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Authors

Newfield, Christopher

Lye, Colleen

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The Struggle for Public Education in California

Christopher Newfield and Colleen Lye, Editors

Christopher Newfield and Colleen Lye

Introduction

The essays collected here are all written by University of California students who were active in the California student movements of 2009–2010. These movements were the largest and most widespread campus-based actions in the United States since the 1960s. They were also remarkable for their intellectual diversity, their successful efforts to link generally disconnected issues, their systematic attempts to rethink student movement strategies, their reflections on their own internal divisions, and their escalating confrontations with local administrations and the police.

The movements became visible to the public in November 2009, when the UC Board of Regents voted for a 32 percent tuition increase—on top of the doubling of tuition that it had already implemented over the course of the decade.¹ But many of the group participants had been operating for years, and the conditions that reached a crisis in 2009 had been reshaping UC and its companion system, the California State University, for two decades.

California's Conceptual and Political Blockage

The student movements had their work cut out for them. Arnold Schwarzenegger was elected governor of California in 2003 in a special election pushed by the California Republican establishment and orchestrated by former governor Pete Wilson, who saw in Schwarzenegger a human firewall against fitful attempts to immolate the low-tax regime that since the late 1970s had limited the development and maintenance of California's previously excellent public infrastructure. Schwarzenegger's tax politics

did not disappoint his backers. After making good on his campaign's flagship idea of cutting the state's vehicle licensing fee, creating a \$7 billion budget shortfall with the stroke of a pen, he forced on the state's higher education sector an austerity measure called the Higher Education Compact. Mistakenly touted by university leaders as a stabilizer of state funding, the compact limited growth in state funding to a rate that was to leave the university systems with less money per student at the end of the decade than they had had when the decade began. The compact also included annual tuition increases of 7 to 10 percent through the end of the decade and a requirement that the UC and CSU systems continue to seek private funds to replace lost public money. As it turned out, this austerity-driven, gradual privatization was a best-case scenario. When the financial crisis hit state budgets in 2008, Schwarzenegger unilaterally abrogated the compact and in one year cut higher education's state funding by 20 percent.²

Schwarzenegger continued the two traditions that have kept Republicans in near-permanent control of the state's executive branch: the racial wedge, which cast traditional suburban California—supposedly white and middle class—as besieged by illegal immigrants and people of color; and the tax wedge, which defined those same white middle-class suburbanites as the small-business owners, professionals, and entrepreneurs besieged by the high taxes required to support those same illegal immigrants and people of color with excessively generous public services. The California Republican Party has not recently won more than one-third of the seats in the legislature, but it maintained effective minority rule by grafting the tax wedge onto the racial wedge.³ Republicans taught voters that a vote for the great public services that had in fact helped previous—and overwhelmingly white—generations out of their own poverty and mediocrity would now be a vote for accelerated decline, for spending more tax money on illegal immigrants and the undeserving nonwhite poor. The voters have obliged by standing aside while higher education became the only sector to see its funding decline in real dollars between 1984 and 2004, by 12 percent.⁴

Before the crisis hit, the results of this social experiment were already in. As economists Claudia Goldin and Lawrence Katz have shown, post-1980 U.S. educational attainment grew at half the rate it had enjoyed during the public funding boom of the four previous decades.⁵ California, one of the world's wealthiest places, has seen one of the world's most astonishing declines in college achievement. The state's continuation rate, the proportion of students starting college who complete it, fell from 66 percent to 44 percent in just eight years (1996–2004).⁶ California's rank among

states in investment in higher education declined during the same period, from fifth to forty-seventh, according to Tom Mortenson, a higher education policy analyst. The state has cut its investment in higher education by close to 50 percent since 1980, forcing tuition increases like the 60 percent rise at the University of California from 2004 to 2008, which was followed by a 32 percent rise between 2009 and 2011. Meanwhile, half of California's students (kindergarten through grade twelve) are now eligible for the federal school lunch program, up from one-third in 1989. As Mortenson notes, these students will have no personal resources to cover the costs of attending college, which at UC is nearly \$30,000 per year.⁷

