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We Must Band Together to Create Change

The American dream has faded. Although a few fortunate segments of the workforce have hung onto affordable healthcare and a secure retirement, these once-basic benefits are slipping away even for them. The U.S. economy prospered over the last 60 years. For most of us, however, overall gains have been dissipated by a growing concentration of income in the uppermost brackets. The top one percent’s share of US income, which dropped from 24% in the 1920s to 9% in the 1970s, is now back up to 1920s levels.

Conventional wisdom has misled us into accepting globalization and unregulated business. Temporary gains in the standard of living from cheap imports and economic bubbles have masked the long-term declines we’re headed for. Now, we need to do something to shift the track we’re on.

“Until we wake up to the way economic realities are being distorted, fairness will remain a losing battle.”

In recent years, bargaining has all been concessionary negotiations. As long as current income distribution trends continue, unions will have no choice but to use defensive strategies to delay painful cuts ahead.

Meanwhile, vested interests have tried to divert the attention of ordinary Americans with financial mumbo-jumbo, as a means to manipulate us into fighting over economic table-scrapes. Until we wake up to the way economic realities are being distorted, fairness will remain a losing battle.

Attention on economic inequalities

Despite its drawbacks, the Occupy movement has helped focus our attention on economic inequalities and the subversion of government by big business. Change is difficult, and we do not have to agree with all of Occupy’s tactics to support its goals. Right now, we cannot afford to undercut any one movement with similar aims that manages to break through corporate messaging and grab the public’s attention.

Engineers and professionals rank among the most conservative occupational groups, right after farm-owners and business executives. Indulging our natural propensity to distance ourselves from more radical elements will only create self-made obstacles in the pitched battle to save the union movement and the sinking middle class. When our ship is sinking, we can’t afford to waste time criticizing the character of our shipmates.

Instead, we must band together, understanding we have differences and a diversity of opinions, but a larger common goal and interest.
New Year Brings Old Challenges, New Opportunities

Organized labor was successful in achieving select gains during the first year of Governor Jerry Brown’s administration. Nonetheless, we are headed into a year that promises several political battles, the outcome of which will shape the future of the labor movement and the direction California takes in these troubled times.

The battle for taxpayer funds to sustain local government and Redevelopment Agencies, public safety, education, and our diminishing social safety net, will take center stage. The rosy revenue projections in the last budget were overly optimistic. The budget contained a trigger mandating mid-year cuts if revenue collections fell short. Unfortunately, we met that trigger last month.

New revenue a major issue
All eyes are turned toward the next fiscal year’s budget and estimated $13 billion deficit. Given, it’s an election year, it is unlikely Democrats will be able to secure the Republican votes needed to raise new revenue. Recognizing this, there are a number of revenue measures slated for the November ballot, including the Governor’s proposal to raise $7 billion per year in sales tax and increase the income tax of our wealthiest residents.

Legality of Governor’s pension reform proposal in question
Although we are open to addressing abuses in the pension system, the legality of several components of this plan are in question and others are far too extreme. However, given the cuts to public services and the political will to reduce pension benefits, we anticipate a serious fight. The Governor has indicated a willingness to meet with labor as his proposal moves ahead.

Many of our battles will play out on Election Day in November, 2012. We will see last year’s “payroll deception” initiative reappear on the ballot, in addition to several tax initiatives and potentially a measure to modify public employees’ retirement benefits. If passed, this initiative will significantly limit unions’ ability to raise funds for political issues affecting members. Despite losing in the past, the ballot measure’s proponents are back at work, hoping to silence our voice at the political level, and ultimately at the worksite.

Public employees’ pensions in crossfire
Governor Brown is not immune from political pressure to prioritize changes to retirement security. He released a plan to reign in the “skyrocketing” cost of our state and local government pension programs. The plan includes increasing employees’ contributions, reducing benefit formulas and creating new tiers that offer 401k plans, increasing the retirement age to 67, and instituting measures to prevent pension spiking.

