How California State University Faculty United to Win

by Lance Newman

In May 2007, the California Faculty Association (CFA), representing more than 24,000 faculty, counselors, and librarians at the 23 campuses of the California State University (CSU), won one of the best collective bargaining agreements in higher education history. The new agreement provides a 20.7 percent general salary increase for all members, as well as annual service step increases for those eligible. Faculty members who receive all of the raises and step increases will see an aggregate pay increase of 35 percent over four years. In addition, the new contract increases job security for lecturers (i.e., faculty in non-tenure-bearing positions) improves family leave benefits, streamlines grievance procedures, and preserves the popular faculty early retirement program. Finally, the contract commits the CSU to increase the number of tenure-track positions as a percentage of the overall faculty workforce.

The CFA contract victory bucked national trends in higher education, where faculty compensation has stagnated since the early 1980s, tenure and academic freedom have come under intense pressure, and institutions across the country have sharply increased their use of contingent faculty.[1] In California, the local face of these trends was CSU Chancellor Charles Reed, who took office in 1998 after serving as chancellor of the Florida university system, where he worked tirelessly to break the powerful United Faculty of Florida. Reed had been a prominent member of the state's Business–Higher Education Partnership, an organization of

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business leaders and university administrators that pushed for the implementation of corporate management practices in public higher education. The Partnership argued that universities should be run like businesses, with presidents exercising "the authority to increase funding . . . by raising tuition, cutting expenses, creating additional revenues from research and development, and selling services." The group also pushed for "increasing faculty workload and aggressively challenging tenure."[2] Matching deeds to words, Reed opened Florida's first tenure-free campus, Florida Gulf Coast University.

Not long after moving to California and the CSU, Reed publicly stated his

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belief that "locking ourselves into a tenure track for faculty forever, I don't think is what's best."[3] When faculty senates on several CSU campuses passed resolutions condemning the statement, Reed dismissively responded, "the academic senates are controlled by a small number of discontented faculty." In short, Reed came to California to remake the CSU in the image of a lean, mean U.S. corporation. And his first goal was to demote the system's faculty members, hoping to change them from active stewards of their universities into compliant, at-will employees.

Winning a strong contract from such a hostile administration required an intense two-year campaign, culminating in a strike vote during which a landslide majority voted in favor of a walkout. Had it occurred, the CSU faculty strike would have been the largest in higher education history. The CFA is the largest faculty bargaining unit in the U.S., and the CSU is the biggest university system in the world, with more than 400,000 students, over two million alumni, and an annual budget of more than $4 billion. The CFA victory was a critical win not only for CSU faculty, but for the labor movement as a whole because it showed the power of a democratic, member-run union that is willing to use its most powerful weapon: the strike.

The beginning of the fall 2004 semester was a low point in the history of higher education in California. Over two years, state funding for the CSU had been slashed by more than half a billion dollars (approximately 20 percent), and students had seen their fees skyrocket 63 percent. Most CSU campuses opened that fall to overcrowded classrooms, cancelled sections, months-long waits for advising appointments, extended graduation timelines, and shuttered degree programs. The administration even reduced its enrollment targets for the 2004/05 academic year by 15,000 students, turning away enough qualified applicants to fill a medium-sized campus.[4] The cover of the October 2004 *California Faculty Magazine*, a publication of the California Faculty Association, featured a collage of images: a laid-off lecturer, an overworked researcher, a completely full parking lot, and students waiting in endless lines. The headline read, "Solution? A Strong CFA."[5] If the CSU was to be saved from the budget ax and from its own administration, the united faculty would have to be the agent of change.

The CFA's contract campaign strategy started from the recognition that one of the most important ways faculty could improve conditions for the entire university community was by winning a strong contract for themselves. Students, faculty, and staff would all benefit from a contract that not only stopped the downward slide of faculty living standards, but also defended shared governance, limited the administration's arbitrary power, established reasonable workload expectations, and ensured a stable workforce with academic freedom. This analysis was summed up in the slogan: "Faculty working conditions are student learning conditions."

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Just as importantly, the CFA statewide officers understood one of the most fundamental principles of democratic unionism: Strong leadership is worthless without the support of an organized and active membership united behind a clear set of demands. At the fall 2004 CFA Assembly, delegates from all the chapters debated bargaining priorities. After a series of meetings, surveys, and public forums held on all 23 campuses, the Contract Development/Bargaining Strategy committee presented the union's Board of Directors with a recommended set of bargaining requests.

