

Bargaining for Good Jobs and Debt-Free College

Kathryn Lybarger, *President, American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 3299*

In July 2015, the University of California (UC) President Janet Napolitano announced that the university would raise its minimum wage to \$15 an hour for all employees and subcontractors working at least 20 hours per week. UC's "Fair Wage/Fair Work" plan is the first \$15 hourly wage standard at a public university in the United States, and the national *Fight for \$15* minimum wage campaign has lauded this victory as an historic step forward for workers.

The more immediate backdrop for Napolitano's "Fair Wage/Fair Work" policy, however, was a campaign by my union at the UC Berkeley flagship campus to insource nearly 100 low-wage subcontracted workers. Known as AFSCME 3299, our union—UC's largest—had launched a "speakers boycott." The boycott called for all invited speakers—including former US President Clinton—to refuse to give speeches on campus until the university directly hired the custodians and parking attendants who had been outsourced. These workers performed the same labor as UC employees but for far less pay and minimal or no benefits from their subcontractor-employers. With the help of student and faculty solidarity, our union eventually won the campaign to bring UC Berkeley's subcontracted workers in-house. The victory provides a path out of poverty for these workers by securing benefits, job security, and wages above the new UC \$15 minimum wage.

At the same time, however, President Napolitano has used her new \$15 minimum wage policy to blunt our union's broader insourcing campaign for other subcontracted workers at UC. Claiming that the \$15 minimum is sufficient, the university has lobbied against legislation backed by Local 3299 that would set the same "prevailing wage" standard for subcontracting that is used for all other California state employees. In short, the UC's "historic" new \$15 minimum wage is being used as a lever to support the university's efforts to lower its labor costs by outsourcing evermore work to subcontractors with precarious job security and much lower wages and benefits than in-house UC employees. This, of course, is all happening at a time of truly historic income inequality in California.

Sadly, UC has often justified cost-cutting on the backs of low-wage workers as necessary for expanding affordability and supporting low-income students. As a mother of two aspiring UC students, I know as well as anyone that we need to make UC affordable again. But eliminating my job security and reducing my modest pay as a UC groundskeeper is like robbing Peter to pay Paul. Without a decent job, UC employees

like me will struggle even more to help our children do well enough in school to gain admissions to UC—let alone graduate from college and pay off student loans. And given that UC is one of California's largest employers, cuts to job security and compensation lower the bar for workers well beyond the university.

The silver lining to all this is that state funding cuts have brought students and labor unions into common cause by leading to both rising student debt from tuition and labor cost-cutting. As noted in Charlie Eaton's "Still Public" contribution to this symposium, our union has sought to build a broader and stronger coalition from this natural alliance by supporting the use of increased state funding to freeze tuition since 2011. Many more higher education unions, including affiliates of the Service Employees International Union and the American Federation of Teachers, have begun to take a similar approach through the Bargaining for the Common Good strategy promoted by the Kalmanovitz Initiative for Labor and the Working Poor at Georgetown University. Through Bargaining for the Common Good, our unions are exploring how to make demands in collective bargaining for policies like tuition relief that can advance our goals as public servants even if they do not relate directly to labor relations (Lerner and Bhatti 2016; McCartin 2016).¹

Still, Eaton makes the on-the-mark assessment in "Still Public" that alliances with university leaders are also necessary to move toward durable reforms on student debt and funding for higher education. Our union would welcome a discussion with UC executives and university leaders more broadly about how we could work together to support expanded public funding for higher education. I think that labor and administrators will need to think big and break out of the boxes from which we have related to each other. If university administrators want to work with student debt coalition partners, they will need to move beyond the largely oppositional relationship to their employees' unions (and often students) that they have long maintained. Moreover, big ideas like debt-free college that have captured the public imagination in 2016 are not necessarily antithetical to either university employees' desire for good jobs or administrators' interest in improving financial stability and educational quality.

As we come together, we may experience that the best policies do not always make the best politics, as Tobias Schulze-Cleven and Julian Garrizmann ably show in this symposium. But as partners with students in the fight for debt-free college, both university labor and management could contribute

to the adoption of reforms that would provide the resources needed for universities to be great employers and outstanding educational institutions. So let's talk!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author thanks Tobias Schulze-Cleven for the invitation to contribute to the symposium and Charlie Eaton for his counsel on the submission. ■

NOTE

1. See also <http://www.bargainingforthecommongood.org/>.

REFERENCES

- Lerner, Stephen and Saqib Bhatti. 2016. "Organizing in a Brave New World." *New Labor Forum* 25 (3): 22–30.
- McCartin, Joseph A. 2016. "Bargaining for the Common Good." *Dissent* 63 (2): 128–35.

Teaching Civic Engagement Across the Disciplines

Coming Soon
as an eBook!

A new wave of civic instruction is moving through American education. As numerous national groups and institutions are joining this effort, political science is uniquely equipped to advance teaching civic engagement. The discipline should lead the movement for high quality civic education across the curriculum and across the disciplines.

To focus on this wave of civic engagement education, APSA is publishing the ebook *Teaching Civic Engagement Across the Disciplines*, edited by Elizabeth C. Matto, Rutgers University; Alison Rios Millett McCartney, Towson University; Elizabeth A. Bennion, Indiana University; and Dick Simpson, University of Illinois at Chicago.

The book redirects the focus from teaching better political science courses to teaching civic engagement across the disciplines. This movement involves university-wide coordinated civic engagement programs and action plans as well as a new nation-wide action plan across high schools, community colleges, four-year colleges, and research universities to consolidate the gains that have been made and provide the resources for the next leap forward. Building on the 2013 book *Teaching Civic Engagement: From Student to Active Citizen*, this book advances the conversation on civic engagement and provides critical scholarly insight into where to go next.

Learn more at <http://web.apsanet.org/teachingcivicengagement>.