Local 21 Delegate Assembly Schedule

JANUARY 28, 2012
Oakland Marriott

JUNE 9, 2012
Hotel Whitcomb
San Francisco

Registration and continental breakfast begin at 8:30 am. Assemblies start at 9 am.

All delegates and members interested in attending should R.S.V.P. to Mandy Bratt, mbratt@ifpte21.org.

Find us on Facebook.
facebook.com/ProTechEng
Members Take a Stand to Save Services, Protect Future

Despite the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression and a concessionary bargaining climate, Local 21 is working hard to protect benefits, minimize concessions, and negotiate non-economic improvements. This year, more than 15 contracts are opening for renegotiation, and the Union is busy developing and executing bargaining strategies that ensure concessions are made only in cases where the justification is substantiated, and everyone is making similar sacrifices.

Since the beginning of the downturn in 2008, public agencies have been using the crisis to attack our benefits. Some employers view our current situation as a golden opportunity to pay less, provide less, and reduce worker’s rights when there is no economic impact. One employer remarked that although its budget was in the black, it wanted concessions because it is an expectation in this economy.

The challenge that lies ahead is to creatively minimize the impact on our members, and draw a hard line where there is no justification for concessions.

Twenty One spoke to chapter leaders and negotiators in varying stages of contract negotiations. Their stories illustrate how some employers are overreaching, skewing facts, and showing disrespect for their employees, as well as how members are taking a stand and fighting back.

GGBD Chapter Holds the Line for Retirees

Members of Local 21 and other unions of the Golden Gate Bridge Labor Coalition are bargaining together and fighting to hold the District to promises they long ago made to employees and retirees to protect current health benefits.

After more than 30 bargaining sessions since April, the District still illegally insists on changing vested retiree benefits with a new retiree healthcare plan that would reduce access to healthcare providers for current retirees.

Jim Hardy, a Steel Inspector and Steward was among members from the Golden Gate Bridge Labor Coalition who spoke before the District’s Board and took part in informational picketing.

“We understand the District’s need to cut costs, and we’ve made proposals that reduce their expenses,” he says. The coalition proposed a “cap” on management’s already oversized pensions. But the District refuses to accept any limit on management retiree benefits. Managers were recently given higher salaries and pensions while forcing employees to live on wages that have not kept up with inflation.

At 67 with a teenage son who suffered a serious chest injury, Hardy has no plans to retire soon. He needs his health benefits. Under the District’s proposed plan, employees will have to pay a percentage that makes coverage unaffordable, particularly for workers with families.

“I’m also standing up for those who’ve already retired,” he says, “to ensure that those who gave their working lives to the District keep the medical coverage they were promised.”

SCWFD Chapters Endure Hostile Climate

Negotiations at Santa Clara Valley Water District were particularly hostile, according to Metra Valle, Engineers Society Vice President. “For the first time, the District wanted retirees to contribute to health care premiums. But,” says Valle, “they legally cannot change this ‘vested’ benefit.” The contract guarantees the district will pay full premiums for current retirees. The District was also intent on weakening layoff protections by limiting seniority-based bumping and eliminating binding arbitration from Local 21’s Professional Managers Association unit.

“We never had to go through concessionary bargaining before,” says Valle.

It was worsened by the District hiring negotiators to come in from the outside. They had no history with the district or appreciation for the employees.

The District couched their attack on benefits by claiming financial hardship. But, these claims were unsubstantiated as the District has sufficient reserves.

After three contentious months of bargaining, the parties ratified a new agreement by the end of the year. While the contract was concessionary overall, the Union got the District to back off its attacks on layoff procedures and binding arbitration. They got a COLA and maintained tuition reimbursement.

While Local 21 agreed to 15% health premium sharing for current employees, we refused to waive rights for current retirees. If the District decides to implement a premium increase for retirees, the issue may have to be decided by the courts.