The central issue for most members was salary—not surprising given that faculty had gone two years without a raise. According to the California Postsecondary Education Commission (CPEC), average salaries at the CSU had fallen more than 13 percent behind those at comparison institutions.[6] Many faculty were unable to afford homes in the state's inflated real estate market. As a result, programs were finding it difficult to recruit and retain new faculty, especially from underrepresented groups. Other key issues included growing workloads and the broken grievance procedure. Teaching loads had become increasingly onerous as administrators demanded that faculty shoulder the burden of the budget cuts by raising class sizes and accepting incremental increases in their advising and administrative duties. Meanwhile, bottlenecks and foot-dragging at CSU headquarters had allowed a two-year backlog of contractual grievances to pile up. Finally, faculty asked that the new contract put an end to never-ending increases in parking fees, and protect the popular early retirement program and parental leave provisions already in the contract. The CFA's initial bargaining proposal reflected these concerns.

By contrast, the CSU's opening proposal made no mention of scheduled raises during the life of the contract, calling instead for the award of "compensation increases based upon faculty unit member's performance" (i.e., merit pay). The administration made no noteworthy proposals regarding workload, but did call for a number of technical changes to the grievance procedure that would have made an already prohibitively complex process even worse. The CSU negotiators also made clear that they would seek significant limitations of lecturers' rights. Finally, and inexplicably, the administration demanded the complete elimination of the faculty early retirement program. On almost all of the core issues, the administration and the faculty took opposing positions.

At the CFA's Spring 2005 Assembly, the group's leaders outlined a multi-faceted strategy to guide campus chapters through what was expected to be a long and difficult fight. The plan was to use a range of complementary tactics to bring pressure to bear on the bargaining table, the place where an agreement would be hammered out. Building a strong bargaining team was the critical first step. The 26-member team included representatives of almost all of the chapters, along with President John Travis and General Manager Bob Muscat. Intense negotiations began in late April and continued for two years. Though conducted almost entirely out of the public eye, the work of the bargaining committee was

concentrated and continuous throughout the campaign.

Second, the CFA communications program focused on outreach to the faculty through *California Faculty Magazine,* regular e-mail headlines, and the CFA Web site. Pulling together a united rank-and-file depended on individual faculty members understanding not only the broad goals of the contract fight, but also what might seem to be minutiae, such as the differences between general salary increases, service step increases, and faculty merit increases. The communications team also distributed regular updates to state legislators, informing them of the effects of the budget cuts and arguing that higher education funding should be a priority. Finally, the team publicized example after example of outrageous misuse of taxpayer funds, such as when, during the depths of the budget crisis, Sacramento State University President Alexander Gonzalez spent $268,000—enough to pay for more than 50 classes—to renovate his presidential office suite.

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At the same time, CFA launched a number of coordinated long-term activities designed to expose the Reed administration's cronyism. It was clear that administrators could find money for the personnel costs that mattered to them. From 1993 to 2004, the number of CSU administrators had grown by 50 percent from about 2,100 to more than 3,150. The cost of their salaries had grown from $140.5 million to $247.9 million, an increase of 76 percent.[7] In an ongoing series of "Charlie Watch" actions, activists confronted the chancellor when he appeared in public, challenging him to explain his priorities. Simultaneously, the union's legal staff filed lawsuits relating to some of the most egregious cases of sleaze, such as the decision to appoint a former chancellor, Barry Munitz, to a tenured professorship after he resigned from another institution following allegations of corruption and misuse of funds. Munitz's appointment at a salary of $163,776, almost double the average salary for a full professor, required him to teach one course.[8]

As the contract campaign heated up, the CFA found itself, along with other California public employee unions, facing political attacks by Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger. At the top of the governor's agenda was a plan to replace California's state employees' pension systems with riskier defined contribution plans. In response, CFA joined with other unions to form the Alliance for a Better California. The coalition organized massive rallies in downtown Los Angeles and in Sacramento and produced a series of television ads in which teachers, firefighters, and police officers scolded the Governor for attacking working families.[9] The campaign generated so much buzz and gained so much public support that Schwarzenegger's pension reform plans never made it out of committee.

The final element of the CFA's multi-faceted organizing strategy was a varied and continuous campaign of rank-and-file activism on the individual campuses. Chapters sponsored public debates about academic freedom, collaborated with student activists to protest budget cuts and fee increases, and rallied with like-minded partners such as the CSU Employees Union and the Academic Professionals of California. In sum, CFA's contract campaign plan—known as the Octopus Strategy—coordinated eight modes of organizing: bargaining, communications, Charlie Watch, legal action, political work, labor solidarity, community support, and faculty activism.[10] Although the plan carried the risk that union resources and strength would become diffused, it offered a multi-faceted approach that applied pressure from many different angles. As any particular tactic began to lose novelty and effectiveness, it could be deemphasized in favor of another. And because each tactic generated a different kind of story, the CFA was able to keep faculty concerns in the news over a long period of time.

