

# Giving back - or rather, giving up

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## GIVING BACK - OR RATHER, GIVING UP

The Council of NJ State College Locals, CNJSCL ( <http://www.cnjscl.org/> ) which has the legal authority to represent professionals in NJ's state college system, has just asked members, including me, to approve a "memorandum of agreement" in which we accept a "furlough" of 7 days. Faculty cannot take the "furlough" on days that we teach, so the "furlough" is a poorly disguised give-back of 7 days of our pay. In addition, we agree to "defer" our salary increase for 2009-2010. We receive no retroactive payment of the amount lost in the deferred salary increase.

CNJSCL is comprised of 11 locals. We are employees of the State of NJ and the union negotiates a state-wide contract about salary and benefits. In reality, little real negotiation goes on with the State, because CNJSCL officials argue that we must accept whatever the far larger union representing NJ public employees, Communications Workers of America (CWA), <http://www.cwanj.org/facts.html> wins for its members. Although we share salary and benefits concerns with CWA members, we also have many issues that are unique, like academic freedom and copyright protection of the courses we create for online classes. Even in normal bargaining, CNJSCL surrenders before it enters the room with the State negotiators.

Several activists from my local (AFT 1839, New Jersey City University) have tried, unsuccessfully, since last Fall to persuade CNJSCL officials and representatives to the union's state council to prepare for the budget crisis. We've introduced proposals for an emergency conference, a publicity campaign, and creation of a speaker's bureau. The ideas for mobilizing members have met with little interest from the delegates and even less from the officials.

We've also seen what could be done if CNJSCL were more pro-active. We organized a teach-in on the budget crisis on our campus that attracted over 600 students, almost a third of the student body <http://www.freewebs.com/time2reformaft1839/thefiscalcrisis.htm> .

Students took the microphones in the open sessions and break-out sessions to describe how tuition hikes and cuts in financial aid are destroying their dreams of a college education. They expressed the urgency for activity - and leadership - and they applauded when a student activist from another state college introduced himself as a socialist.

In contrast, CNJSCL has not organized a single activity to protest the budget cuts to higher education or the State's demand that the public colleges cut expenditures to union members' wages. (Administrative costs have been ignored. ) The union refused to issue a public statement opposing tuition hikes for students. (There is no longer a State Office of Higher Education that regulates tuition, so the administration on each campus sets tuition independently.) In April, despite the looming cuts, delegates at the state-wide council meeting elected the same slate of officers who have steadfastly denied the seriousness of our situation. They won re-election, virtually unopposed.

CNJSCL has not just asked us to give back our wages to the State. It has given up as a union. In this it is no different from many other unions, in the private and public sectors, in academic and industrial unions. Members are asking why we/they pay union dues. The Left should be asking what's happened to labor? What's happening with this abject surrender of unions like mine - and the passive acceptance by union members of this situation? And how can it be changed?

I can see, strategically, what we have to do about CNJSCL: Encourage union members on other NJ state college campuses to organize as we have, forming a caucus if necessary <http://www.freewebs.com/time2reformaft1839/> . We've democratized our local, though several activists, especially those organizing adjunct faculty, have paid a high personal cost. The website of Association for Union Democracy <http://www.uniondemocracy.com/> has been an invaluable aid, but it's still been a long, painful struggle. Clearly the same process has to occur on other campuses, so this year we have made connections to individuals who share our thinking about the need to empower members and democratize CNJSCL.

But I'm asking bigger, harder questions here, that go beyond the immediate strategy. Where are the activists who will do this work? How do we draw a new generation into this activity? How will workers who have experienced unions that are conservative, apathetic and corrupt envision a union's potential to be a progressive force?