

Tarnished Golden State: Fighting Education Cutbacks

By Duane E. Campbell

Over 8,000 students and their supporters rallied outside the California State Capitol in Sacramento on March 22 to demand adequate funding for education. Students brought buses of demonstrators from community colleges throughout central and northern California. This march, organized primarily by community college groups and their allies, was the latest in a series of demonstrations. Forty other protests were staged across the state, with staff, students and faculty from the California State University and University of California systems and community colleges.

At the primary and secondary levels, students, faculty, workers and public education supporters protested deep cuts to education funding as a part of a march for public education. Over 22,000 teachers in California have received layoff notices. Protesters have insisted that public education and public services need their funding restored to meet urgent needs. A particularly effective strategy at the rallies was to have students share their own personal experiences with budget cuts.

In a system once famous for affordable quality in higher education, University of California regents voted to increase tuition an additional 32 percent in the fall of 2009, placing in-state tuition at \$10,302 for undergraduate work. Cal State tuition has increased 182 percent since 2002. Classes have been cut as the universities have furloughed faculty, while students struggle to get into classes that have been canceled. A reduced class schedule causes many students to delay graduation for years, piling up ever-increasing debt burdens; a six-year university education is much more expensive for the student and state than a four-year education.

The California Faculty Association (NEA) represents faculty on the 23 campuses of the California State University. CFA members, staff and allied students helped to



George Lakoff addresses students at Sacramento rally on March 4, 2010

organize many of the nationally-covered demonstrations on March 4. Student-led protests on some UC campuses included brief occupations of buildings. The Sacramento rally and the demonstrations around the state were the product of months of grassroots student organizing.

Professor George Lakoff, a well known messaging strategist, argued at the March 4 event for

a petition drive for the California Democracy Act. If passed after the legally required 600,000 signatures were gathered from registered voters, this act would reduce the requirement to pass a state budget from the current two thirds of each house of the legislature to a simple majority. Lakoff asserted that all the demonstrations would mean little unless the California Democracy Act passes in the November election, so that revenue can be raised to fund California's needs, including education. Lakoff criticized leaders of the California Democratic Party for not getting enthusiastically behind the initiative. At press time the campaign is far behind the required number of signatures. Lakoff argued that an online campaign which would "go viral" was needed to push the initiative.

The media generally gave sympathetic coverage to the demonstrations, but the loose coalition of activists lacks a clear strategy for achieving their goals. At present there is no measure on the November 2010 ballot that raises significant new money for education. Activists can use mass action to pressure legislators and the Governor to redirect excessive spending on prisons and other wasteful programs to education, but there is no chance this year of getting enough Republicans to win the necessary two-thirds vote in the Legislature. To resist further budget cuts students and unions must connect public education with other societal issues involving budget cutbacks.

The economic crisis at the state level has resulted in budget cuts in K-12 and higher education, transportation, libraries, environmental programs, parks, and key social welfare systems in the state and across the nation. This protracted economic decline has had a devastating impact on the California budget and the budgets of 42 other states. Revenues have continued to plunge and legislatures have made a series of deep cuts from coast to coast. The state of California cannot, by law, pass a budget with a deficit as can the federal government. California's tax structure exacerbates these problems by relying on revenue streams that fall precipitously when the economy suffers.

Sacramento Local DSA was an active participant in developing these demonstrations through our work with the Sacramento Progressive Alliance. We have also been working with unions and faculty groups since October, providing training, workshops, campus tabling and organizing efforts to encourage campuses in the three college systems to work together, link to advocates for primary and secondary public education, and use the California Democracy Initiative to grow a movement. ♦

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