



CFJ UPDATE

AUGUST 2006

Californians for Justice Education Fund is a statewide, grassroots organization working for racial justice by building the power of communities that have been pushed to the margins of the political process. We organize youth, immigrants, low-income people and communities of color in order to improve their social, economic and political conditions.

The Story So Far...

A Quick Look at CFJ's First Ten Years

Californians for Justice was born out of a painful chapter in California history. In 1994, Governor Pete Wilson fanned the flames of racism by attacking Mexican immigrants. At the center of his re-election campaign was his vehement support for Prop. 187, which sought to deny undocumented immigrants access to public schools and health care.

81% of the voters in that pivotal election were white. Prop. 187 passed by a large margin.

Within weeks, right-wing forces began collecting signatures to put their next attack on the ballot—the anti-affirmative action initiative that would become Proposition 209.

In response, a group of individuals and organizations who had fought against Prop. 187 came together to launch a new organization that would build on the lessons they had learned. This new organization would work to change who voted in the state to represent California's emerging majority of people of color, low income people, and youth.

In the spring of 1995, Californians for Justice was born!

The First Campaign

CFJ's campaign to defeat Prop. 209 accomplished a lot: we registered 18,000 new voters, mobilized 10,000 volunteers, and defeated Prop 209 in every one of the 1,350 precincts that we targeted. Many CFJ "old-timers" remember signing the "Million Voices for Justice" petition as their first contact with the organization.

When CFJ first started we could barely afford two offices and a couple of staff. Early staff members recall how much we relied on the support of allies. Every time we met with organizations to coordinate our work to defeat 209, we would end the meeting by asking if they could donate office supplies to us. Our first trip to buy office supplies with our own money was an exciting moment!

Unfortunately, Prop. 209 passed. But CFJ ended the campaign with an organization that reflected the diversity California, staffed and led primarily by people of color.

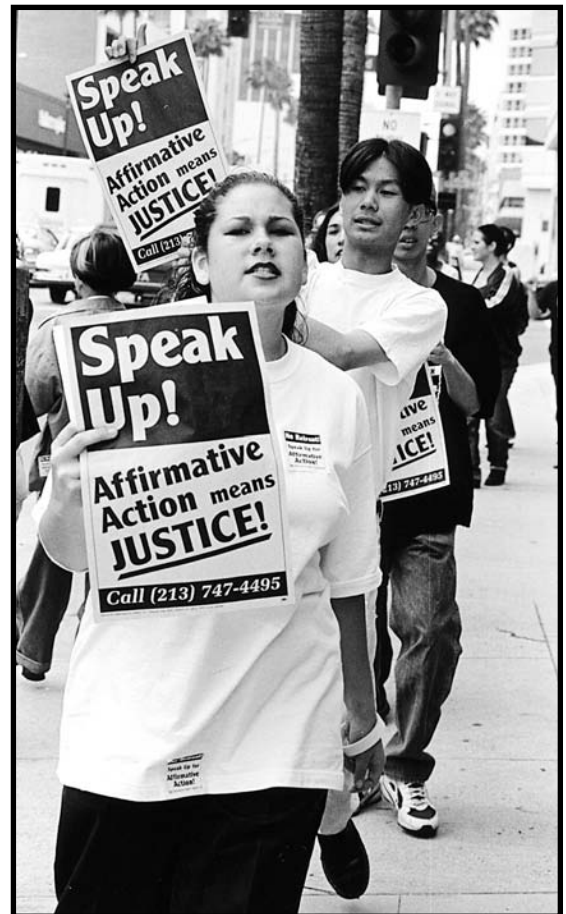


Photo by Scott Braley

The Next Steps

In January 1997 we formally incorporated as a non-profit organization, and began planning what to work on next. CFJ members decided that they wanted to respond to the decimation of federal welfare programs by developing

Continued on page 2

Californians for Justice Education Fund www.caljustice.org

1611 Telegraph Ave., #317
Oakland, CA 94612
(510) 452-2728
Fax (510) 452-3552

1971 Las Plumas
San Jose, CA 95133
(408) 272-0236
Fax (408) 272-0315

200 Pine Avenue, Ste. 502
Long Beach, CA 90802
(562) 951-1015
Fax (562) 951-9444

4265 Fairmount Dr., # 200
San Diego, CA 92105
(619) 641-7750
Fax (619) 516-1734

2014 Tulare Street, #718
Fresno, CA 93721
(559) 443-1394
Fax (559) 443-1343

The Story So Far...

