



Stronger Together- Episode 3.mp3

Podcast 3.mp3

Audrena Redmond: [00:00:10] Hello and welcome to Radio Free CSU. The official podcast of the California Faculty Association. My name is Audrena Redmond, and I'm your host for this 10-part series, "Stronger Together," here on Radio Free CSU. This series is inspired by the intentional Anti-Racism and Social Justice Transformation that began in late 2016. In each episode we'll discuss one of our 10 guiding principles with CFA leader activists. Our hope is that you too will be inspired to engage in Anti-Racism and Social Justice work and join us again for more conversations about why and Anti-Racism Social Justice transformation is necessary. Today we are joined by Kevin Wehr, a Professor of Sociology at CSU Sacramento, and the statewide Secretary and Chair of Bargaining for the California Faculty Association. Thanks for being here Kevin.

Kevin Wehr: [00:01:08] I'm so happy to be here.

Audrena Redmond: [00:01:11] Great. So we're going to be talking about the third principle for CFA's Anti-Racism and Social Justice work. And let me read what that is for our listeners. "We acknowledge that even we in CFA are part of the problem of racism." I think that's such a huge statement; that's ownership. Ownership saying that we have a role in this too. So I have to ask — has it been hard for CFA as an organization to do the self-exploration that came up with a statement like that?

Kevin Wehr: [00:01:48] It has been hard. It has been very difficult.

Kevin Wehr: [00:01:51] I think this third principle is one of the scariest and one of the difficult most difficult ones to wrap your head around because it does imply ownership; it doesn't just imply, it states it outright that we are part of the problem. You have to own that as part of the problem before you can be intentional and purposeful about addressing that problem.

Audrena Redmond: [00:02:20] Can you give us an example of how CFA is part of the problem of racism.

Kevin Wehr: [00:02:27] Yeah I sure can. Reflecting on this principle there's several places where I think we're part of the problem. CFA used to be, and oftentimes still, is a very white space. I saw a picture of the bargaining team from just 15 years ago and it was almost completely white. So we've made some movement from there. That's something to notice. That's good. But as you know as we have talked about with the principles, words like just "diversity and inclusion" are not enough. We need to be talking about power and distribution of resources. And there are some ways that we have not yet moved beyond the idea of representation and quotas.

Kevin Wehr: [00:03:16] It's not acceptable. And the union leadership I think is committed to addressing that. CFA, sometimes I think, we can sometimes do default to a very white space. And

that means that sometimes we are reflecting values and goals and processes that white folks might be very comfortable with. And might not even notice that it's being assumed. But they might and might in fact be very exclusionary in certain ways. So I'm grateful to my friend and colleague Molly Talcott, who shared with me some ideas from Tema Okun, a North Carolina anti-racist activist and Reverend Daniel Buford from New Orleans. They talk about some of the way that their lives are very white and also very academic principles of perfectionism that there is 'only one right way.' There is a sense of urgency. That we can obsess with on issues of measurement and assessment. And that, especially the sense of urgency, that can keep us from talking about what is truly important and necessary. The sense of urgency around a contract campaign and how we measure it and reassess it and how do we build the perfect contract campaign. All of those things are urgent. Getting a raise for our members are urgent. Addressing Anti-Racism and Social Justice is important and necessary. And so sometimes I think some of these default values or goals or processes can distract us from what is really deeply important and that can be inflicted through a racialized lens. So I think I think we've made some progress on some of this but that's a process that I'm not sure where the end point is at the moment.

Audrena Redmond: [00:05:28] Do you have any examples of where, in our collective bargaining agreement for example, CFA's Anti-Racism Social Justice effort is reflected in the collective bargaining agreement?

Kevin Wehr: [00:05:44] Absolutely. In our contract we've made several iterative attempts to improve and build in principles of Anti-Racism, of reducing bias, and also redistributive efforts. Article 16 or non-discrimination article I wasn't there when it was put into the contract that was decades ago. But I had been told that that was the single most difficult article to get into our contract. As a result, every time we open the contract we are trying to build up that article; expand it, deepen it.

Audrena Redmond: [00:06:22] Have partner articles.

Kevin Wehr: [00:06:23] Have parts of the contract referenced back and forth to Article 16 so that the appointment article that talks about how people come in, how they're hired how their contracts are written are linked back to non-discrimination and also how we deepen the categories of protection for folks.

Kevin Wehr: [00:06:46] You know originally it was race and sex and Vietnam veteran status. We've had a couple of wars since then, let alone come to understanding about micro-aggressions and biases against LGBT faculty, for instance, many other categories of bias. So we've continually tried to buttress that article and expand it. Article 20 hour, our workload article, is the other big one where we've made I think some good progress. It's a couple of steps down the road and there are more steps to be taken. Article 20.37 in particular is frankly an attempt to redistribute some resources to address the increased workload that faculty of color, female faculty, LGBT faculty experience. What my colleague Cecil Canton has called cultural taxation.

