them: “This is a happening; this is a going strike.” At 10 a.m., the next shift came on and we early-morning people went home exhausted but euphoric.

The next day, Friday, was déjà vu at East-West Road. A large, good-humored, enthusiastic band of picketers turned out at dawn—some being dispatched to other lines—and the secretaries, friends, and supporters from other unions brought more food and drink than we could possibly consume. Students and faculty

coming on campus were gently urged to join a strike in the interest of the university's future.

Our surprising strength proved irresistible to Hawai'i's always on-the-make politicians. The lieutenant governor, a Democrat with a sure eye on next year's election, appeared briefly on the line, wrapped in smiles.

Such transparent political opportunism rankled. She was asked: “Where have you been the past six years while the governor was making war on us?” Muttering, “I wasn't on the negotiating committee,” she turned quickly away.

A few days later, the leading Republican candidate for governor tried to use our line for a photo-op only to face similar questions about her indifference to the university.

Negotiations over the weekend remained stalled and a real question on Monday was the state of striker morale. After all, Hawai'i is a brutally high-cost economy and each day out meant money forever lost.

But Monday's picket lines stayed remarkably solid. At the Manoa campus, which was akin to a ghost town, 348 out of 1,660 faculty signed in. At UH Hilo and West Oahu College, 90 percent were out, as were almost 95 percent at the community colleges. It was appar-

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ent that by demanding that health insurance coverage and other contract benefits be limited to nine months, the governor had made this a fight about survival and self-respect. The faculty was galvanized. We would hold on.

As the week passed, our East-West Road shift began evolving its own esprit de corps, its own community subculture of dance-walking, humor, sharing food, talk, lives.

This happened on every line. Picketers at one gate wearing buttons proclaiming themselves to be the “Waialae Warriors,” challenged the university’s football coach—arguably the most popular figure in the state—for crossing the line.

On Friday, the union held a spirited rally downtown at the capital, with much honking of horns by passing motorists. The faculty clearly had the initiative. With public education in Hawai’i nearly shut down, and the university’s semester on the edge of the abyss, the governor’s isolation had become monumental. He had to deal.

Word on the picket line Tuesday morning, April 17, was that an all-day bargaining session was on. That night at 11 p.m., a settlement was reached. I ran over to my neighbor and fellow picket captain Kathy Ferguson and we hugged and yelled, “We did it! We won!”

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won raises for nonunion lecturers, the most exploited members of our faculty.

The next day, Kathy and I joined the still-striking teachers picketing at a nearby elementary school. “Last week, I drove past the university and there were dozens of picketers at each entrance,” one teacher said. “I felt so proud to see all of us standing up for our profession.”

On Thursday, April 19, University of Hawai’i classes began again. Students and teachers were both understandably out of sync. In my classes, we talked briefly about the strike, discussed the revised syllabus, and eased into a new work rhythm.

In the strike’s immediate aftermath, joy reigned. Faculty returning to work at Kapiolani Community College marched back onto campus en masse and, forming a circle, yelled and cheered.

One of the faculty negotiators, Mary Tiles, thanked the strikers:

I don’t quite know how to express the bargaining team’s gratitude for the support we received from the Manoa picket lines. Without you out there in the hot sun day after day proving the faculty can hold out we would never have been able to get the deal we ended up with.

At a union party to celebrate

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victory, there were lots of thumbs up, Hawaiian “shakas,” and hugs. People felt immensely empowered. A political science professor told me: “I wouldn’t have missed this strike for the world.”

But euphoria proved to be short-lived. Not even the negotiating committee had claimed the settlement was an unalloyed triumph. Noted Mary Tiles:

We know we have failed to get the kind of raises that are really required to rebuild the university.” But we think we have all that we could get in the current situation and have done so without the various take-aways that were previously threatened.

Many agreed with Tiles’s analysis that, while the contract wasn’t perfect, it was probably the best the union could get under the circumstances.

Others demurred. Faculty voting on ratification were handed a leaflet, “Proposed Settlement Pathetic VOTE NO!” demanding union negotiators return to the bargaining table.

Although the contract won approval by a strong margin, the heavy abstention rate demonstrated some dissatisfaction.

The core anti-contract argu-

ment was that the state had the resources and willingness to provide higher raises than the settlement called for. The union negotiating committee was accused of “asking too little too late.”

Some faculty close to the committee agreed with this analysis. In the interest of helping low-paid faculty achieve some equity, a flat \$2,325 raise was negotiated for the first year of the contract. This meant that in the first year a faculty member making \$37,000 would receive twice the percentage increase of someone at \$77,000. This was a red flag to some faculty, especially in the more highly paid business, professional school, and scientific research-related departments.