Continued from page 1

state legislation that would create a public jobs program.

Judy Decker was one of the CFJ members who developed the bill. When she shared that information with her U.S. Government class at Contra Costa Community College, she was stunned to hear her teacher say, "No, you're not." The professor could not believe that this fifty-one year old grandmother from a low-income community could be part of an organization that was writing state legislation.

At the next class, Judy stood up in front of the everyone and said, "Yes, I am writing a bill for the state legislature with Californians for Justice, the group I

volunteer with. In fact, I brought a copy of the bill for you to look at."

The jobs bill failed to pass, but CFJ learned a lot about the legislative process. Those lessons would be valuable in future campaigns. In the years that followed, CFJ worked together with state labor unions to successfully raise the California minimum wage and to defeat the anti-union Proposition 226.

Solidarity

CFJ has repeatedly demonstrated a willingness to take on issues that others shy away from. Rona Fernandez remembers learning how crucial it was for us to talk about the "wedge" issues that the right-wing used to divide our communities:

"During a house party in Oakland, held to raise money to fight the anti-gay marriage Proposition 22 and the anti-youth Proposition 21, a gay

man said he supported Prop. 21 because it was about "law and order". A tense discussion followed. The matter wasn't resolved, but if CFJ hadn't put those two issues together, many people would never have made the connection between juvenile justice and gay rights."

"The 800 Pound Gorilla"

In 1999 CFJ made the decision to take on a problem central to the persistence of racial inequality in California: the poor quality of public schools in communities of color and low income communities.

With over six million students in 8,000 California schools, a \$54 billion state education budget, plus myriad issues disputed by powerful, well-funded interests, we knew that we were taking on the "800 pound gorilla" of political issues. But, what the heck? We were used to being the underdogs.

Making Change

Improving the public school system is a complicated task—it sometimes feels like everyone in the state has an opinion



Some scenes from CFJ's first ten years of fighting for justice.

Photos by Scott Braley and Californians for Justice



CFJ by the numbers

2 Number of offices in 1997
(Oakland and Los Angeles)

5 Number of offices in 2006
(Oakland, San Jose, Fresno, Long Beach, and San Diego)

1,000+

Number of CFJ members in 2006!
This includes youth, parents, community members, and general supporters. We hope that it includes you!

about how to do it. But, it was clear to CFJ that some basic improvements were needed to get California moving in the right direction. The schools in low-income communities of color are literally falling apart. Overcrowded and lacking basic educational materials such as textbooks, they also have fewer qualified teachers compared to other schools. Yet, some lawmakers were focused on testing students more and more, and eventually denying a diploma to students who couldn't pass an "Exit Exam." This punished students twice: first with bad schools, second by denying a diploma if they failed to learn in those schools.

We knew to make these big changes we had to challenge the state to provide a quality education to each and every student in our schools.

In 2002, CFJ student leaders met in Sacramento with then-assem-

blymember Alan Lowenthal to talk about the Exit Exam and the injustice of their poor school conditions. He said, "Funny you should bring up these issues, there are some students in my district who have done some protests about these same problems." The students responded, "Yeah, that's us!"

In 2003, three Long Beach CFJ members wrote a critical op-ed connecting the inequities of the Exit Exam with poor school conditions. Shortly after, the students were called out of class by the school principals. One said: "I will not tolerate any students giving our school a bad name." By chance, the students had just completed a CFJ training on how to respond to intimidation from teachers or administrators. One of the CFJ Leaders responded by telling them, "My name is Melissa Pittman. I am a student at this school. I have a right to speak out about the conditions here and to organize to change them!"