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After more than a year of bargaining and activism, the contract campaign became more urgent when the CSU team walked away from the negotiating table in July 2006. Chancellor Reed had publicly pledged to close the CPEC salary gap within five years, but his compensation offer turned out to be grossly inadequate. When the CFA team demanded more, the university's negotiators closed their briefcases and left. Reed sent them back to the table a few weeks later with a revised salary offer that he claimed included almost 25 percent in salary increases; but for most faculty members, it would have meant less than 15 percent in raises over four years, barely enough to keep up with inflation.

At an organizing training session in August 2006, CFA launched a new effort, featuring the slogan, "Stop the Ripoffs," that was designed to escalate the pressure on the administration. The key goals were to move even more members into action, and to build solidarity across the university community by stressing the connections between stagnant faculty salaries, non-stop student fee hikes, and outrageous executive pay. Statewide officers traveled to all 23 campuses where they convened membership meetings designed to demystify the chancellor's "generous offer." Angry faculty members flooded Reed's fax machine with hundreds of messages of protest. Faculty activists also confronted the administration directly, organizing a 1,500-strong march and rally at the November 2006 Board of Trustees meeting.

Nevertheless, negotiations remained stalled throughout the fall. At the end of September, the California Public Employment Relations Board certified that contract talks had reached an impasse, and the two sides agreed to submit their dispute to mediation. Three months later, as faculty turned in their grades, the state-appointed mediator declared that he had failed to broker an agreement. This announcement cleared the way for fact-finding—the third and final stage of the legally mandated bargaining process—during which a third-party analyst would

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study the situation and make a series of non-binding recommendations about how to resolve the standoff.

When faculty returned to campus in January 2007, the CFA and the CSU had been in contract negotiations for 21 months. The long delay was deeply frustrating, and conditions had gotten much worse. Salaries had been stagnant for five years while the consumer price index had risen by 12 percent. After adjusting for inflation, faculty salaries had actually fallen by at least nine percent. The salary gap between the CSU and CPEC comparison institutions now stood at an all-time high of 18 percent.[11] Meanwhile, high-ranking administrators were raking in huge raises. During the two years since 2005, Reed and the Trustees had handed out 23.4 percent in compensation increases to campus presidents and other top executives. Reed himself had seen his salary increase by $48,800, more than the starting salary of many assistant professors. Meanwhile, he refused to budge an inch in the contract standoff. In a welcome-back letter to all faculty, he continued to peddle the spurious claim that he was offering “an unprecedented salary proposal” that would deliver a generous 25 percent raise over the life of the contract.[12] Days later, he voted with the trustees to give campus presidents and top executives yet another raise.

The centerpiece of CFA activism throughout spring 2007 was the strike vote campaign, centered on the theme, “I don’t want to strike, but I will.” Soon after the October 2006 certification of impasse, the CFA General Assembly had empowered the Executive Board to poll the membership, asking for authorization to call “rolling walkouts, two-day strikes, and/or a system-wide strike.” Coordinating this vote was approached as a full-scale activist campaign, mobilizing the resources of the entire union. The goal was to generate the highest possible turnout to the polls, with the highest possible number of ballots in favor of job actions. Strike committees were established, made up of chapter officers along with a new layer of faculty activists who had stepped up during the previous year. Posters, flyers, t-shirts, and other materials that encouraged voting were distributed on every campus. Because it was critical to secure a clear forecast of the results, faculty were asked to sign pledge cards, committing themselves to cast ballots.

Not surprisingly, the impending vote became the central topic of campus conversation. And new revelations added fuel to the fire. Research by the Center for

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Economic Organizing showed that, while the administration was pleading poverty, the system's unrestricted net assets had grown by $500 million since 2002, reaching an all time high of $1.2 billion.[13] A fraction of this slush fund could have easily paid for the difference between the CSU and CFA salary proposals. Moody's Investor's Services validated these conclusions when they raised CSU's bond rating, citing the system's healthy cash reserves.[14]

Following a March 2007 vote, the CFA Board of Directors announced that the membership had overwhelmingly authorized a series of two-day walkouts that would move from campus to campus across the state. A full 81 percent of the union's 10,000 members cast ballots, and 94 percent voted in favor of these rolling strikes. President Travis remarked, "Faculty don't want to strike, we want to teach. But in my 30 years at the CSU, I've never seen us more united." Local and national media covered the results of the vote, and the story was featured on television news programs in every media market that included a CSU campus.[15] Public response was overwhelmingly positive. Resolutions of support were passed by the Associated Students of the San Francisco, East Bay, Monterey Bay, and Channel Islands campuses, as well as by the California State Students Association. Just as important as the student endorsements was a powerful surge of solidarity from the labor movement as a whole. Letters of support arrived from the California Teachers Association, the American Association of University Professors, and many other unions and professional organizations. Central Labor Councils (AFL-CIO) up and down the state prepared to enforce strike sanctions, and tens of thousands of union members sent letters to the chancellor and trustees.

