

Looking Forward

Teachers are ready to organize, resist



By Mark James Miller, Apr 27, 2017

“Organize! Resist!” These were the watchwords of the 75th California Federation of Teachers Convention at the Sheraton Grand Hotel in Sacramento.

More than 500 delegates from more than 50 locals were in attendance. It was one of the most crowded CFT conventions in recent memory. Nearly every seat was taken and there were dozens of people sitting on the floor of the ballroom during the general sessions. The workshops were all standing-room-only.

Why? A sign of the times. This was the first convention of the Trump era, and the new president is no friend of unions, teachers or organized labor.

A general feeling exists that we in the labor movement must be ready for some tough times ahead, that we may be facing serious anti-union legislation from Washington very soon, the kind that already exists in the most backward states. In Kansas, for example, state laws not only have deprived teachers of their unions and their right to collectively bargain, they no longer have any form of due process when it comes to disciplinary matters. Reactionaries in Congress may try to use Kansas as a model for the entire country.

Whereas in the not-so-distant-past it was possible to speak of big business and big labor in the same breath, the size and influence of American labor has declined to the point where any attempt to describe it as being on any kind of equal footing would bring guffaws to either side. Corporations vs. unions is now David vs. Goliath, and even that may be an exaggeration. In their assault on unions, reactionaries are seeking to take us back to the worst days of the Industrial Revolution.

So, the mood at this year’s convention was somber but spirited, cautious but defiant. Speaker after speaker emphasized the need to defy the Trump agenda and the importance of teaching and teachers. Darrell Steinberg, mayor of Sacramento, noted the huge impact teachers can have in the lives of students of all ages.

Assemblyman Tony Thurman from Richmond noted that teachers are priced out of buying a home in more than 30 of the nation’s cities, and for that reason he is sponsoring legislation to provide affordable housing for educators in California.

Billionaire philanthropist Tom Steyer, who described himself as “the son and grandson of teachers,” noted that “democracy does not begin or end on election day” and stated that “Trump is coming after our rights.” He reminded the audience of how important it

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is to prepare young people for the future, a mission made all the more vital when you consider who is in the White House and his contempt for law and the judicial process.

Not all was negative. When the Communication Awards were announced we were delighted to find out we have won awards in all five of the categories we had entered, including first place awards for best website, best use of social media, best public relations, best bulletin series, and a third place for best single effort.

The mood of the convention was also defiant. Delegates held a march and rally for immigration, taking their protest to the nearby ICE headquarters. A resolution was passed to support a single-payer health-care system in California.

CFT President Josh Pechthalt noted we have to be ready “for the long fight.” I came away certain that the teachers of California are prepared to do just that.

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