Throughout this period, the Democratic opposition came to accept the description of the public infrastructure as a "safety net"—something remedial, for society's alleged losers. Higher education by its very nature falsified this idea, since it was a public investment that created and constructed new technology and new ideas, new craft knowledge, new and more effective economic and sociocultural systems. Specialists were well aware that public funding was the only source of support for the early development of scientific and cultural knowledge, for fundamental experimentation, for breakthrough creativity. And yet even progressive politicians seemed unable to learn a basic concept like "market failure" that had been part of economics since the 1950s. They accepted the premise that public outlays could and should be replaced by private funding wherever a higher education manager expressed an eagerness to try.

The University Responds

As the state unemployment rate passed 12 percent, Governor Schwarzenegger furloughed state workers—cutting their pay in effect by 14 percent. University leaders followed a similar strategy. The protest year of 2009–2010 began in July 2009 when UC leaders put on the regents' agenda a declaration of an "extreme financial emergency," emergency financial powers for UC president Mark Yudof, and furloughs for all state-paid workers amounting for most of them to an 8 percent pay cut.⁸ Objections began immediately. An online petition authored by Kris Peterson at UC Irvine called on the UC president and regents to postpone the furlough and emergency powers until a meaningful discussion with the university community had taken place, one that would find better budget solutions than pay cuts.⁹ This petition gathered nearly three thousand signatures in five days. A similar letter, written by UC Berkeley professor George Lakoff,

got more than one thousand signatures in the same period of time.¹⁰ Faculty demanded budgetary “transparency”—the meaningful disclosure and open debate of better solutions that could help make the university financially stable over the long term.

These and other employee efforts were brushed aside. The Board of Regents passed the fiscal state of emergency, the emergency powers, and the furloughs with near unanimity. Very active faculty and staff debate—and some important analyses of the budget, of senior management salaries, and of administrative growth—appeared in places like the blogs *Remaking the University*, *Changing Universities*, and *University Probe*, and later on UCLA’s “alternative commission on the future.”¹¹ It did not appear in official meetings, regular campus forums, or newspaper reports and op-ed dialogues. University leaders focused on denying the practicality of any alternatives and on message control—“the patient is out of intensive care, and his condition is stable,” the president would say. They did not provide detailed, comprehensive information to a university community that wanted more than foregone conclusions—that wanted to understand what could be done besides caving in to downsizing, to instructional reductions, and to quality declines.

The first systemwide, coordinated public protests took place on September 24, 2009. This was the first day of courses for all but the Berkeley campus, which had been organizing for more than a month and had the largest protests, drawing a crowd of five thousand and the attention of national and international media. At Berkeley, the protests were the result of major cooperation among students, faculty, and staff unions, who came together behind the slogan, “No Fees, No Furloughs, No Layoffs.” Individually these demands could be dismissed as expressing special interests, but as an aggregate they managed to represent effectively the public good so that the administration had no choice but to congratulate the demonstrators on keeping alive the Berkeley protest tradition. Over the next months, this necessary yet fragile coalition would be repeatedly put to the test, as the administration, in accommodating itself to ways of absorbing the cuts, would seek to play the constituencies against each other.

Nevertheless, from the September 24 action flowed political goals, frameworks, and movement dynamics that would be developed throughout the year. Student activists and university employees embarked on an effort to organize an unprecedented statewide coalition of students, staff, and educators for all grade levels in defense of public education, which culminated in the March 4 Day of Action that extended beyond California.

