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UC-AFT Lecturers Engage in Systematic Labor Unrest!

My feet are sore and blistered. My legs are knotted. This comes from having walked the picket line for nine hours on each of the last two days. Our job action is now over and my legs are grateful for that. I say “job action.” A number of articles in newspapers say the Lecturers of the UC System went on “strike.” I am old school, I guess, because for me a strike is when you walk out and don’t come back till you have a contract. Lecturers throughout the UC System didn’t do that. We engaged in systematic labor unrest for two days.



Picket Line at Mellow Campus by the Sea

Maybe it’s just a quibble—strike or labor unrest. But when you walk the picket line you have time to think, and I began to wonder as I walked how the hell does one strike a multi-campus behemoth like the

UC System. After all they are not turning out product; by walking out, we were not cutting down the flow of that. We are not pinching the UC in their pocket books, like the longshoremen down at Long Beach were doing, till Bush shut them down. K-12 teachers can strike of course and have a disruptive effect. People depend on schools for childcare, if not education, so after a couple of days parents get upset. But the students where I teach, at UCSB, were not upset, nor were their parents.

So why then did Lecturers, throughout, the UC system engage in systematic labor unrest? For a number of reasons—but mostly because our union, the UC-AFT, has been in negotiations with the UC system for 2.5 years and gotten absolutely nowhere. That was the legal basis for our strike. You have to have a legal basis, and that is especially the case when you have, as Lecturers do, a no-strike clause in your contract. But legally too, when you have been negotiating for 2.5 years you have to wonder if you have a contract. While the University says otherwise, the lawyers for the union assured us we had a legal reason to "strike," to withhold our labor and picket.

Apparently, we could strike on the basis of a ULP, unfair labor practice. This is another legal thing, an actual document filed with PERB (The Public Employee Relations Board of California) that, on the Lecturer side, asserts that the University has engaged in unfair labor practices. We have filed a number of these—8, I do believe—at this time, and so engaging in systematic labor unrest was a way of saying to the University, "Stop Doing That." And those of us who might have contact with the media were repeatedly told to not talk about things like money and job security, but to stick to the ULP idea. If we didn't and did talk about money and things like that the University might file a ULP against the union for attempting to negotiate details of the contract in public. Sort of makes you wonder whatever happened to "free speech."

So we had a legal reason, and in a way too it was a real reason. For myself, the more I heard about how our actual negotiators at the table had been treated the more pissed I got. Beyond rudeness, I thought, more like downright humiliation. And rumor has it that one of the persons on our side finally lost it and started cursing out the university side and had to be led from the room. One of the newspaper articles on our labor unrest remarked on how civilized our job action was. Well, somebody said, they are teachers, not teamsters. I wonder who is being insulted here. True, teachers aren't likely to go into the fuck you and your mothers and fathers mode. But one of our negotiators was pushed to that point.

Our team of negotiators would show up and sit there and sit there, and the other side would be four hours late. They replaced their chief negotiator in midstream. And then it became clear that their negotiators weren't negotiators at all. They couldn't actually make a decision that would stick. Instead they would have to go back and talk to whoever their bosses were and then come back days, weeks later, with responses that seemed to have no relation at all to what we had been talking about days and weeks before. Things got so bad that the governor's office sent in one of its "mediators" to try to settle the dispute. But to this date, even his presence and his efforts have had no effect.

That was one reason—hearing about how our negotiators were treated—that made me feel we at UCSB had to do something when the word came down from the top of our union that we would "strike" system wide on October 13th and 14th. Well, not Berkeley, though, since they had stolen a match—Berkeley being Berkeley—by holding their strike in August. But that left a bunch of other campuses for the 13th and 14th. UCSB though was far from a foregone conclusion. We, at this mellow campus by the sea, do not have a culture of political unrest. As a person who has served off and on—mostly on—for 16 years on the executive board of our campus local I have felt despair at not being able to mobilize my fellow Lecturers to come to a free lunch much less go out on "strike."

But special circumstances came into play here. We are not the only bargaining union that has gotten short shrift from the University. CUE (The Coalition of University Employees)-a unit representing clerical

workers—also decided to go on strike for three days on the same days Lecturers were to strike. So when our executive board sat down to make its decision we decided we just had to “go for it.” Had we struck on our own—without CUE—we would have been purely pathetic. I don’t think we could have “personed” the pickets at the three main gates into the campus. But if we did do something, when CUE did something, we would have numbers.

Also I had gone to a number of CUE meetings and was impressed. They were able to draw numbers to their lunch hour meetings, and they were pretty well organized. The membership of CUE is 80% female (there’s a gender issue here that I can’t go into at the moment). I was in a room with mothers, with kids still at home, or about to go to college. And with grandmothers. And they were pissed off. Over the last ten years they had seen their working conditions steadily deteriorate and their pay not keep up at all with the cost of living. In their negotiations, the University had offered them a 1% raise and that the university said was contingent on the budget situation.

So when the members of our executive board met to discuss what we would do, we sort of had our marbles in a row. A legal reason to strike and possible numbers for the picket line with CUE at our side. So we said, yes, at the local level to a “strike.” Easier said than done, we knew at the time. But we had a core of Lecturers in the Writing Program, where I work, that we knew we could count on to be on the picket line. This was important, again from a legal perspective. Deciding to go on strike with CUE was not a purely opportunistic move. CUE is unaffiliated. But the AFT is affiliated with the AFL-CIO. That meant that members of the AFL-CIO might recognize our picket line. But the line itself wouldn’t be a legal line unless at least one living member of the AFT was present.

