



## “Teach CSU” in California

By PETER HOGNESS

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In October 2001, the California Faculty Association (CFA) organized a statewide series of teach-ins that linked its bargaining demands with the future of public higher education in California. The events were a key part of the union’s campaign for a new contract at the 22 campuses of California State University (CSU).

In 2000, the CFA had held public hearings on “The Future of the CSU,” as part of a coalition-building effort to turn around harmful trends in bargaining and in state funding. The 2001 teach-ins, dubbed “Teach CSU,” built on these hearings and were partly inspired by the PSC’s “Teach CUNY” effort the same year.

“Teach CSU was the most ambitious project ever attempted by the California Faculty Association,” the CFA’s magazine reported. Statewide, more than 20,000 people attended. But that success did not come overnight.

Planning had gone on for weeks over the summer, and by September every CSU campus but one had set a date for its event. Endorsements from dozens of elected officials, student groups, labor organizations and community leaders were already in hand when the fall term began. Hundreds of students were involved as planning and outreach moved forward in September. “We couldn’t have done it without them,” the CFA later reported.

As the teach-ins grew closer, management threatened faculty with disciplinary action, claiming that the teach-ins could “violat[e] the contract’s prohibition against concerted activities.” The CFA denounced these warnings as an infringement on both free speech and academic freedom, and management soon backed down.

Under the slogan “Faculty working conditions are student learning conditions” – earlier used at “Teach CUNY” – the teach-ins examined why both had been on the decline. The events were wide-ranging, combining scholarly presentations, music and dramatic performance, Q&A sessions, and talks by students and state legislators. They focused on issues such as:

- \* the trend to replace full-time, tenure-track faculty with part-time lecturers.
- \* increasing class size.
- \* the growing difficulty in recruiting new faculty.

Where appropriate to a class's subject matter, many faculty integrated the teach-in into their course of study. For example, students in a public relations class at CSU Hayward were asked to examine the teach-in as a planned PR event. They analyzed the tactics that were used to get public attention, studied the resulting media coverage and evaluated which tactics were effective and which were not. "They loved being in the position of critic, and expressed their opinions passionately," their professor later wrote.

The CFA's own evaluation concluded that "the response of the news media exceeded all our hopes." There was coverage in every major daily paper, and most teach-ins drew reporters from local TV and radio. Two sympathetic editorials appeared in the San Francisco *Chronicle*, highlighting the faculty's dedication to teaching. The CFA attributed its success with the press in part to a "one-two effort" of local chapters and the statewide organization, working together. On the campus level, "faculty members serving as CFA Campus Media Reps devoted hours to faxing and calling local reporters about their events," *CFA Update* reported.

The success of the teach-ins was an example, the union argued, of why CSU must offer students an education that goes beyond a narrow conception of "job training" alone: "[CSU] professors work tirelessly to teach their students the critical thinking skills they need to be thoughtful, successful parts of their communities." The teach-ins "demonstrated how important these skills are for the civic as well as professional lives of our students....How on earth will we protect our democracy if we do not educate our citizens to participate wisely?"

"Teach CSU" gave a large boost to public support for the CFA and the visibility of its contract fight. This soon had an impact on contract talks: Management stopped its foot-dragging and began to get serious about negotiations; CSU administration offered proposals that the union felt were worth discussing. But the system's chancellor later changed direction and backed away from a settlement, citing state budget problems.

The union responded by greeting the chancellor with large rallies at his public appearances. The first, outside the San Francisco Marriott Hotel on February 9, drew 1,000 members and supporters from across the state. "I did not anticipate the large welcome," the chancellor told the press. More rallies followed him to Pomona, Sacramento and Dominguez Hills.

Meanwhile the CFA was starting the spring term with preparations for a possible job action, including some form of a strike. In New York, the law bans public employee strikes and courts have imposed increasingly strict sanctions. But in

California, most public employees have the right to strike if mediation and fact-finding fail.

All these converging pressures led management to sign a new contract agreement on March 2. CFA President Susan Meisenhelder described the contract as “a victory for all Californians who are concerned about maintaining the quality and accessibility of the CSU.”

“The CFA’s work for better management and adequate public funding for the CSU did not end when the contract was signed,” noted Alice Sunshine, the union’s communications director. “The top CSU administration seems to have believed it was merely a ploy to get a decent contract. It was not. We continue to advocate for a better public higher education system, and that is good for everyone – including the faculty.”