Power in Numbers

We decided that we could work more effectively if we teamed up with like-minded allies. In 2001, CFJ took the lead in pulling together a statewide alliance of youth, parent, policy, legal and research groups. By 2003 more than one hundred organizations from all over California had signed on to the Campaign for Quality Education (CQE).

CFJ led the statewide CQE alliance in calling for a delay of the High School Exit Exam. After a bus tour from San Diego to Sacramento that stopped in twelve cities to expose unjust school conditions across the state and community speak outs in Los Angeles and Oakland, hundreds of students and parents converged on the state board of education meeting. CFJ and other student testimony convinced the board of education—we won a two year delay to the exam!

A Big Elections Victory

In early 2002 CFJ joined with a number of allies to face a new civil rights challenge. Ward Connerly, who had chaired the Prop. 209 campaign in 1996, was back with an initiative that would bar the state from collecting or using any data based on race. This proposed law would endangered public health efforts and decimate any attempts to fight institutional racism. But this time we were ready for him.

CFJ and other grassroots

Continued on back page



6

Number of staff in 1997

17

Number of staff in 2006

256

Number of members who have graduated from CFJ's annual Leadership Academics since 1998. The first year had 10 participants, this year's Summer Youth Leadership Academy (SYLA) had 55!

942,727

Number of phone calls made since 1995 (okay, give or take a few...). And if some of you think that half of these calls were reminder calls made to YOU, then we've been doing our jobs!

The Story So Far...

Continued from page 3

groups came together early with a broad range of concerned organizations. A cohesive message and an extensive paid advertising blitz were matched with the grassroots get out the vote effort. We finally won a big vic-

tory against a right wing ballot initiative. Prop. 54 was soundly defeated with a 64% "NO" vote!

Challenges and Victories

CFJ and the alliance supported an "Opportunity To Learn" index in 2004 that would measure and publicize the learning conditions in all schools. While

we did not win, we did see a victory: community pressure on the state contributed to the settlement of the landmark *Williams* lawsuit. The settlement provided nearly \$1 billion for school repairs, new instructional materials, and increased oversight of conditions.

In 2005, the CQE alliance hosted a statewide gathering at UCLA of over three hundred people to discuss next steps in the struggle for educational equality. These discussions led to delegation visits with state legislators about the need to improve school conditions and to change the graduation requirement from a single test—the Exit Exam—to a more effective "multiple assessments" method.

The Next Ten Years...

Even when we are celebrating our history CFJ is always looking ahead. Over the past year CFJ has done a lot of internal planning. The result is a new five year organizational plan as well as a first-ever strategic plan for the Campaign for Quality Education alliance.

Our new five year plan does not make any radical changes. We will continue our work to win a quality education for all students in California, and will focus on improving our organizing and leadership development as well as the infrastructure of the organization.

This year we have refocused much of our organizing work on our local campaigns.

In San Jose, CFJ Leaders fought for effective implementation of the settlement of the statewide *Williams* lawsuit. The campaign won new ways to educate parents and students about the settlement and their rights, an Opportunity to Learn Index based on existing data the schools have to report, and using the school data to pursue more funding.

In Oakland, students are focusing on access to college and the lack of academic counselors in their schools. Campaign goals include more counselors, more counseling time, and earlier notification of graduation requirements and college information.

In Long Beach, we are fighting for all students to get the classes they need to be eligible for college. CFJ Leaders have presented a proposal to the school board to make the "A-G" college requirements the standard graduation curriculum, and to provide the educational resources necessary for every student to succeed.

We also recently wrapped up our

The Story From Here

Most folks who have been involved with CFJ have a favorite story or moment. There are too many of them to fit into this newsletter. But, that's what our tenth anniversary celebrations this December will be for: to get together with



Summer Youth Leadership Academy (SYLA), which had the highest number of participants ever—55! It was also the first time that we ran an Advanced SYLA for veteran CFJ student members, in San Jose.

other CFJ members and allies and talk about the stories and accomplishments of the past ten years.

There's much more to come. CFJ has a big future and a lot of growing still to do. We have achieved a lot in our first ten years, but we're just getting started!