Collective Faculty Letter of Support for CSU Caste Protections

Dear CSU Board of Trustees, CSU Chancellor Castro, and CFA President Toombs,  
  
We write as a national body of South Asians and allied faculties who are concerned about caste equity and workers’ rights. We commend the Cal State system for adding caste as a protected category. This move is in alignment with the broader civil rights movement of caste oppressed people seeking redress for the discrimination and harassment that caste oppressed staff, faculty, and students face on a regular basis in institutions across the United States. It is also a powerful vindication of the work of CALFAC to address the needs of its members. The negotiating committee’s hard won agreement should be respected.   
  
Despite the legal and moral appropriateness of this decision, a small group of faculty and allied organizations are working to overturn democratic union processes and intimidate Cal State into rescinding this important step.   
  
As experts on caste, race, and South Asian issues, we applaud the Cal State system for its leadership in protecting the rights of caste oppressed students, faculty and staff. We ask that you stand firm in the face of opposition and endorse the expansion of anti-discrimination policy to include caste.   
  
Additionally we want to clear up any disinformation related to this issue:  
  
1) The addition of caste does not impact other protected categories. Caste is a system of discrimination based on work and descent with its roots in South Asia. Similar hierarchical systems are found throughout the world including Latin America, Africa, and Asia.   
  
Caste impacts the over 5.6 million South Asians in the United States. South Asian Americans are Americans whose heritage comes from any of the countries of South Asia including: Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, and Myanmar. It also includes people who were indentured from these communities including Indo-Caribbean and Indo-Fijiian communities.   
  
Caste also continues to operate in the U.S. through forms of social exclusion and workplace discrimination. Extending protections to oppressed castes does not negate existing protections on the basis of religion, nationality, race, and ancestry. The argument put forth by the opponents of the decision that existing protections are sufficient to address caste-based discrimination is patently false. Caste-based prejudice is a distinct form of discrimination that cannot be subsumed under existing protections and must be addressed and remedied on its own terms.  
  
2) Adding caste as a protected category is not anti-Hindu. The student coalition that formed around this work is a broad network of interfaith, intercaste, and interracial students, faculty, and community stakeholders. One of its major leaders is Prem Pariyar, a practicing Hindu from Nepal. You can read about his inspirational leadership in the LA Times. [https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2022-01-20/csu-adds-caste-to-its-anti-discrimination-policy](https://www.google.com/url?q=https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2022-01-20/csu-adds-caste-to-its-anti-discrimination-policy&sa=D&source=editors&ust=1642955367990843&usg=AOvVaw31fJnQ7vNhwdUGKXyZJ5UU)   
  
3) Many of the South Asian faculty, staff, and students involved in the deliberations around this decision are themselves caste oppressed people who came forward at great risk. Attempts to discredit these vulnerable stakeholders are themselves expressions of casteism that underscore the need for institutional protections.   
  
4) One such attempt at discrediting caste oppressed groups is the smear campaign against Equality Labs and its research. As a caste oppressed Dalit civil rights organization, it is unique in having spearheaded this survey. The constant attacks by opponents attest to the difficulty of caste oppressed stakeholders to speak to and document their experiences. Dalit civil rights leaders of this organization continue to stand up to caste violence in order to transform, not just the South Asian American community, but the larger landscape of civil rights. Calling their work “anti-Hindu” or discrediting their survey data is emblematic of the violence caste oppressed individuals and organizations face when working towards their rights. It is also the precise reason why such protections are urgently needed in the system.   
  
5) Opponents of adding caste as a protected category state that they do not think of themselves in terms of caste and that such measures will negatively impact their South Asian students’ and faculty members’ identity. But the luxury of setting aside caste identity is itself a reflection of caste privilege. It also reflects the fact that the opponents of legally establishing caste-based protection are overwhelmingly drawn from privileged castes. These opponents have also argued that establishing caste as a protected category will result in discrimination and violence against South Asian communities. This claim, too, is spurious. Equality, rights, and dignity are not a zero sum game. Adding caste as a protected category does not take away the rights of privileged caste groups anymore than gender equality takes away the rights of men.   
  
6) The CALFAC union agreement to add caste as a protected category is in line with other academic union contracts, such as that of the Harvard Graduate Student Union. To reopen this agreement would not only cause harm to the bargaining process, but is a bad faith undermining of workers’ rights. We urge you to stay committed to the already agreed upon contract particularly as the larger non-discrimination policy has already been changed to address caste. There is no need to go backwards as the decision has already been completed at the policy level.   
  
We thank you again for this courageous step. In taking it, the California State University system joins the California Democratic Party, Brandeis University, Colby College, University of California, Davis, Harvard University, and other institutions who are supporting the rights of the caste-oppressed by acknowledging caste discrimination and changing their policies to reflect this reality.   
  
  
Thank you,