

A letter to a friend in TSEU about DEI

There are several differences I have with your approach and some major agreements.

I'm going to try to address the differences.

First, I have been a member of this union since 1998. Before that I was a member of the ILGWU, the Carpenter's Union, and closely allied with the United Mineworkers. I am still an associate member of the mineworkers and receive a widow's pension from them.

There are many films I've made with labor about social justice that take a deep look at working class people and their involvement. I am known nationally for telling the truth no matter what. And when I don't know or I'm confused, I ask a bunch of people.

I know TSEU from a variety of viewpoints over the last 24 years – as a rank-and-file member, as a member of the executive board, as a member of the organizing committee, as a leader in the university caucus. I am a sister in the union; I am not a dogmatic follower.

I also know UT Austin with depth few others have. I have the regent's award for undergraduate teaching. I serve on the executive board of my department having fought my way in as a lecturer. I received the creative achievement award last year from the College of Communications. I am underpaid, overworked, under threat of firing (once around shared services where I, like many members, risked my neck trying to protect staff).

I have paid my dues many times over.

So

1. I know you were at Nacogdoches. Jim was also involved in helping with the march. I was fortunate to talk with many people about this and had the organizing books for many years. Like all things we print the myth, but
The whole mobilization campaign was based in a lawsuit. The lawsuit came first beginning with Annie Mae Carpenter who was fired and then others joined in around race and gender discrimination which took a lawyer and his wonderful law clerk Emily Gross Jones to prove, then the union. The anchor was community – and if there were 400 members joined the union from the back of a pick-up truck at Arthur Weaver's office, that included many community members. At the height of the campaign there weren't that many workers who were organized. In 1988, 74 members out of 671 workers. They needed the union to force the university to pay attention to the lawsuit. It took Jobs with Justice, the lawsuit, and the union to win. Most of all, the workers and the community that risked everything and, in the end, won very little. Nacogdoches both confirms and goes against some of your assumptions.

2. You say “IF this is a broad and serious attack.” You also say “IF the DEI purge is part of an overall attack.” You got to be kidding. There were at least 60 (mainly staff) workers at UT fired because of their former connections to DEI. The chancellor of the UT system boasted of over 300 employees associated with DEI who had been fired. They weren’t moved. They are terminated. NAACP legal is looking into a class action lawsuit and we ought to be following it. We also should have continued mobilizing about DEI after testifying at the bill. BUT we didn’t. That would have given us a jump of almost a year to mobilize.
3. This is part of a national playbook with ALEC. There’s an important website which could be common knowledge if there was any clear way to communicate to our members. Most don’t even know what DEI stands for. The anti-DEI effort is at the heart racist, sexist, discriminatory against people with disabilities, veterans, undocumented people, anti-free thought and comes out of the far right. It’s part of a plan to destroy public higher education along with maybe democracy. Here’s the map – cited by ABC, CNN, Best Colleges.com, the Education Trust, the New York Times and so on. It’s here. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/here-are-the-states-where-lawmakers-are-seeking-to-ban-colleges-dei-efforts?sra=true>
Because it’s a national attack, our partners in mobilization need to be national partners down to local chapters. TSEU is going to fail miserably, even projecting the correct vision and analysis for the campaign, if we don’t work collectively on the higher level for communication and strategies for mobilization. I’ll bet we can’t even answer the question: What do we want?
4. The anti-DEI attack is connected at the hip with the suppression of protests across the country and the discipline and firing of students, staff, and faculty under the false accusation of using antisemitic speech. This is obvious with Creighton, Abbott, the so-called more moderate Republican legislators who signed a letter calling for the resignations of more than 630 faculty at UT-Austin who signed a no-confidence letter in President Hartzell. Remember, Creighton is head of the Senate subcommittee on education, the author of the anti-dei bill and also the author of the anti-bds bill. He’s not writing the script on his own. It’s straight out of ALEC. This is CNN Opinion “What’s happening in Texas is an assault on American Democracy” by Peniel Joseph who I contacted immediately and gave TSEU permission to quote him. We should invite him to talk with our members and then, after respecting his scholarship, ask him to join us in strategizing as a member. He teaches at the University of Texas. <https://www.cnn.com/2024/05/02/opinions/university-of-texas-at-austin-dei-israel-gaza-protests-joseph/index.html>
5. So the problem with engaging in the legal arena around employment as TSEU is not that we enter hostile ground. What is more hostile than encountering police horses? And so what. This is admittedly an exaggeration but what if folks had said they shouldn’t defend the Scottsboro Boys because it would be better to mobilize than enter the legal apparatus. (I can think of many other examples that are less strong –

the Anne Braden film is full of them.) And I know that we are over our heads against UT Legal which is in the hands of a far-right legislature. We need to figure out a way to enter that hostile ground in a disciplined and serious way if possible AND mobilize. It would be great to have a CWA lawyer and it wouldn't take a thing away from us. THEN we can concentrate on mobilization. But as long as we have a bunch of people getting fired, not getting diplomas, not allowed to register, getting arrested after the fact, we need to figure out defense for them. We are playing with peoples' lives and it's not service unionism. It's respecting their needs as much as ours. The lawyer could be from CWA which would be best but also NLG, ACLU, and so on. Just so that we help figure this out now for our members. I can name 4 under threat now off the top of my head – two from last fall. And there will be many more if these are not defended.

6. In fact, we have a member who is high up in the law school trying to figure out how to defend students. She has about a hundred cases to work on. She's going 24/7. How can we help her? She's using law students and risking herself. This kind of support really needs to happen immediately or there will be no one left to fight for the rest of us. Remember Martin Niemoller. And the workers who are involved WANT to fight for themselves. They just need help. We've basically been telling them to be quiet.
7. On mobilization... we have 540 something members at UT-Austin. We can communicate with about 400 of them. There are more than 15,000 workers at UT not counting student workers. We have 5-8 consistently active members on the organizing committee. All of us are nearing burn-out. We have one part time organizer at UT with many other responsibilities. Other Texas Universities have less union density and smaller or inactive or no organizing committees. We have organizers at them only a few days a month and no fulltime campus organizers at TSEU. And we don't have a lot of time. I say you're right. I like your ideas but the devil is in the details as you know. Will it inspire our members and potential members? Surely, they should be involved in decisions. It might be things like escorting the arrested and traumatized students back to classes. And we have to get real about the seriousness of the attack and our limited resources both financial and people power. I say let's do everything we can but work in coalition as much as possible with combined strategies. It's the only way we can get any numbers behind us. And let's not give up on any of the possibilities just because it's not in our usual playbook.