SF Members Fight for What’s Due

Over the last two years, the city saved $250 million because of members’ willingness to accept a temporary 4.62% pay
Twenty One Winter 2012

reduction in exchange for furlough days. Now as we head into bargaining a new contract, early indications are that the City wants the wage reduction to be permanent, with additional health care concessions and without the furlough days off.

"It’s been hard," says Isabel Auerbach, President of the Health Educator’s chapter. "We’ve bailed out the City a number of times and would like that to be honored. The contract says the 4.62% was a loan not a gift, so we expect that back."

Down to 24 Health Educators from what were once 51, Auerbach says they can’t meet clients’ needs, who include poor mothers receiving education on prenatal care and nutrition, domestic violence issues, and childcare. Due to cuts, they lost a program that helped seniors with home safety and fall prevention.

“We’re about prevention,” Auerbach explains. “What they can’t do now, costs more later. "We’ve tried to maintain remnants of gutted programs, but we don’t have time. We have too many balls to juggle.”

Auerbach explains that though tough cuts have been necessary, having “more work piled on us to take up the slack left by layoffs and furloughs is extremely difficult,” though they remain dedicated to the people they serve.

Even with the 4.62% scheduled to be restored in 2012, with implementation of Prop. C, a ballot measure voters approved last Fall to help keep the city’s pension system solvent, members will pay 3% more for retirement, resulting in a small net wage restoration of 1.12%.

“We’re tired,” says Auerbach. "We’d like to see an increase. We’ve not had a raise since 2008. We deserve one.”

AMSP Counters Mayor’s Hypocrisy

In San Jose, members are frustrated by the Mayor’s hypocrisy, says Dale Dapp, President of Local 21’s newest chapter, Association of Maintenance Supervisory Personnel.

The City wants to cut retirement benefits for employees and retirees by placing on the ballot a measure full of unlawful provisions. It uses retirement cost projections that have been disproven, explains Dapp.

Though the Union has been working hard to negotiate fair solutions, the city prematurely declared impasse. Even the San Jose Mercury News Editorial Board says the City should continue to negotiate.

“We want to achieve a sustainable pension system that’s good for the city, retirees, and future employees,” says Dapp. Because the City’s proposal requires changes to the city charter, voters have to approve the changes.

The Mayor apparently doesn’t want to negotiate. He wants to “take advantage of the economic climate and take back as much as possible,” Dapp says. "The City is showing the public inaccurate numbers that don’t take into account some workforce changes... the 10% pay cut we’ve already agreed to, exaggerated cost projections, layoffs, and investment gains.”

In December, city unions rallied to protest the Mayor’s ballot measure and unveil a “no-cuts budget.” Local 21 is reviewing our next steps with legal counsel.

SF Health Educator Isabel Auerbach wants the City to make good on promises. The Union has bailed the City out numerous times.

Courts. This strategy has presented challenges to negotiations as the Court looks to get a permanent 7.5 % wage reduction in addition to an upcoming pension contribution of 3% and other concessions.

Although the Court received a loan from the AOC in September which reduced the number of layoffs, the Court maintains it needs the same level of concessions in order to function in the future.

"It’s been grim," says Trudy Verzosa, Interim President of SF Superior Court Professionals. In October, the Court laid off 68 employees, 45 of which were from Local 21’s two bargaining units. After a few months of bargaining, "we still haven’t dealt with big ticket items like pay, but we’ve cleaned up a lot of contract language and put forth creative non-economic proposals."

Morale in the Court is low. Both bargaining units have been subject to two years of furloughs and now are being asked to do more with significantly less. Our bargaining teams continue to focus on negotiating non-economic benefits and holding on to what they have.

Trudy Verzosa, Interim President of SF Superior Court Professionals says both Local 21 Court chapters bore the brunt of recent layoffs.
Joe Doser, Supervisory Health Inspector for Contra Costa County, says he hadn’t thought about retiring until last April. The County was trying to reduce retirement benefits and cap compensatory income. Luckily, the Union held off the County’s attempts, which would have reduced compensation by 15-16%. Regardless, “many are leaving the County,” he says, “because of retirement insecurity.”

