

Looking Forward

# Teachers somber, but defiant



**By Mark James Miller, 4-27-18**

The overall mood at this year's California Federation of Teachers Convention was somewhat more subdued than in recent years.

With Donald Trump in the White House, the decision in the Janus case expected anytime, and Betsy DeVos as the Secretary of Education, California teachers have more than their fair share of issues to be anxious about.

Trump is certainly no friend to unions or to teachers, the Janus case could deal a severe blow to the strength of public employee unions. DeVos would like to dismantle the entire public educational system by privatizing it.

If the atmosphere at this year's convention at the Costa Mesa Hilton Hotel was somber, it was also defiant. Teachers are optimists by nature, and the 353 delegates and 116 guests, in spite of all that is stacked against them, brought with them an unmistakable never-say-die attitude. The underlying spirit could be summed up as, "We've seen tough times before, and we came through them stronger than ever."

The delegates were welcomed by Jennifer Muir Beuthin, general manager of the Orange County Employees Association. She gave an empowering speech, reminding delegates that both labor and the Democratic Party are making inroads into what has traditionally been one of the reddest places in America, Orange County.

She was followed by Tony Thurmond, who currently represents the 15th Assembly District and is now a candidate for state Superintendent of Public Instruction. Growing up in a poor family, Thurmond describes himself as one of those “who are not supposed to make it,” but did anyway, thanks to education.

The following day there was a speech from Erwin Chemerinsky, dean of the UC-Berkeley Law School. Pointing to the Janus case, which has been funded by some right-leaning wealthy people, Chemerinsky noted the push to privatize the public school system is taking place because these well-heeled people see privatization as an opportunity to make money. Public employee unions stand in their way, and weakening their power by taking away agency fees would greatly aid them in their quest to take down the nation’s public school system and fatten their pocketbooks at the same time.

While the political landscape looks grim at the moment, Chemerinsky told the listening delegates we have a choice: “We can give up, or we can fight harder.” The response from the delegates made it clear their choice is to fight harder.

That afternoon delegates piled into school buses and went to nearby Centennial Park in Santa Ana to take part in a March For Our Lives rally protesting gun violence, such as the recent Parkland, Fla., school shooting. Students carried signs that read “My Life Means Something” and “Tired of Dying For No Reason” and “We Refuse To Live In Fear.”

While speakers included Gavin Newsome, candidate for governor, and Tom Steyer, the billionaire who is spearheading an attempt to impeach President Trump, it was truly inspiring to listen to high school and middle school

students speak out against gun violence, shaming politicians who have refused to take any action to stop it.

Times may look grim for teachers and unions right now, but as my high school wrestling coach used to say, “When the going gets tough, the tough get going.” The recent teacher walkouts and demonstrations in West Virginia, Kentucky, Oklahoma and Arizona, indicate teachers are starting to get going.

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