Kevin Wehr: [00:07:54] Those faculty are often disproportionately called upon to serve students, especially some of our most marginalized students.

Audrena Redmond: [00:08:02] And to be representatives on committees for the university in their department and college.

Kevin Wehr: [00:08:08] And the university still has not moved beyond the words of "diversity and inclusion" but diversity and inclusion on all the committees means extra service work for those faculty having to serve on every single committee.

Audrena Redmond: [00:08:21] So 20.37 then provides these identifiers that you have to apply. That's some relief because it comes with reassigned time.

Kevin Wehr: [00:08:30] That's right. It is a dedicated pool of assigned time for these purposes to offset some of that extra work. And it's not perfect yet. We need to expand it. We need to make sure it's going to the right people in the right ways to really address this problem. But that's one little example of some progress that I'm fairly proud.

Audrena Redmond: [00:08:53] I think that's a big example. You're being honest — I think that's a big example.

Kevin Wehr: [00:09:01] I agree.

Audrena Redmond: [00:09:02] So it clearly it took a lot of conversation, meetings, interactions with the various levels of leadership within the organization including the staff leadership of CFA. What would you say the reception has been like among member leaders.

Kevin Wehr: [00:09:20] I think the reception is really very quite a bit. There is a lot of people who applauded this move and said it's about time. There's a lot of people who. Have told me that this is a great move. It's a smart move. And that is unnecessary. There's also been some pushback. I'm not going to lie. There are people in the organization who questioned. Why now? We started this a year and a half ago.

Kevin Wehr: [00:09:51] We were in the midst of a big contract campaign. One of the biggest and one of the most successful that we've had as an organization and there were people who said why are we doing this now? Why are we talking about salary? Why are we talking about bread and butter? Why are we talking about working conditions, workload. And I'll be honest, I think that that is a form of pushback. It's light. Well it is for people of color is familiar. Sure. It's a redirect. It's so difficult to talk about why is it so difficult to talk about race, about forms of oppression in general. Unless they are abstract and out there right. But this third principle says we are in it. We've got to own it and having our conversation is difficult. So we knew people were going to push back and. And my answer to them — it's not been an easy conversation — but my answer to them is. This is a bread and butter issue. This is an issue of economic justice. One of the things that I have. Come to understand through this process through this transformation process is that there is no pathway to economic justice that doesn't lead through social justice. We as an organization we're not going to be successful.

Kevin Wehr: [00:11:20] Calling on the entire faculty to be in solidarity with one another over a contract campaign that addresses salary or workload or whatever bread and butter issue you want unless we have full solidarity from everybody. And that means white people got to show up for black people on anti-racism issues not just white black right.

Kevin Wehr: [00:11:42] But the whole panoply.

Kevin Wehr: [00:11:46] Those have not been easy conversations but they're necessary conversations. But I can tell you I've also heard from faculty of color. That this is.

Kevin Wehr: [00:11:58] This is opened up CFA to them in a way that they haven't felt before. In a welcoming way that they haven't necessarily thought this. And that's part of the third principle as well. We have to acknowledge that. The way that we've been in the past is not as welcoming, not as inclusive as we could have.

Audrena Redmond: [00:12:20] But we were mirroring. Like all organizations do we mirror the systems and structures we live in and we do it subconsciously really we're just doing it.

Audrena Redmond: [00:12:31] Although there is consciousness that's why it's called racism.

Kevin Wehr: [00:12:34] And that's right yeah that's right. And that's true. You know the CSU is an institution of higher education in a racist and sexist culture and CFA has a part to play in that broader system, and you're right we do reflect some of those biases. Some of those assumptions and that's why we have to be persistent and intentional. About correcting those wrongs.

Audrena Redmond: [00:13:06] I think CFA having been out front you know five six years ago with our Unconscious Bias Workshop and being very timely right now in the current social political climate is really good. So the fact that our member leaders are working their way through this and have made a commitment. To being anti-racist and a social justice organization and acknowledging that CFA is also a part of the structure that creates the system of racism I think is hopefully is going to go a long way for us. You talked about the faculty some of the fact that you've heard from them. You said in particular that faculty of color come up to you and said it's about time; that they feel welcome that there's a space and place for our folks.

Audrena Redmond: [00:14:09] Do you worry about what will happen to other people who may not feel as comfortable anymore? Who might say that this is no longer the place for them because CFA is making this space in place for faculty of color who we know traditionally may not find that on campus for example.

Kevin Wehr: [00:14:35] Are you asking me in a nice way if this might be offensive to white people?

Audrena Redmond: [00:14:39] Yes.

