



CRISJ Building Justice Podcast

Season 3, Episode 7: Students for Quality Education (SQE) at Sac State

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Guest: Michael Lee-Chang

Please note: This transcript may be imperfect. Please contact Tejhasvi Jaikumar directly should you have questions, tjaikumar@csus.edu.

Music lyrics: Company under construction, the function, justice for the human family we demand it. Justice, true freedom, equality is a must. Thus, decolonization of the planet. So bust this. People be the power now we're Building Justice. Pulling out divinations, now we're Building Justice. Welcome the planet to the Podcast, "Building Justice," "Building Justice," "Building Justice." Building is to add on, or to do away with.

0:33

Tejhasvi: Welcome to Building Justice, a podcast by Sacramento State's Center on Race, Immigration and Social Justice. We explore critical issues affecting our communities with the hopes of creating a healthier and more just world. I'm Tejhasvi Jaikumar, a sociology student at Sac State. And my guest is Michael Lee Chang, a political science major and student intern with Students for Quality Education at Sac State. I have invited Michael Lee-Chang to share his first-hand experience with campus organizing for affordability, accessibility, and quality of education. It's great to have you on the Building Justice podcast.

1:06

Michael: Yeah. Thank you so much for having me.

1:07

Tejhasvi: What is SQE's purpose and why was it established?

1:10

Michael: Students for Quality Education or SQE is a grassroots organization fighting for affordable, accessible, and quality education for all students at every CSU campus. We actually have, uh, active chapters at every CSU campus fighting specifically for, um, issues within those campuses. And of course, issues that affect all CSUs, uh, and we were formed in 2007 by students. So we're of students, um, by students and for students. So, our movement for educational justice is not exactly new, uh, students in the 1960s fought to open up the CSU system for working families, uh, immigrant students and other underrepresented groups. They were basically asking for access to high quality and relevant education because education is a right that everyone deserves, not even deserves, but everyone needs, uh, and services like Educational Opportunity Program or EOP were badly needed, which students were able to fight to implement to the CSU system. And, so eventually the CSU grew to become this people's university, you know, a place where education is open to all and anyone who just meets the basic requirements to enter the university system. But in recent years, we've been seeing attacks to this idea of the people's university and it's becoming less accessible. The quality of education is going down. And that's not to, you know, blame our faculty or staff because they're trying their hardest, but it's things like administrative bloat, you know, we're seeing pay increases and benefit increases for administrators, while our faculty and staff are struggling to get by and their workloads are constantly increasing. Our student assistance doesn't even have a proper union. So they are just being completely overworked without any rights and our students, you know, the quality of education we're trying to maintain because our students need it badly. And it's really upsetting, especially with the recent tuition increases and our, uh, labor unions within the CSU, a bargaining for better rights, a better contract, better pay, better benefits, because at the end of the day, faculty working conditions are student learning conditions, you know, whatever affects our faculty and staff will affect our students as well. So, SQE is actually supported by the California Faculty Association or CFA. It's a union of 29, 000 professors, lecturers, librarians, counselors, coaches, who teach and provide services to the CSU system's nearly 460, 000 students. So, they have a lot of weight on their hands, and they deserve better working conditions and not to be exploited by administrators.

4:09

Tejhasvi: So, how have you been involved with SQE since the chapter was established at Sac State?

4:14

Michael: So, this is my second year being a SQE student intern at Sac State, along with Layla Cormier. We have been doing a lot of things, we've been incredibly busy, but, uh, one of the biggest things that I'm honestly excited about is forming the SQEC, or Students for Quality Education Coalition at Sac State. It's a coalition of various clubs and student organizations to basically make the campus community a little closer together. And make communication and just collaborations easier across campus because sometimes it's a little difficult, um, to get, uh, people on campus to reply to emails or even just, uh, check DMs if they don't bother you back. So, we

wanted to streamline that, process and, just, because some clubs may have similar missions, but they may have never even known each other existed. So connecting, you know, make, uh, creating connections like those, it's establishing a network, um, I guess, unity, uh, more and better projects to come in the future out of these clubs and organizations. And then other things as of course, policing alternatives. We were pushing our campus president to have a SQE member sit on the new task force on campus safety. And we were able to get Layla to be appointed to that position. And so we're fighting for steering away from this emphasis on policing for safety and more individual and community care, things like an emphasis on mental health and importance on prevention rather than criminalization. And I think, you know, we believe that, when we know just from research as well, that education is the way to go. In making campus and just the world a safer place rather than trying to villainize in most of these cases, the other students and, you know, it's a place of education and we think that there's, you know, an institution like this should be doing what it's meant to do, which is to educate.