Charges surfaced that the flat raise had been on the union agenda all along and was deliberately concealed from the membership.

Negotiator Joan Peters replied that the decision for a flat rate increase was made just before settlement and “in the spirit of unity and the level of sacrifice of all faculty during the strike.”

One of the most vocal “irreconcilables,” an accounting professor, lamented that the flat raise left higher-paid faculty worse off—after losing 13 days of pay—than if they had accepted the governor’s final offer.

“What I think is particularly

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scandalous is the way Manoa full professors were thrown to the wolves," he said.

In retrospect, the bitterness expressed by those opposed to the settlement was not really about the treatment of senior faculty as a whole. What the controversy highlighted were *the fault lines of values and class dividing professional school and science research faculty from liberal arts faculty at the University of Hawai'i, and indeed in the modern American university.*

At the core of the group's rejection of the flat raise was an uncritical acceptance of the "academic marketplace" as rational and moral. To them, the idea of market-valued senior faculty sacrificing for the needs of non-market-valued others was both irrational and immoral.

Exasperated business professors and research scientists, for instance, cited the increasing difficulty in recruitment and retention of talented newcomers who could get more lucrative offers elsewhere.

Here, of course, the driving force is the ongoing transformation of America into a *market society*. Those who are valued highly by the market—from baseball players to academic stars—take on an inflated sense of entitlement.

The real point of reference of

UH professional school and scientific research faculty had become the salaries commanded by colleagues in their fields at major universities and corporations in North America and globally.

The comparatively lower salaries at UH, coupled with the higher cost of living in the Islands, means they inevitably feel themselves severely disadvantaged. So their status as University of Hawaii faculty aristocrats becomes irrelevant, and a contract delivering greater equity for lower-paid faculty is seen as accentuating their own inequity vis-à-vis more privileged colleagues overseas.

Meanwhile, other UH faculty remain both alienated from the notion of the United States as a market society and not a little disturbed by the academic market model. An ensuing E-mail exchange brought this home in sharp relief.

One political science professor, emphasizing the importance of the pay increase for lecturers and of being able to hire new faculty at more competitive rates, wrote:

After over a decade of cut after cut after cut, of watching the university erode we are finally able to take decisive aim and make it a better place.

Another supporter of the contract settlement wrote:

I don't give a damn whether we got everything we needed and deserved. I didn't go into this line of occupation in order to get rich. Listening to some of these \$100,000 and above crybabies and their heart wrenching worries, I don't care if they don't find their salaries high enough. Let them go to wherever they can get what the market is willing to give them. They have already sold out to the market anyway.

Others criticized the author for painting everyone making over \$100,000 with the same brush. Defenders of the market wrote: They are "some of the lowest-paid within their rank in their department." These people are "very, very productive and contribute a lot to the intellectual life at this university, bring in huge amounts of external funding."

In retrospect, this was not as absurd a "dialogue" as it may seem. Controversy over the contract finally brought long-simmering but repressed issues, such as gaping salary inequalities between full-time faculty of the same rank and radically differing views of the university mission, into the light of day. Of course, given the current political situation and dominant American values, the struggle for equity will be difficult.

It will be years before we can properly assess the long term ramifications of the strike of April 2001.

"For those of us picketing at Manoa," history professor Karen

Jolly has written, "the days on the strike line have built a sense of solidarity and purpose often lacking on our large and diverse campus."

Indeed, what we observe in the current academic year is a faculty more confident about its central role in the university and conscious of a newfound strength and purpose. After the crucible of the April strike, faculty have taken greater ownership of the University of Hawai'i Professional Assembly as their union and are demanding more of it.

We are now prepared to take larger risks. In early September, a cadre of strike picket captains from various campuses met to evaluate the lessons of the strike for the future and joined other unions in a high-spirited Labor Day Education march. If an acceptable contract is not on the table in 2003....

For years, I'd noticed the Japanese language instructors in the building across from my office walking to and fro between classes and office. We passed like ships in the night. The strike, by bringing us together on the East-West Road 6 a.m. picket line and giving us a unique opportunity to exchange grievances, ideas and hopes, created the basis for a different relationship.

Nowadays, we greet each other warmly, "talk story," and even have lunch on occasion. Multiply this by a 100- or 500-fold on campuses around Hawai'i and you understand how the strike has already transformed our institution. ■