Kevin Wehr: [00:14:42] Yeah the answer is yes. Of course. There's going to be people as I mentioned, the sort of like a form of pushback when you're talking about bread and butter issues. I think I think that certainly it may not be consciously code language but I think it's code language for pushback. 'You should be dealing with my issues.' And they, of course, are held up as everybody issues. But one of the things that I've learned through this process is that when we hide behind issues that everybody can agree upon.

Kevin Wehr: [00:15:17] We tend to be defaulting to issues that are most important to white male folks.

Kevin Wehr: [00:15:27] Of course we're a labor union — we're not going to stop dealing with wages, hours, and conditions. My response to those folks who may feel alienated by this new focus: We've got to do better education with them and we need them on our side. We need everybody working together. It's the right thing to do. If we lose some people along the way I guess I'll have to live with that. And I do believe that we will gain a lot more people along the way because of this new set of focuses.

Audrena Redmond: [00:16:07] Certainly race as we know from American history is not separate for economics in this country.

Audrena Redmond: [00:16:18] Racism, although it didn't have a name until post 16 81 is not separate from economics in this country. This country prospered at the sacrifice of the native

peoples, at the sacrifice of enslaved Africans, at the sacrifice of indentured servants, at the sacrifice of people shipped over usually to fight the war. I mean this nation is founded on 'isms' and we could go on right.

Kevin Wehr: [00:16:49] The building of the railroads and mining of the gold mining of the oil resources all of it. Yes.

Audrena Redmond: [00:16:58] So CFA has taken on this huge chunk. I'm curious though how is it, you know, what's your own journey been like through this Anti-Racism and Social Justice Transformation. What's it been like for you Kevin, having to time to think and reflect on maybe some things that have happened in your past?

Audrena Redmond: [00:17:21] Or the challenges that might have come up in some of these meetings and the decision making to move in this direction as a union.

Kevin Wehr: [00:17:34] It has not always been easy. And has ultimately been extremely rewarding and extremely fulfilling. It's transformation processes.

Kevin Wehr: [00:17:44] You know when we first started talking about this transformation. Ok that's cool we're going to transform as a union, as an organization. And I didn't quite tumble to the fact that that meant me transforming as an individual in order for that to happen. That's where the real change is. It took a little bit of time for me to come to that. So there is there is a process there.

Kevin Wehr: [00:18:09] There was a road for me to walk and it was not always easy. There were there were tears, There was a lot of introspection. I'm an introspective person, that wasn't hard to come to grips with.

Kevin Wehr: [00:18:33] Racism and sexism and social inequality are things that, because of where I grew up in California, I've seen it, fought against it, understood it as a sociologist. I study it.

[00:18:44] It's out there. It's abstract. It's something that I can understand it's something that I can write about. It's not something that I was living and breathing every day. I was in my head, not in my heart. And so I'm making that movement from head to heart is not an easy one. And it's especially not easy for academics, we live in our heads. But when one of the insights that I really came to understand deeply, and you know I'm still learning how to embrace that, but racism is something that lives in individuals. It's something that lives in institutions but it's not just something that out there. It happens every day. It happens in one on one conversations. It happens in meetings. It happens in classrooms.

Kevin Wehr: [00:19:35] There are micro aggressions. There are assumptions made. There are excuses given right?

Kevin Wehr: [00:19:47] So learning to live in the moment and really be present. And watch these things pass by and taking note of them. Feeling them. Intervening or responding. When possible.

Kevin Wehr: [00:20:04] Where possible. That's been a trend of personally transforming process for me. I can think of moments where I have stopped a conversation in the classroom. Because of noticing what was happening.

Kevin Wehr: [00:20:22] I have done the same thing in meetings and had other people do it in CFA meetings. It's a different way of trying to live in the world and it's a different way of, shall I say, conducting business as an organization. So the personal transformation part is a huge part of the

organizational transformation.

Audrena Redmond: [00:20:48] Yeah it is. I mean we, certainly leaders need to know it. Leaders like you need to know it. Need to feel it. Need to own it. In order for the transformation for the organization to be possible. The individuals lead the organization. So thank you for that work, and the other CFA leaders for doing that.

Audrena Redmond: [00:21:13] Well folks it's time to wrap up our podcast. We're going to leave us with a quote.

Audrena Redmond: [00:21:19] "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly." That's a quote from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in his letter from the Birmingham jail, April 16, 1963. This has been Radio Free CSU. I want to give a special thanks to our guest today, Kevin Wehr. I'm your host Audrena Redmond. That's the end of our podcast, but do join us again for more conversations discussing the 10 Guiding Principles of CFA's Anti-Racism and Social Justice Transformation. Remember: transformation is an action verb, meaning a thorough or dramatic change in form or appearance.