6:20

Tejhasvi: So, in terms of your involvement with SQE's Coalition, what was the inspiration to join forces with community groups or members?

6:28

Michael: I think, you know, the biggest, um, inspiration for it was when you try to reach out to honestly, any group on this campus. First of all, it's confusing. We were even supposed to reach out to, because there's not, there's usually not like a central point of contact. Uh, so unless you have a, in, you know, a friend or, you know, someone within that group that you've already established connections with, it's kind of difficult for, especially any newcomers to try to establish new connections. Um, and, you know, have worthwhile collaborations in the future. I mean, if you can't, you know, even start a dialogue with them, how are you going to work with them? So that was our biggest concern and motivation for forming the coalition. It's basically to streamline communication and collaboration efforts across campus because we feel that, uh, unity will make a better campus and make life easier for everyone, honestly.

7:25

Tejhasvi: Can you tell us a bit more about the Coalition?

7:28

Michael: Yeah, so it's very new. I mean, we just started, uh, we taught, we started talking about it last month, but we officially launched it last week. But already we have about 20 coalition members that ranges from official centers on campus to just clubs and student organizations. So, and we're expecting more members too. So, 20 from a starting point, I'd say is honestly really good for a coalition this new, and I think one of the things that makes a coalition so appealing is that the requirements are very light. I mean, if you could even call it requirements, um, we don't have any weekly or monthly meetings, it's pretty much, uh, just the discord server. It's a very loose network of, uh, clubs and student groups, it's just to get dialogue started because 1 of the things is, you

know, again, I mentioned previously, it's very difficult trying to reach out to anyone on this campus. So if we just streamline that process and have at least a central place for communication, but that's not email and that's less formal and maybe, uh, more accessible to a lot of students, I think it's the right way to go about things. So, there's very few asks, we just ask that each coalition member designate at least one member of their organization as a coalition ambassador. Just so that other coalition members know who to bother, basically, if they want to get in touch with that club or campus group. So to really start things off, we're planning a meet and greet event to kick off the coalition. It's on October 17th, uh, from 3 to 5 on campus. And it's basically, you know, it'll be, for some of these clubs, it'll be the first time they even meet in person, or even just realize that they exist on, with each other on campus. So, I think it's going to be a great event. Our campus president, our student government president will both be attending. And we're hoping it's a relatively big event. I mean, it's accessible to anyone. Anyone can attend. Not just coalition members, uh, because we do want students to get more familiar with what the coalition is and who's part of the coalition and what our intentions are.

9:41

Tejhasvi: Well, here's hoping that the event on Oct 17th from 3 pm to 5 pm at the Multi-Cultural Center is a success. And, looking forward to seeing how the Coalition grows! Other than being involved with SQE Coalition and advocating for policing alternative methods and mental health, what are the other projects that the Sac State chapter is currently involved in?

10:02

Michael: So, our biggest project recently, and it's still ongoing, it's fighting against tuition increase within the California State University system or CSUs because there was a proposal to increase tuition by 34% over five years for all CSU students, and I mean, that's an insane amount, at least that's how we felt about it, and we feel that it may disproportionately affect students... students of color, low income students, transfer students, immigrant students, first gen students. And, with enrollment already in decline at multiple CSU campuses, with a greater price tag of entry, we feel that some students may just, you know, choose to go somewhere else, or maybe they opt out for community college and just, or, you know, some may even decide not to go to college and the students who are already in college, they may possibly even decide to drop out. Unfortunately, the proposal did pass on the 15th of five. So tuition will go up by 34 percent over the next five years. And the biggest concern, you know, on top of the ones I mentioned is that a lot of students don't know about the tuition increase. I mean, they didn't know when it was first proposed and a lot of them don't know that it passed. Um, and what's going to be happening in the next few years. So, we have taken it upon ourselves, um, to try to inform as many students as possible about this tuition increase because students deserve to know, I mean, that's the bare minimum, honestly. And we feel that they've been inadequately informed at the, at the current moment, so. Uh, we're trying to do what we can, um, to keep students informed about the tuition increase and keep the fight going, um, and channel all that anger and frustration towards action.

