**Unions' Long March against California Cuts**

Labor Notes

March 24, 2010 / Fred Glass

March 4 witnessed an explosion of energy across California (see Can Public Education Be Saved?), as thousands demonstrated against the devastation of the state’s K-12 schools and vaunted public colleges, once the gateway to opportunity for the working class.

The flame didn’t sputter out, though. The following day 1,500 people gathered in a church in South Central Los Angeles, including 300 who bused in from San Diego.

They were there to send off a “March for California’s Future,” a 48-day, 250-mile trek from Bakersfield in the San Joaquin Valley to Sacramento, initially organized by the California Federation of Teachers.

The intent of the march, said CFT President Marty Hittelman, is to show what caused the state budget crisis, draw attention to what severe budget cuts do to Californians, and move toward solutions that make sense.

Those solutions include, front and center, progressive tax policies to fund public education and vital public services. And that will require reducing California’s requirement of a two-thirds vote in the legislature to pass a budget or taxes, down to a simple majority.

“We don’t have any illusion the march by itself will accomplish its ultimate goals,” said Hittelman, a Los Angeles community college instructor. “But sometimes the right action at the right time can light a symbolic flame for people and help get a movement going.”

‘I AM MARCHING’

The CFT knew it needed to build a broader coalition, and plenty of green-shirted AFSCME members filled the pews alongside blue AFT and purple Service Employees garb (and a sprinkling of orange from the reconstituted ACORN).

The march is a stretch for the CFT and AFSCME, which are not among the largest public sector unions in California. But they put the march on the road because, of all the state’s unions, they are the two most consistently focused on a progressive tax message.

Josh Pechthalt, head of the CFT’s “Fight for California’s Future” committee that dreamed up the march, walked the first five days.

“We know that it can’t be just a fight for education,” he said. “It’s also a fight for social services, health care, making sure that our children can play in public parks. And the only way that we’re going to get there is if we tax the rich and the corporations, like the people of Oregon voted to do two months ago.”

The loudest cheers at the send-off rally came for seven people dressed in black-and-white shirts that read simply, “I am marching,” modeled after the famous 1968 Memphis sanitation workers’ strike placards (“I am a man”). The seven trail a path marked by Cesar Chavez’s 1966 peregrinación, a 240-mile pilgrimage that lifted striking farm workers into the nation’s conscience.

CFT and AFSCME recruited the seven to march for 48 long days: Watsonville teacher Jenn Laskin and a former student of hers, Emmanuelle Ballesteros; San Diego community college instructor Jim Miller; Los Angeles County probation officer Irene Gonzalez; adult educator Anna Graves and high school teacher Gavin Riley, both retired; and Los Angeles substitute teacher David Lyell.

Along the way they are joined by day marchers—some days a handful, other days hundreds, as they pass through some of the areas hardest hit in the nation by the recession.

WALKING ALL OVER US

The crisis in the state is only too clear. College students are staggering under gigantic fee increases, dwindling course offerings, and faculty and staff furloughs and layoffs. Economic refugees from the Great Recession can no longer, as in downturns past, regenerate their job skills and renew their lives.

The marchers signed up, as Gonzalez said, because “we can’t let the legislators walk all over us. We can’t be living from paycheck to paycheck while corporate executives are making the big bucks. If it takes a march to do it, if it takes three or four months, I’m there.”

Gonzalez was nursing a swollen ankle following two straight 14-mile days walking back roads in the San Joaquin Valley near Highway 99. Her foot care was in the hands of Bob D’Ausilio, a retired firefighter (IAFF Local 1578, Alhambra) and paramedic driving one of the support vehicles.

D’Ausilio is also preparing most of the meals for the marchers and staff. “I’m putting just about all my firefighter training into play here,” he joked.

Eight days into their adventure, the marchers had a sober but optimistic assessment of their impact thus far. “It’s a pretty desolate patch of valley here,” said Jim Miller, “not much of anything except roads and fields.”

Cars and big rigs hurtled by on the highway a couple of hundred yards away. Although the media hoopla of the launches in L.A. and Bakersfield had tapered off, at least one or two reporters interviewed them by phone or tagged along for a while on the road each day.

The marchers’ spirits were buoyed when passing motorists honked and waved, and sometimes stopped to chat. “One woman drove up from L.A. after seeing us on TV,” said Laskin. “She brought us water and marched a few hours.”

LOCAL RALLIES, TOWN HALLS

Marchers had different favorite moments: sharing a stage at a rally of a few hundred people in Delano with Dolores Huerta; the ceremony in Allensworth, a former African American utopian colony, now a state park closed most of the time due to budget cuts; and the time a woman ran out of her house to serve them melon and orange slices and thank them for their sacrifice.

The three official themes of the march, emblazoned across a bus accompanying the marchers, are “restore the promise of public education,” “a government and economy that work for all,” and “fair tax policies to fund California’s future.” Toward those ends the marchers are joining with local unions and community organizations as they move up the central valley in rallies, town halls, and other events to gain public attention. Graves is posting her images daily at March for California’s Future.

A modest purchase of paid ads is running on local radio and in newspapers to reinforce news coverage and concerted blogging by the marchers. The march will conclude with a massive rally in the state capital, calling out the legislators who have so spectacularly failed their state.

PERSONAL POLITICS

Gonzalez, a single mother, grew up in foster homes across the Central Valley. She put herself through school, got a master’s degree, and has worked as a Los Angeles County probation officer for 10 years. A member of AFSCME Local 685, she recognizes the crucial role public education played in her own life, and for the people she now works with.

“But with budget cuts, the support is all going away,” she said. “No more education and medical programs for the probationers and their families. There aren’t any jobs for them either.”

Fred Glass is a member of the California Federation of Teachers.