As promised (although a day late), here's my full report on the CSEA General Council meeting held the weekend of Oct. 8. For background, I might remind you that CSEA now is comprised of four affiliates, SEIU Local 1000, CSUEU, the Retired Employees Division, and ACSS (the Association of California State Supervisors). CSEA exists to provide services to the affiliates and to serve as a governing body over the association of the affiliates. Those services include legal, accounting, legislative, communications, and benefits. Each affiliate is equally represented in committees; in the General Council, delegates proportionally represent their members (about 1,000 voting delegates are currently authorized by the Bylaws). Actions can be introduced by members, groups, or committees: committees recommend actions or abandonment of actions on issues, practices, policies, and budget to the General Council, which then has the right to follow, drop, amend, etc. the measures. CSEA has four officers who are elected by the delegates: President, Executive Vice-President, Vice-President, and Secretary/Treasurer.

Committees have been meeting since the 2003 GC. The Fiscal Committee was characterized by contentious discussion and attacks throughout its existence and was chaired admirably through intense conflict by our own Kathryn Plunkett. The primary sticking points centered around Local 1000's desire to remove nearly all their financial support for central services. In committee, a number of alterations to the budget which benefitted Local 1000 were agreed to by the ACSS members and at least one of the retirees, which gave the Local 1000 bloc a majority vote. Kathryn and the other CSUEU member, Lori Williams from San Luis Obispo, steadfastly opposed all moves to give the opposition control, but in many cases they simply could not persuade the swing votes to switch over. Likewise in the other major committee, Bylaws and Policies, Local 1000 was bent on gaining control of the Association. From both committees came resolutions which were intended to give Local 1000 independence from the other affiliates through budgetary and policy-based means. Another contentious issue was a measure which would have allowed ACSS to separate from CSEA entirely. More information about the internal stresses can be found at: http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-unions8oct08,1,3286045.story?ctrack=1&cset=true

Tensions were high throughout the meetings. I'm not proud of the fact that on several occasions verbal assaults were made, and there was one incident of physical attack which resulted in an arrest. In a verbal incident, Kathryn's personal integrity was insulted and attacked; the culprit was subsequently ordered to not approach her for the rest of the meetings. Many CSUEU delegates found themselves traveling the halls in groups to provide protection to each other.
Several significant upsets to Local 1000 and ACSS plans were achieved in the General Council voting sessions, however. Firstly, the four officers elected were backed by CSUEU or sympathetic to our needs. J.J. Jelencic was re-elected to the Presidency. J.J. is from Local 1000; his philosophy is that the association must stay together, since 140,000 members are stronger than 60,000 (were Local 1000 to eventually depart). CSUEU's Hylah Jacques, from San Luis Obispo, was elected Executive Vice President. If you've met Hylah, you know how right she is for this position. A dark horse candidate, Donna Snodgrass from Local 1000, gave what many delegates felt was the best speech of the entire proceedings. Due to her down-to-earth practicality based on a strength-of-the-individual-through-association-with-others-of-common-needs philosophy, she was elected Vice President. Finally, Frank Luna was elected Secretary/Treasurer. Frank's from Local 1000 also, but will not take any nonsense from anyone in his oversight of the association's monetary affairs. All four were elected with major percentage spreads between them and their nearest competitors. Heading into voting for the committee recommendations, Local 1000 and ACSS leaders must have been somewhat unnerved seeing what delegates who vote for their constituent members' benefit could do.

An early vote was taken on ACSS' bid to exit the association. It was defeated decidedly, which sent a strong message to Local 1000 that any attempt they may make to exit will face stiff opposition. In other votes, the office of Executive Vice-President will be eliminated following the 2007 General Council; the Regional Director and Assistant Regional Director positions will likewise be terminated in 2007 (RDs and ARDs are intermediate officials of CSEA, serving as local liaisons between members, Chapter leaders, and the upper leadership echelon; they also are activism co-ordinators on the local level). An attempt to halve the number of delegates to GC was also defeated, which worked against Local 1000 and ACSS by ensuring the current difficulty of organizing a rebellious majority of voting delegates.

The other major work to be done was budgetary. To the emaciated recommended budget that came out of committee, amendments were made and defeated, made and approved. Finally a package was passed which wasn't as strong as CSUEU wanted. The position of General Manager, to oversee the day-to-day business activities of about 200 CSEA employees will continue to go unfilled. The legal staff will be cut to one full-time lawyer and one half-time legal secretary. In the legislative action department, a proposed legislative analyst position was not approved. However, the communications department, which the 1000/ACSS coalition had sought to eliminate, was spared. This area provides and disseminates publications and electronic information, both internally and to the public. Travel funding for the RDs and ARDs was restored following an attempt to eliminate it.
This General Council was perhaps the most important meeting in the history of CSEA. Had the leaders of Local 1000 and ACSS prevailed in their attempts to give themselves nearly total autonomy from and/or control of the association, the results for us could have been catastrophic. I have no doubt that the struggle isn’t over: the two groups may choose to simply break their agreements with CSEA and pay the legal/monetary consequences. They may try again in two years to do it from within the Bylaws and Fiscal committees, on the floor of GC, and in the election of association officers. For now, we are still an association of about 140,000 members who have our differences, but whose overarching goal is to provide the best protection and advocacy for ourselves possible in difficult times.

I consider being part of this GC one of the most exhilarating and fulfilling experiences of my life. One poignant moment came as I was leaving. I stepped into an elevator in the parking structure with two Local 1000 delegates. I greeted them, but not knowing where they stood on issues, said little else. As she exited one floor before I did, one of them said, ”It's good to know this union has finally turned the corner.” The other man and I agreed wholeheartedly. The victories we achieved proved that labor union politics and advocacy, at their best, are about ethics and doing what’s right for hard-working people. I’m proud to have participated and represented you. Thanks again for your support and giving me the opportunity to serve.

Ray Finnell
President, Chapter 310 CSUEU