11:50

Tejhasvi: Absolutely. Students must be made aware of this issue since it will have a profound impact on our lives. So, thank you for spreading the word out to other students who have the basic right to be informed. Are there any other advocacy work for other issues that you're involved with?

12:06

Michael: So, the next biggest thing is probably, um, uh, fighting in solidarity, uh, with our faculty and staff. There's 5 CSC unions that are currently, uh, fighting for better working conditions. And these unions, uh, labor unions consist of our faculty, our staff, which include, you know, our professors, our counselors, our coaches, our librarians, our office employees, receptionists, and, our trade workers too, so our custodians, our plumbers... it's covering most employees within the CSU and, we feel that their working conditions are our, you know, our student learning conditions, they deserve to be treated with respect. So, we're keeping students informed about that because I'm sure if you, you know, if you go to a CSU or if you just go to honestly any college, you have at least one person, one employee of the university, whether it be a counselor or a professor, or even maybe a custodial worker that you have a relationship with that, you know, you really value their hard work and efforts to improve your education on a day to day basis. So, we're trying to keep students informed and we're also doing what we can to mobilize students, um, in support of, uh, our faculty and staff. And, you know, if things escalate, then we're prepared to do whatever necessary, um, to show our support for our faculty and staff.

13:41

Tejhasvi: Definitely, it's not just about students getting an education, but also how we get it. So, we need to ensure that faculty and staff are respected and have the best conditions to support students. So, you had just mentioned how you are mobilizing students for a variety of advocacy work, such as supporting the faculty and staff strike. So how can students become involved in these efforts?

14:02

Michael: Yeah, and I do want to note that they aren't able to strike just yet. A lot of these unions, there's a legal process that they have to follow before they are able to strike. Um, so I just want to note that because, um, it does get tricky if we're saying that, uh, they're going to strike. But you know, if, if they do, and when they can, then we are happy to show our support, but, at the moment they are still following the legal process, um, and trying all options, uh, before, um, basically, you know, that's the last resort. In terms of involvement, our advocacy work is mostly within the CSU. I mean, you know, of course that trickles down to...the entire state and possibly the entire nation of the United States of America, but, um, if, you know, any students listening, if, you know, if they attend the CSU, we definitely suggest reaching out to your local SQE chapter, uh, on campus, um, and see how you can get involved. But, uh, if you're even in the area, you know, we always work with our, um, campus community partners. Uh, so if you're in the area near a CSU, you know, definitely reach out. Uh, we have an active chapter at every CSU. We are fighting hard and we're fighting well. So please do get involved. And we're, you know, we're always happy to see more

students get involved because this isn't just, you know, this is all of our education and, for some it's there, it's basically what decides whether they have a, you know, whether they can have a good life or not.

15:40

Tejhasvi: How can Sac State students contact SQE's chapter at Sac State if they are interested in getting involved with your advocacy efforts?

15:44

Michael: So we have an active, um, uh, social media across several platforms. Our Instagram is probably the best point of contact...just feel free to shoot us a DM or click the link in our bio to join our discord server where we'll be active. So, just feel free to reach out, mainly on our social media and you'll probably be able to reach someone in a short time.

16:07

Tejhasvi: Thank you so much for all your hard work in the Sac State community to advocate for quality education, alternative options for policing, and opposition to increase in tuition. It has been so great chatting with you and learning more about the important work that Sac State's SQE chapter is involved with. Thank you for being on the Building Justice podcast. It was nice meeting you!

Michael: Yeah, it was great meeting you as well. Thank you so much!

Tejhasvi: Everyone who has tuned into this episode, thank you for listening in. We hope our ongoing conversations spark understanding, empathy and motivation to join the struggle for a better future for all. The information contained in this podcast episode, including its title and description, represent the views and opinions of the host and guest, and don't necessarily represent the views and opinions of Sac State, CRISJ or the Building Justice Podcast Committee. Take care.

Outro Music Lyrics

No more penalties and no more wars. Based on the actions. Now, time for "Building Justice,"
"Building Justice." Time for building justice, justice.