One letter that Reed may have read more closely than most was sent by 28 state legislators, including Senate Majority Leader Gloria Romero, a longtime member of CFA. The letter lambasted the administration for wasting money on expensive and "inoperable" computer systems and on huge raises for administrators, while showing "little appreciation for the circumstances of faculty and students in your system." In closing, the legislators wrote that they found the "20-month delay" in bargaining "unacceptable" and strongly urged the chancellor to "settle" an agreement based on "the faculty's reasonable contract terms."[16]

On March 25, four days after the results of the strike vote were announced, the long-awaited report from factfinder Sylvia Skratek was made public. Stunningly, Skratek recommended that the faculty should be given a 25.37 percent general salary increase over four years, plus 10 percent in service step increases. She also argued that that the CSU should aggressively pursue funding to reduce workload by hiring more tenure-track faculty, that no changes be made to the faculty early retirement program, and that parking fee increases be limited to the general salary increase percentage in any given year.[17] Skratek's ringing vindication of the CFA's reasoning on almost every point, combined with the intense pressure of the united faculty and their many supporters, finally forced the administration to face the facts. Within hours, the CSU Board of Trustees agreed to a new 10-day round of talks using Skratek's report as a framework for a settlement.

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Despite the breakthrough in negotiations, the CFA continued to organize for the strike. Faculty activists pored over maps and walked campus perimeters, attempting to visualize impenetrable picket lines. Union offices were papered with wall charts that identified goals for member participation. Activists created piles of strike materials: picket signs, flyers, factsheets, press packets, and more. Then, on April 3rd, in a conference call with representatives of the press and CFA members on all 23 campuses, President Travis announced that a tentative agreement had been reached, and the strike had been averted.

By the end of this lengthy process, the CFA won more than a new collective bargaining agreement: The CSU's unionized faculty proved their solidarity in practice. Their power was now a central feature of the university's landscape. Even so, just weeks later the administration began to apply spin to the outcome of the contract fight, arguing that faculty raises would require further student fee hikes and cuts to other areas of campus budgets. It was immediately clear that, even though the contract had been settled, it was now up to the faculty not only to enforce it, but also to make the university deliver on its promise to provide an affordable higher education to the children of California's working-class families. On May 10, Travis and dozens of CFA members traveled to Sacramento with hundreds of students from the CSU's 23 campuses. Together, they rallied on the capitol steps against yet another proposed 10 percent fee increase. A delegation of students delivered 7,000 handwritten letters to the lieutenant governor.

CFA's support of the students was only one more example of the remarkable unity that the union's contract campaign helped to create. Throughout the two-year campaign and after the settlement, members maintained a solidly united front in the face of the administration's attempts to play on their individual interests.[18]

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Beyond the faculty, a wide range of allies—including students, university staff, other labor organizations, and state legislators—provided crucial forms of support at critical times. Creative communications were absolutely critical to winning support from these varied constituencies. The statewide organization and local chapters produced a staggering volume of newsletters, factsheets, flyers, e-mail blasts, slideshows, Web sites, videos, and other materials, all designed to unify the faculty and their many supporters around common goals and a common understanding of the ongoing crisis in the CSU. Perhaps the most important lesson of the campaign, though, was the value of widespread member activism. The chapter officers acted as leaders and coordinators, but that work was only possible because hundreds of rank-and-file members of the union stepped forward over the two years to engage in the collective work of winning a new contract.

For some, the motivations were purely economic. It is no secret that salaries are considerably higher in states with collective bargaining in higher education than in those without faculty unions.[19] So simple math was enough to convince many to get involved. Others were moved by personal matters, like the young math professor who reported that his wife's illness made him realize the quality and value of his union-won health benefits. Some older faculty felt a responsibility to improve the CSU for their successors. Each member was moved to action in his or her own way. Most importantly, though, there was a broad pattern of radicalization over the two-year course of the campaign, with faculty becoming increasingly angry and determined with each new revelation of corruption and arrogance on the part of the administration. More and more, faculty came to see the CFA not as a remote advocacy group, but as a collective self-defense organization belonging to the entire faculty. Maintaining that sense of ownership and commitment is one of the most difficult and important challenges the CFA will face in coming years.

ENDNOTES

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10 John Travis, CFA Emergency Strike Preparation Meeting, Long Beach, CA, April 24, 20071

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15 See for instance Jim Doyle, "CSU faculty authorize strike," *San Francisco Chronicle* (March 21, 2007), A1.

16 Assemblymember Alberto Torrico, et al., to Charles Reed, March 12, 2007.

17 Sylvia Skratek, "Fact Finding Report and Recommendations," March 2007.

18 For a systematic analysis of the community of interests across ranks, see Jane Kerlinger and Scott Sibary, "Protecting Common Interests of Full- and Part-time Faculty," *Thought and Action* (Fall 1998), 91-100.

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