We managed to pull that off. And I was gratified to hear that UPS did not cross the line, and at the gate where I stood one huge truck drove up. The guy saw the picket line, ask what was going on, and then asked the university person at the gate how he could turn around and go back where he had come from. Now THAT was sort of magical. And for me gave some real meaning to the word “solidarity.”

Solidarity or something like it emerged also from a few odd places. When I was putting up my banner in the dim morning light, I suddenly became aware that a cop car had driven up the sidewalk right behind me. And I felt as I usually do when a cop car pulls up behind me. But the anxiety quickly dissipated when members of CUE went up to the car and began to banter with the officers. The cops all knew the people of CUE and the people of CUE knew the cops. A whole other level of social economic stratification opened up before my eyes. I knew none of the cops.

Before the end of the day I did. I talked with one cop for an hour; we shared the arc of our lives and talked about the students, their drunkenness and the difficulties of being a police officer in I.V., our student ghetto. He had come up to me to ask where we Lecturers had purchased our t-shirts. I wasn’t able to say since they were hand me downs from Berkeley. But he wanted to know because he wanted to buy t-shirts that were union made. The cops were union and he was the president of their local. Turns out—and I didn’t know—that for some reason the UC insists on having its own police force, 250 strong throughout the state. And their troubles negotiating a contract with the UC system exactly paralleled our own. Three years of negotiations until they had finally gone out and got a hired gun, a professional negotiator who specialized in representing police units.

Maybe, I wondered later, lecturers, adjuncts and other forms of academic contingent labor look too much for support from the professorate, from those above them, rather than from “below” them in the social hierarchy of the university. It might well be that the conditions that might lead lecturers and adjuncts to unionize are much more closely aligned with the conditions of policemen, clerical workers, machinists, and technical workers than with members of the senate faculty. This should be obvious, but it’s hard to

see.

It's hard to see in part because the working conditions of lecturers and adjuncts do differ from those of clerical works and police persons. The latter are nine to five workers (though the police on our campus work 12 hour shifts). They are on site and in the plant 8 hours a day. CUE was able to organize in part because all their workers have the same lunch hour, 12-1, and that's when they met and planned. Lecturers don't have a lunch hour. In fact we teach right through the lunch hour. We come and we go. Some are on campus only for the hours that they teach. I have been trying for 15 years, along with the other members of our executive board, to get fifty Lecturers (of the 240 on our campus) in one room at the same time and have failed.



OK, that's one reason adjuncts and lecturers are hard to organize. And it's a very real reason, structural and institutional. But there's another too, I think, more psychological that bothers me. A headline for an article in the *L.A. Times* on the upcoming job action read something like, "Lecturers Long for the Rewards, Respect of Tenured Faculty." This bugged me because it made Lecturers appear a bunch of "wannabes." I wrote a letter to the editor, that did appear in the *Times*, saying no, I don't want tenure. I want the respect and rewards that I deserve as a teacher. As it is, I wrote, I am paid less than colleagues in community colleges and have less job security than K-12 teachers and I work in one of the best public universities in the world.

That's a hard bullet for academics with Ph.D. and other advanced degrees to bite. It has taken me—I have one of those Ph.Ds. — 20 years fully to bite it. I am a teacher; that's what it says in my union contract and that's what I am hired to do—8 classes of writing per year. And I am good at it. Maybe because I am, I have also come to the conclusion, over the years, that the university as a whole is no good at it at all. The university as a whole is concerned with research, and the UC system does an excellent job of supporting its tenured researchers. My campus has two Nobel Prize laureates wondering around on it somewhere.

But it does a very poor job of supporting its teachers and from that I infer that the UC does not care much about its teaching mission.

I think there are profound implications in that last statement for students and their futures. But for the moment I will stick to the point. The gulf between adjuncts, lecturers and their tenured colleagues is profound. Certainly we did in our job action receive support from members of the senate faculty. But not many and these were mostly the “usual suspects,” people who, to their credit, are known campus activists. And an unexpected letter of support for Lecturers was generated by tenured faculty. But none of them showed up on the picket line. I don’t want to make that—being on the picket line—a litmus test of “solidarity.” But the strike would surely have received more press if our two Nobel Prize laureates had joined us on the line, but they didn’t.

But all campuses are different, even ones in a system like the UC. UC Santa Cruz was flat out shut down for the two day action. Turns out, there, the senate faculty at Santa Cruz is unionized. Once again solidarity counts. And maybe that solidarity was there in part because Santa Cruz was from the get-go established as the “liberal arts,” or “teaching” campus of the system.

My adrenaline rush is wearing off. In fact, I am writing this mostly to get rid of the rather unpleasant fumes of that rush. I will be back in the classroom in a couple of hours, and I look forward to that. The last couple of days have been experientially dislocating. I don’t know what I will say if my students ask me how it went. I guess I will say what I said to the campus radio station. It was a success. It was a success because Lecturers, in their 16 years as a union, had never done it before, and this time we did. And it was a success because we acted together with another union, something too we had never done before. And it was a success because students learned more about the working conditions of their teachers. And it was a success because we received press and for the first time ever the press acknowledged and somewhat accurately described what a lecturer is.

As to whether it will have its intended effect of moving the UC towards reasonable and fair negotiations, I have absolutely no idea. But as soon as I can I plan to go on line and check out the UC-AFT website. If you want to see how the story works out, you check it out to at:

<http://www.cft.org/uc-aft/>

The pictures here were taken by my friend, fellow striker, and teacher of writing, Madeleine Sorapure, Ph.D.