

California: College faculty suspended for protesting budget cuts

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2 December 2009

In late October, four faculty members of Southwestern Community College in Chula Vista, California were suspended by the administration because of their involvement in campus protests against budget cuts. The suspensions, which took place amidst growing opposition throughout the state to the gutting of funding for public education, are an attempt to intimidate faculty and students.

Over the last two state budgets, the Democratically controlled state legislature, in collaboration with Republican Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, slashed several billion dollars worth of funding for higher education, including \$840 million for community colleges. This has resulted in widespread layoffs, furloughs, student fee hikes, and reductions in courses and programs.

At the same time, enrollment in community colleges has been surging for months. As a result of the economic crisis, many are returning to school in the hopes of waiting out the downturn and/or changing careers. Others are turning to these institutions as a lower-cost option compared to the University of California schools, where fees were just increased by 32 percent.

A recent report from the California Postsecondary Education Commission warned that the community college system, which consists of 110 colleges serving 2.9 million students, will not be able to function given the declining resources and increase in enrollment.

At Southwestern Community College, President Raj K. Chopra instituted a 26 percent cut in classes, resulting in the loss of 400 classes and the laying off of hundreds of part-time lecturers. At the same time, he secured a 7.9 percent salary increase for himself.

On October 22nd, 400 students accompanied by Phil Lopez, Andrew Rempt, Dinorah Guadiana-Costa and

Janet Mazarella, faculty members of SWC, assembled in a peaceful rally opposing the recent cuts.

Chanting “Cut Chopra, not classes!,” the students made it clear that their resentment was focused not just on the cuts, but also on the administration.

Later that day, 50 students accompanied by Professor Lopez marched to Chopra’s office where they met opposition in the form of ten campus police officers. After being told to disperse on the charge of “unlawful rallying,” two or three students had a discussion with the police. Eventually the crowd outside dispersed and no legal action was taken against them.

Hours later, Chopra sent letters to the four faculty members notifying them of their suspensions for allegedly inciting these actions. The letters, delivered by an administrator with an armed police escort, banned the faculty from campus and prohibited their use of campus phone and email. Immediately following this action, President Chopra left for a long vacation overseas, leaving to his subordinates the task of justifying the suspensions.

Although the university administration continues to claim, in a series of contorted and embarrassed statements, that the suspensions of faculty did not come as a direct result of their participation in the rally, the general consensus on campus is that the motives were political.

However, Chopra’s attempt to muzzle protest has backfired. On November 6, students and faculty, joined by representatives from professional and civil liberties organizations, demonstrated in opposition to the suspension of the educators.

In an effort to find legal grounds for the suspensions ordered by Chopra, the administration funded an independent investigation into the conduct of the teachers during the October 22 rally. The investigation,

which cost upwards of \$15,000, caused further outrage and ultimately failed to produce any findings justifying Chopra's actions.

Chopra's suppression of democratic freedoms has raised concerns among civil-rights circles. The local ACLU is beginning to look into the incident, citing a violation of free-speech rights and an encroachment on academic inquiry.

The American Association of University Professors and the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, both national advocacy groups, have opened up similar investigations into the Southwestern incident.

This is not the first time Chopra has been the center of controversy. In 2008 Chopra was charged with plagiarizing Southwest Airlines Chairman and CEO Gary Kelly in a Thanksgiving letter to college employees. This embarrassing incident, for which Chopra was compelled to issue an apology, speaks to his academic credentials and sources of inspiration.

Earlier this year, Chopra pushed through a restructuring plan that involved the firing and reassignment of several employees. As a result of these actions, the Academic Senate at Southwestern Community College voted for a "no confidence" resolution, which accused Chopra of having a "total lack of regard" for the principle of shared governance.

Unlike many university administrators who, in the process of enforcing the ongoing cuts, have at least expressed dismay, Chopra has performed these tasks with callousness, earning widespread contempt at Southwestern Community College. Nevertheless no matter how callous Chopra may be as an administrator, there is an objective logic at work in his actions, which have a broader significance as well.

The faculty suspensions at Southwestern College are an attack on fundamental democratic rights. Furthermore, they are an indication of what is bound to emerge on all college and university campuses as more severe cuts and fee hikes are implemented.

College and university presidents, along with their respective administrations, will be responsible for the enforcement of unprecedented reductions in campus resources. As opposition grows on the campus to these conditions, the democratic rights of students and educators will be targeted.

There are already signs of this developing elsewhere. Last month, students at the University of California

were confronted with police in full riot gear during three days of protests against a 32 percent fee hike. At the Davis, California campus, there were upwards of 50 arrests made, while at UCLA one student was tasered by a police officer.

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