**Taking the Lead**

Perspective Column

March 2003

**We Can’t Wait**

I have just returned from a meeting of the **AFT Program and Policy Council** in Washington DC. The agenda of the meeting dealt predominantly with developing a strategy and a plan to counter the increasing attacks on our institutions, faculty and staff. From all- around the country we heard tales of declining state support for higher education accompanied by **increases in tuition and fees**. We discussed the **Bush-administration's draining of money from the domestic public sector in order to fund his military adventures**. We also discussed the loss of funding capability at the state level that has been driven by tax cuts mostly **benefiting the very wealthy** in our country. The shift from taxing all for the common good to implementing user taxes (such as tuition and fees) has been encouraged by a strong conservative assault on the value of our public institutions. **Right wing pundits** have been filling the media with arguments opposing a **civilized and thoughtful approach to solving problems**, leaving only the market to determine results. Some state and local politicians, trustees and campus administrators — biased against the public sector — believe that education is only a private good, and distrust anything but "instrumental" education.

We discussed what appears to be a national movement to weaken the academic profession: administrators attempting to dismantle **shared decision making processes**; attempts to take curriculum decisions out of the hands of the faculty; colleges and universities, replacing full-time tenured faculty with **underpaid temporary full-time and part-time faculty**; attempts by universities and colleges to profit from the intellectual property traditionally owned by faculty; accreditation agencies attempting to impose narrow standards based on **measurable student outcomes** on faculty and staff; and a move to transform education into a simple accumulation of factoids. In addition, there appears to be a nationwide attack on academic freedom, led by the same people chipping away at our constitutional rights to free speech and free association.

We will, in the coming months, be asking faculty and staff to contribute to the fight for quality higher education and for improved conditions for the employees who work in higher education institutions. On April 11-13, 2003, the AFT will hold its annual National Higher Education Issues conference in Atlanta. A major emphasis of the conference will be on the development of a **plan of action.**

In California we cannot wait for a strategic plan. We must begin today, in every local and at the state level, to move the legislature and the governor to concurrently **increase taxes** and reduce the cuts targeted at the community colleges. We must fight against any increase in fees. We must negotiate local contracts with strong language protecting our **intellectual property rights** and our salaries and benefits from erosion, increase the pro rata pay of part-time faculty, fight against increases in load and class size, and organize ourselves into a fighting voice for quality in higher education.

What can your local do?- It should begin immediately informing students concerning the proposed budget and increased fees and its impact on them. It should organize meetings with local legislators and inform them of the consequences of higher fees and reduced funding. Leaders should meet with local newspaper boards and describe how the proposed cuts will impact on student lives. We need to bring home the human impact of reduced educational offerings and services.

What can you do? Write a letter to the governor and your legislators. Sign a union produced postcard. Register students to vote. Help inform your students of the impact of the proposed cuts and provide them the opportunity to express their views to their elected officials. Tell your neighbors and friends what is going on with the state budget. Above all, '**Educate, Agitate, and Organize**.'