Raised consciousness of the statutory obstacles to rational state budgeting promulgated university members' participation in various electoral reform efforts, including a campaign to end legislative minority rule, a campaign to eliminate corporations' exemption from market reevaluations of their tax liabilities, and a campaign to impose an oil severance tax to benefit higher education. Throughout various UC campuses, hitherto dormant or newly formed faculty associations began organizing, in part out of a recognition of the limitations that the formal rights of faculty governance placed on the ability of the academic senates to dissent too openly and vigorously from administrative decisions. On September 24 as well, an irreparable split between student activists in favor of building occupations and other student activists presaged what was to become a central fault line within the coalition, both between students and between students and university employees.

In November, the regents voted to approve the 32 percent tuition increase, and their meetings at UCLA were marked by massive protests, clashes between students and police, and the posting of a video of a student being tasered behind campus bushes, another of a security guard spraying tear gas at passing students, and several regents, caught outside their police-protected meeting room, running from students who were trying to talk to them. At UCLA on November 19 and on the following day at UC Berkeley, UC Davis, and UC Santa Cruz, students occupied campus buildings and were in some cases arrested and charged with disciplinary sanctions.

These protests were widely covered in the mainstream media in California, in the United States, and worldwide. The media had been largely indifferent to faculty and staff protests about loss of pay and cuts to education but showed surprising sympathy to students' fears that the fee hikes would deny them access to a bachelor's degree. A strong endorsement of the public benefits of public funding came not from the UC administration but from a Bay Area television editorial, which asked rhetorically, if the state as a whole benefits from UC's students, professional schools, and medical care, shouldn't the state as a whole pay for it? The November protests offered a starting point for a statewide and national discussion of the creative power of public services whose costs are shared by the entire public as a way of maximizing their benefit for society as a whole.

Decision makers generally immunized themselves from these discussions. The university's senior managers had in practice already given up on restoring public funding, and they spent the rest of the year mis-

describing marginal revenue enhancements as significant solutions. The most visible of these was a pilot program in online education, which was dangled before the regents by the regents' Commission on the Future—and by its strongest proponent, Berkeley School of Law dean Christopher Edley Jr.—as an access revolution and future revenue stream that would allow the UC system to remain the bedrock of social justice for California's diverse population. Some campuses began to replace California residents with out-of-state students because the latter paid much higher tuition. The Berkeley campus did this most aggressively, doubling the out-of-state share of its fall 2010 incoming class to 23 percent and dropping its Latino student share by 12 percent.¹²

Leadership stuck with other tried-and-failed solutions. Administrators proposed increased fundraising, which supports worthy individual projects but rarely if ever supports general operations at public universities. They proposed increased research funding, which the university finally revealed would increase its budgetary shortfall (already estimated at \$720 million per year on current research levels, or nearly four times greater than the money saved through the salary cuts). All yielded marginal financial improvements: even the 32 percent tuition increase gave a net boost of about 2 percent of UC's core campus expenditures for a given year.¹³ All these solutions had already been tried repeatedly, often annually. All were part of the funding model that had helped produce the crisis. All were dysfunctional without the substantial public funding that had subsidized the model's private initiatives from the start. All likely suppressed public support for public funding in the very moment in which the university needed that support more than ever.

Race and Taxes

As we noted, California conservatives had successfully fused race and taxes, suggesting tax expenditures largely benefited less deserving people of color. California liberals tended *not* to confront these claims head-on, by describing public spending as a constructive, creative, transformative benefit to all Californians, meaning that it was spending that must not be cut. In this tradition, UC leaders did not insist that public funding cuts would seriously damage educational access for low-income students or students of color. Student movements reconnected these issues, constantly noting the links among reduced funding, reduced access, and racial discrimination.

