

CONFERENCE DEFENDS PUBLIC HIGHER ED

By Linda Sneed

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Throughout the US, students face fewer sections of needed courses and higher tuition and fees; faculty and staff see less job security, fewer benefits, little to no salary increases (if not salary reductions), and workload creep. What to do?

In early January, defenders of public higher education met in Los Angeles during the Modern Language Association's annual convention to craft and share strategies to keep the doors open to a robust and just public higher education system. In a series of panel presentations and audience discussions organized by Bob Samuels of UC-AFT, conversations consistently returned to the importance of advocacy, organizing, and solidarity within and outside of higher education.

Placing the recent protests against dramatic tuition increases for UC students in a national context, Joshua Clover showed documentation of ways in which "higher education solidarity proceeds in solidarity with house foreclosures, whether it knows it or not." He used this data to suggest that we seize opportunities to find common ground with others facing economic hardship and create a stronger movement for public services and the rights of working people.

In answer to the title of his panel, "Organizing Labor and the Academic Class War," Joe Berry quipped, "We can, and there is" and emphasized contingent faculty (part-time faculty in the community colleges, part-time and full-time non-tenure-track in the CSU and UC systems) as ripe for organizing as workers and "helping rebuild the labor movement." Co-panelist Maria Maisto echoed the call for a stronger labor movement in which educators join with other workers to demand not only fair wages and safe working conditions but increased job security for all.

Addressing issues of college service and shared governance, Michelle Masse identified service as a "si-

lent economy in higher education" and urged faculty to participate fully in shared governance and other forms of college service but not to be exploited. She urged us to resist the lure of seeing ourselves as professionals and instead to see ourselves as workers, and encouraged us to take on the hard work of becoming centrally involved in college- and university-wide decision-making processes. "Read those key documents," she suggested, to find out what campus governing bodies are charged with doing and what they are actually doing.

Cary Nelson advocated on behalf of protecting academic freedom and tenure, issuing a sort of manifesto, the "Faculty Agenda for Hard Times." Among his exhortations were to "celebrate collaborative campus decision-making," to publicly promote the interests and needs of students, to forge coalitions with students groups and other groups of workers on campus, and to "conquer our fears" about an uncertain future through collective action.

Murray Sperber, discussing the effects on college enrollment patterns of the abolition of affirmative action, noted the relative absence of people of color from the day's proceedings and challenged us all to work toward greater ethnic diversity throughout our public education institutions.

Perhaps the most resounding words of the afternoon, spoken to galvanize, were these: "Union membership is like gym membership: nothing happens unless you do something."

Si, se puede! ■

THE NEXT GENERATION CLASSROOM

An interview about The City Farm Project

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the spring 2011 semester entitled "Institutionalizing Sustainability at SCC: Campus Garden". She serves as the Coordinator of Design Education for the Designers Accord, and is on the Executive Board for the LRCFT. Her recent work with the next generation has been featured in Fast Company Magazine, The SF MOMA, San Francisco Chronicle, KPFA radio, Communication Arts Magazine, and Print Magazine.