Now 49-years-old with 25 years service, Doser originally wanted to work until 55 or 56. But even after 32 years of service, he says he “probably have to work elsewhere in order to save enough for retirement.”

In the autumn, Governor Jerry Brown laid out a 12-point pension reform plan. Doser is fine with the proposals that address pension spiking and double dipping. “There are well publicized cases of upper echelon government employees who’ve abused the system,” he says. But, they’re a small number of high paid non-union-represented management whose “antics have tainted everyone.”

Doser is more concerned with proposals to offer whittled down pension benefits for new hires, increase employee contributions, reduce employer contributions, and raise the retirement age.

“Historically,” says Doser, “government service has depended upon a cadre of loyal, dedicated people who spend their lives in public service.” He fears that “without secure retirement benefits, we will lose quality people and government services will suffer.”

At 51, Ken Easton is a fairly recent hire with the City and County of San Francisco, having started three years ago. He says he has little incentive to stay with the City.

Easton, a Senior Purchaser, doesn’t think he’ll “make it to 20 years” to collect retirement benefits. “If you’re not expecting to last the required 20 years for the full defined benefits, the pension is no better than anyone else’s,” he says.

After already contributing 7.5% to his retirement benefits, Easton says the soon to increase 3% contributions represent a pay cut.

The biggest hit, says Easton, “is emotional. My value to the City isn’t determined by what I’ve done or what my Union bargains, but by the ballot box and what is now a hot button political issue. He says it’s unfair to blame city employees for the current economic downturn and the situation the city is in.”

Steven Buscovich first thought of retiring last year when the City of Hayward issued pink slips to people in his department. The 58-year-old Hazardous Materials Investigator has more than 15 years with the city.

Luckily, the layoffs were rescinded. Buscovich says the main impact had he been forced to retire would have been psychological. “I love my job and still have a lot to offer,” he says. He’d have made ends meet since he already lives a simple life, but he’d have had to eat out less and make fewer big purchases.

A secure retirement was a large part of why he took this job. “My father had a good pension plan that enabled me to go to college. I’m blessed to have a good job that I love and a retirement plan,” he says. “But I don’t consider myself rich or part of the one percent.”

Buscovich is frustrated that “public employees and unions are vilified as greedy. ‘I don’t make top dollar in my field, but what we do is important.’

War, low taxes, misguided policies to blame for problem, not public employees
“We didn’t cause the problem,” says Buscovich. “It’s because of ten years of war, low tax rates, misguided policies, not putting money into our own country. My pension shouldn’t be vilified because of people’s misconceptions about what’s really been happening.”
Chandler Protests Big Banks by Switching to Credit Union

In November, San Francisco member Craig Chandler took part in the Dump Your Bank movement as called for by Occupy Wall Street, MoveOn and other activist and consumer organizations. He is among more than 650,000 consumers who have since left their banks in favor of a credit union.

The Metropolitan Transit Authority Network Administrator says he’s not a radical or a militant. As to the Occupy Wall Street movement, he thinks the name is “too in-your-face.” But he strongly identifies with its message of economic justice.

Chandler, who says he had savings in Wells Fargo, decided to close his account and move his money to Golden 1 Credit Union to protest the “negative impact banks are having over our lives.” He blames the big banks and Wall Street speculators for the economic downturn, high unemployment, government budget deficits, huge spikes in public employee pension costs, and the disappearance of the middle class.

“We’re becoming a third world country,” he says, “with ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots.’ The ‘haves’ have more than ever. The ‘have-nots’ don’t have enough to eat.”

Felt empowered in making a difference
Chandler felt empowered, knowing he could “make a difference by transferring money from one institution to another. I care about customer service. I want banks to care about employees and have a sense of moral and ethical involvement.”

He’d already had a small account at Golden 1 Credit Union. As he learned more about credit unions, he knew closing his account at Wells Fargo was the right thing to do, and hopes others will realize this and do the same.