Incidents at the Irvine and San Diego campuses brought these impli-

cations to the fore. In February 2010, a UCSD fraternity staged a “Compton Cookout” whose racist framework particularly distressed an African American student population at that campus and elsewhere. The “cookout” was soon followed by the discovery of a noose hanging in the university library, apparently left there by a student “who didn’t think much about it.”¹⁴ Protestors noted the likelihood that if such frank antiblack racism was so deeply entrenched in the UC system that many observers thought the incidents were innocent or funny, then the already tiny black enrollments were likely to decline even further and nobody would care. UC senior managers responded to this by appointing Edley as special advisor “to assess and monitor the situation at UC San Diego and advise both the president and the chancellor as they evaluate current conditions and seek to address underlying causes.”¹⁵ UC officials did not endorse or even address the connection students were making between declining public funding, increased tuition, and the further endangerment of black enrollments and degree completion.

Around the same time (February 8), student protesters interrupted a talk at the Irvine campus by Israel’s ambassador to the United States. Senior managers also responded to this incident by supporting the ambassador against the students protesting Israel’s policy in Gaza and elsewhere in Israeli-controlled Palestine. A letter signed by Yudof, on February 26, 2010, condemned “all acts of racism, intolerance and incivility,” aligning the Muslim organization that protested the ambassador with the fraternity that sponsored the Compton Cookout.¹⁶ The implication was that protesting the ambassador was motivated by an anti-Semitism that could be likened to the antiblack racism of the cookout stereotypes. In keeping with the general parameters of such an interpretation, an Irvine review committee announced the suspension of the Muslim student group involved in the original protest.¹⁷ At each point in the winter of 2010, students had at least three simultaneous tasks: to define which racial groups are in fact disadvantaged, to show that racial tensions flow from structural problems rather than from isolated “intolerance,” and to identify as one of those racially significant structural problems the continuous decline in public support for higher education.

The March 4 Day of Action was truly statewide and involved many sectors of public education. A prominent feature was the effort to connect the campus crisis to the political crisis in California as a whole and to do this physically by taking the protests into surrounding towns: Sacramento in front of the state capitol, San Francisco Civic Center Plaza, and down-

town Oakland. The most sacrosanct element of the California infrastructure—the freeway—was temporarily “taken back” in Oakland and Davis by members of the Occupy Everything bloc. The police became increasingly confrontational and the media less favorable, all while the movements were asking, to whom public infrastructure actually belongs, to whom control should be given, and in whose interests legitimate choices can be made?

This is not to say that the students themselves were unanimous in their analyses and strategic pursuit of these questions. While the occupationists provided the most theoretically articulate (and widely disseminated) systemic analyses of the higher education crisis—in part driven by the fact that they saw themselves as part of a global movement that was linked through virtual communication—activists affiliated with worker movements tended to carry the weight of broad-based organizing that required face-to-face local meetings and democratic consensus. For their part, student leaders cultivated by student government parties or who had cut their teeth in long-standing campus organizations—in particular, those devoted to minority recruitment and retention—were instrumental in spreading protest among the mainstream of students, putting the administration on notice, and using their connections to influential alumni and sympathetic politicians. Much of the significance of the protests of 2009–2010 lies in the fact that they were of a mass quality, involving and activating all kinds of students beyond those belonging to any organized or ideological set. The most effective protest actions were undoubtedly those that reflected the cooperation or at least conjunction of all three groupings: occupationists, student-worker organizations, and student government parties and sponsored campus groups. When cooperation broke down, it was over the flashpoint issues of the place of nonviolence in protest tactics, democratic consensus-making, and race. Momentum had fallen off by the end of the year.

The Continuing Agenda

The essays collected here identify some central issues for student protests and for the student-led reconstruction of public higher education—a reconstruction that most of their elders are failing to begin. The essays also reflect tactical, strategic, and ideological differences of perspective on the events of 2009–2010 that provide a glimpse of key internal movement dynamics and areas of significant internal debate. Despite the infighting, California’s student movements forced a quietly antieducation governor to

stop cutting the higher education sector, brought international attention to the decline of public higher education in the United States, produced public sympathy for the beneficiaries of the public sector, and created new connections among disparate critiques and agendas that offer some hope for the reconstruction of public education in the coming years.

Notes

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