

## Somber But Defiant: CFT Convention 2018

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The overall mood at this year's California Federation of Teachers Convention was somewhat more subdued than in recent years. With Donald Trump in the White House, the decision in the Janus case expected anytime, and Betsy DeVos as the Secretary of Education, American teachers have more than their fair share of issues to be anxious about. Trump is certainly no friend to unions or to teachers, the Janus Case could deal a severe blow to the strength of public employee unions, and DeVos would like to dismantle the entire public educational system by "privatizing" it.

(As we did last year, in an effort to save money, the local executive board voted to only send two delegates to Costa Mesa, myself and Beverly Garcia, who was attending for the first time. As always, we attended useful and practical workshops, and will report on them separately).

If the atmosphere at this year's convention, which took place from March 23—25 at the Costa Mesa Hilton Hotel, was subdued, it was also defiant. Teachers are optimists by nature, and the 353 delegates and the 116 guests, in spite of all that is stacked against them, brought with them an unmistakable "never say die" attitude. The underlying spirit could be summed up as "We've seen tough times before, and we came through them stronger than ever, and we will get through these tough times as well, come what may."

The delegates were welcomed by Ms. Jennifer Muir Beuthin, the general manager of the Orange County Employees Association. She gave an empowering speech, reminding the delegates that both labor and the Democratic Party are making inroads into what has traditionally been one of the reddest places in America, Orange County, California, much to the chagrin of the Republican party there.

She was followed by Tony Thurmond, who currently represents the 15<sup>th</sup> Assembly District and is now a candidate for State Superintendent of Public Instruction. He is being endorsed by the CFT, and the delegates were told several times that his election is a "must." Thurmond is pro-teacher, pro-union, and pro-public schools, and he decided to run for this office after speaking at last year's convention.

Growing up in a poor family, Thurmond describes himself as one of those "who are not supposed to make it," but did anyway, thanks to education. "Education saved

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my life,” he told the crowd. He experienced hunger as a child, and understands the kind of obstacles poor families face as they try to better their lives. His speech was to the heart and from the heart, and the delegates gave him a standing ovation.

The following day there was a speech from Erwin Chemerinsky, Dean of the UC Berkeley Law School. The son of a teamster, and a former social studies teacher, Chemerinsky’s speech was focused on the state of our legal, political, and educational systems. Pointing to the Janus Case, which has been funded by some right-leaning wealthy people, (as was the Fredericks’ case before it), Chemerinsky noted that the push to “privatize” the public school system is taking place because these well-heeled people see “privatization” as an opportunity for them to make money. Public employee unions stand in their way, and weakening their power by taking away agency fee would greatly aid them in their quest to take down the nation’s public school system and fatten their pocketbooks at the same time.

A quick primer on the Janus Case: Like the Fredericks’ case that preceded it, the case is about a public employee who objects to having his fair share or agency fee deducted from his paycheck. Some people simply do not want to belong to a union, usually because they disagree with the political leanings of that union. However, these people, regardless of whether they want to belong or not, benefit from what the union does for them in negotiations, in the grievance process, in improving working conditions, etc. When the union negotiates a raise, everyone in that union receives it, including those who do not want to belong. Since 1977, the law has recognized this by enabling a public employee to have whatever percentage of a union’s revenue goes to political causes refunded to them every month. In our local, for example, that amount is calculated at 6%, and so non-members have the right to request that 6% of their dues be sent back to them each month. While some people have taken advantage of this in the past, no one is doing so at present.

While this seems a fair solution to most people, the anti-union forces want to take this a step further and enable non-union members to opt out of paying *any* dues whatsoever, while still benefiting from what the union does for them. That this also encourages and enables employers to discourage people from joining the union and also assists them in pursuing an anti-union *divide et impera* policy goes without saying. One only has to look at what takes place in the so called “right-to-work” states where union

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membership is optional and as a result pay is lower and unions have little bargaining power to see how this works.

Chemerinsky also pointed out that the Supreme Court will hear the case of a bakery that refused to make a wedding cake for a gay couple, claiming that it violated their religious freedom. “Every law that enhances equality limits the liberty to discriminate,” Chemerinsky pointed out.

While the political landscape looks grim at the moment, Chemerinsky told the listening delegates that we have a choice: “We can give up, or we can fight harder.” The response from the delegates made it clear their choice is to fight harder.

That afternoon the delegates piled into school buses and went to nearby Centennial Park in Santa Ana, to take part in a “March For Our Lives” rally protesting gun violence, such as the recent Parkland School Shooting. Students carried signs that read “My Life Means Something” and “Tired of Dying For No Reason” and “We Refuse To Live In Fear.” While the speakers included Gavin Newsome, candidate for governor, and Tom Steyer, the billionaire who is spearheading an attempt to impeach Donald Trump, it was truly inspiring to listen to high school and middle school students speak out against gun violence and shaming the politicians who have refused to take any action to stop it.

For me personally, two especially poignant moments came when the massacre in Seal Beach, California, in 2011, was mentioned. Seal Beach is the town I grew up in, and a teacher from a nearby high school spoke, describing how her mother had died in that shooting, and another came when a survivor of that shooting spoke. The rally concluded with a march around the park.

Another highlight came at the annual CFT Communication Awards. This year we only entered in one category--Best Public Relations—and as we have many times in the past we once again were awarded first place for my columns in the Santa Maria Times. In the last several years we have won as many as six awards for our website, our use of social media, and power points that are used in orientations, but since the untimely death of our webmaster and good friend Dorran Nadeau last year these have, unfortunately, been neglected. However, we are in the process of rebuilding all of them and so as the saying goes, “Wait till next year.”

Finally, there was a powerful speech by CFT President Josh Pechthalt. “We must confront the forces that oppose public education head-on,” he said, “and push back against Trump and his reactionary regime as much as we can.” We must show our members the value and importance of unions, he said, and we also ally ourselves with other progressive groups and organization. He also pointed out that CFT led the fight to force STRS to divest from gun manufacturers.

Times may look grim for teachers and unions right now, but as my high school wrestling coach used to say, “When the going gets tough, the tough get going.” As the recent teacher walkouts and demonstrations in West Virginia, Kentucky, and especially Oklahoma demonstrate, and Arizona, teachers are starting to get going.