Corporate banks are run by shareholders looking to maximize profits. Credit unions are nonprofit cooperatives, run by an elected, volunteer Board of Directors. Typically, banks charge maximum fees whenever possible. Credit unions have fewer and/or lower account fees and reimburse you for using another bank or credit union’s ATM.

Changing to credit union not as difficult as he’d thought
At first Chandler worried that changing to a credit union would be difficult. He says, “There’s a lot to consider... direct deposits, autopay and other services.” He advises others to open an account and set up those services first at a credit union before closing bank accounts.

Now that he’s settled at Golden 1 Credit Union, he realizes “how convenient a credit union can be. There’s an entire network of ATMs. I like my credit union,” he says. “The staff knows me by name. It’s a small community. I can reach an actual human being when I call. Rates are lower.

Craig Chandler was among 650,000 consumers who left his bank in favor of a credit union as part of the “Dump Your Bank” movement.

Interest is higher. There’s more of a connection with the community.

NINE STEPS TO SWITCH YOUR BANK ACCOUNT
onecentatatime.com/9-steps-to-switch-your-bank-account/

1. Choose the right account for you at a credit union.
2. Transfer money from the old account in phases, to make sure adequate funds remain for scheduled payments.
3. Change your autopay settings in new account once it has sufficient balance for one month of bills.
4. Change direct deposits to the account.
5. Cancel your automatic savings settings if you had automatic savings through your old checking account.
6. Consider internet-only banks which can have lower overhead costs to pass on to you.
7. Read mail sent to you by your new credit union in case fees and terms of your new account change.
8. Keep some money in the old account for a month or two to cover any uncleared or forgotten debits.
9. Close the old account after transferring remaining funds.

FIND A CREDIT UNION NEAR YOU
To find a credit union near you, go to CULookup.com or MoveYourMoneyProject.org
Oakland’s Tannenwald Designs Creative Spaces for People to Enjoy

Since she was a child, Diane Tannenwald knew she wanted to work with her hands. She took wood carving as a third grader, electricity classes in junior high, wood shop in high school, and embarked on her first construction project at the age of 17.

About to complete 20 years working with the City of Oakland, Tannenwald can’t believe how quickly time has passed. She has worked in a variety of capacities ranging from the Planning Department to serving as Assistant Project Manager in the construction of the City Administration Building Complex, Frank Ogawa Plaza, a $90 million project.

Now, Tannenwald is a Capital Improvement Project (CIP) Coordinator. One of her primary tasks is the design and construction of the Oakland section of the San Francisco Bay Trail, a recreational trail connecting nine Bay Area counties. She was formerly the City of Oakland’s representative on the construction of the Mandela Parkway, Amtrak Maintenance Facility and the Eastern Span of the Bay Bridge. Recently, she helped with the completion of the East Oakland Sports Center, a 25,000 square foot, state of the art fitness, aquatic and dance center.

Tannenwald says, “There’s huge potential here in Oakland. I am fortunate to be able to design and construct artful creative spaces that I hope people will want to seek out and enjoy.”

The funding source of most projects she works on are separate from the general fund. “Part of what I do is grant writing,” Tannenwald says. “Since they are largely funded by outside grants and other funding sources, the deficit hasn’t impacted what I do as much as it has for others. Grants are more competitive in these dismal economic times, and there have been some retirees in my department that haven’t been replaced; it’s a challenging time, but I feel grateful that many of the projects I work on have moved ahead.”

As busy as Tannenwald is, she has found time to actively participate in the union. Last year, she was on Local 21’s Oakland chapters’ bargaining team. “It was an amazing, eye-opening experience,” she says. “I have a newfound respect for leaders of the negotiating team. I really learned a lot from leaders on both sides of the table. We put in a lot of extra hours and fought hard to come to a resolution. We always maintained a constructive attitude, working in good faith.”

Tannenwald has no designated leadership position in the union, but always helps her colleagues. “My coworkers come to me as a resource, asking questions,” she said. “It’s nice when issues don’t have to escalate to a resolution. We always maintained good faith.”

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