

## How Union Members

### lose control

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I have a love/hate relationship with unions that goes back to when I was 21-years-old. The first union I belonged to, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) was an excellent union. They fought hard for their members, and the leadership was outstanding. The last union I belonged to, the State Employees Trades Council (SETC) failed miserably to represent its members, and left a lot to be desired when it came to leadership.

I was employed as a HVAC engineer for thirty years at Humboldt State University (HSU). For approximately two-thirds of that time I was a member of SETC. The union was brought in along with six others to provide representation for a wide variety of staff and faculty positions at HSU (as well as 22 other CSU campuses). On the surface, union representation looked like it would be a great thing. But bringing seven unions on board at once turned out to be a shrewd and carefully planned move by the Chancellor's office, one which would cost employees dearly in the years to come.

Before the arrival of the unions, cost of living raises never seemed to be a problem. Ten percent pay increases were commonplace, and employee health and dental benefits were some of the finest available in California.

Then the unions arrived (closed shop, of course), and the good times came to an abrupt halt. A wall instantly went up between administrators and employees, and the Board of Trustees' plan to turn a state university system into profit-making business went into action. The first thing they did was use the unions to pit state employees against one another. In other

words, divide and conquer. It was a move so bold and calculated that it made me question the true relationship between our union leaders and the Board of Trustees.

We were told that the seven unions on campus would bargain individually for yearly raises and their benefits. Where custodians, secretaries, engineers, building technicians and professors once stood together and received an equal share of the pie, they now fought tooth and nail for crumbs. Union was pitted against union for benefits and annual wage increases (which coincidentally grew increasingly smaller with passing time).

To make matters worse, we were trampled and eaten raw by our union leaders. Each year they would go into negotiations and come back with the same tired news: "The Board of Trustees say they have no money to bargain with, so there will be no raise..." Meanwhile, new construction on the 23 CSU campuses soared to an all time high, and annual wage increases for administrators topped 15 percent (one percent raises for SECT members were considered "a blessing from God" by our union leaders).

During my infrequent encounters with union administrators at HSU, I would ask, "Why won't you go to bat for us? Why do you come here and tell us that the Board of Trustees has no money for raises when they are doling out huge increases to CSU administrators and constructing \$20 million dollar buildings on campus? Why don't we build strength by working with the other unions? Why aren't the right questions being asked?"

I would immediately be yelled down for having the audacity to question their motives. I soon learned that it was forbidden to ask a question that might embar-

*When this happens to you how powerful do you feel?*



Class-Conflict by Hammer

rass or otherwise cause dissension in the ranks. I was instructed to simply nod my head and keep my mouth shut. It became clear that SETC members did not have control of their union, and that solidarity between SETC and other unions was not tolerated.

This did not strike me as a union working for its members.

For the past 20 years, the strength of the Chancellor's office has been in dividing CSU staff and faculty. It appears that SETC (and maybe a few other unions, as well) have been just fine with that. Perhaps it's time we start keeping a closer eye on our union leadership and holding them accountable while pushing for member run unions.