

Paraprofessionals and their Union



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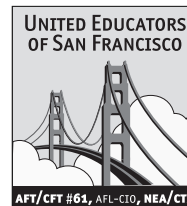
PARAS ON STRIKE FOR BETTER SCHOOLS

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Cover photo: Paraprofessional issues were part of the demands of the 1974 strike against SFUSD. As "temporary employees", they had no job security, being laid off at the end of the school year with no guarantee of a position in the fall. This page: Poster used in the 1974 strike.



February 2013

In San Francisco “paraprofessionals” is the term we use to identify a wide range of schoolworkers. Sometimes called teachers' aides, known within NEA as ESPs (Education Support Personnel), and within the AFT as PSRPs (Paraprofessionals and School Related Personnel), and within the Civil Service sector as “classified”, paraprofessionals are the lifeblood of the schools.

This booklet is intended as a brief introduction to the role paraprofessionals have played in the union in San Francisco, and the role the union has played in improving their work lives. It highlights the previously unsung efforts made by Linda Cook as the first chairperson of the paraprofessional unit and follows the path she charted as it has gone forward over the succeeding years.

Real work remains to be done. Issues of respect, classism, and racism are raised in this narrative, but have not been resolved. We will have to work together as we challenge these obstacles. Our shared history shows that when we move with unity, we can have great results.
In unity,

Dennis Kelly
UESF President



A 40-Year History of San Francisco's Paraprofessionals

Paraprofessionals in the San Francisco Unified School District have made steady gains since organizing for equality in the 1970's. Linda Cook, who spearheaded this effort from the start, recalls how it was and the strides paraprofessionals made with union support.

Before President Lyndon Johnson declared "War on Poverty" in 1965, classrooms generally functioned without aides or paraprofessionals. Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 authorized classroom support to aid the education of poor children who previously lacked services.



Gloria Washington, SF Federation of Teachers paraprofessional representative, addresses a rally from the back of a flatbed truck in front of 135 Van Ness. Joan-Marie Shelley and staff rep David Clisham are at left.

Initially, classroom paraprofessionals were hired to serve as teachers' aides in elementary and then middle schools, assigned to work with small groups of students or to provide one-on-one help. San Francisco hired about 50 paraprofessionals, Linda Cook among them.

As city employees, they were required to take the Civil

Service exam to become eligible for the City Retirement System and other benefits, but this eligibility was contingent on them working an eight hour day to earn "Permanent" status. For paraprofessionals, an eight-hour day was extremely rare and Linda, along with other paraprofessionals, was classified as "Temporary".

Under Title I, which was created to "supplement not supplant" funding, the school district saw a way to avoid civil service obligations and hired the next thousand or so paraprofessionals as "temporary employees" who could be laid off at the end of the school year with no guarantee of a job the following September. They were also denied benefits including pensions.



Linda Cook (2012)



Teachers and paraprofessionals march down Polk Street from the California Federation of Teachers convention to SFUSD headquarters at 135 Van Ness during 1974 negotiations.

Assigned to the old Lincoln Elementary School in 1969, Linda recalls that students were poor and grades 2-4 were packed into classrooms of about 35 students. Some administrators treated paraprofessionals like servants. She recalls, "We were introduced by first names; everyone else was known by last name. We were told to use the children's bathroom. We couldn't enter the lunchroom if teachers decided to hold a meeting there." There was no procedure for hiring and assigning paraprofessionals. "The principal's friends got hired." One principal even assigned a paraprofessional to hem her clothes.

For their work in the classroom, paraprofessionals were paid about \$2.43 an hour. There were two schools of thought behind that wage rate. First, the paraprofessional workforce was then primarily female and subject to the wage suppression that had been there for decades. Secondly, paraprofessionals were generally seen as neighborhood ladies, one

step from the volunteer room mothers who occasionally lent a helping hand. Their classroom work was undervalued, underappreciated and underpaid. "Prejudice and classism. This was my first experience with those things," says Linda, a native of New York City.

Linda transferred to Sutro Elementary in the Richmond District in 1972. Although some aspects of the job improved, Linda discerned a real hierarchy: custodians were at the bottom and paraprofessionals were one rung higher, then came the substitutes, the school secretaries, the teachers, and the principal. In 1972, the San Francisco Federation of Teachers (SFFT) formally opened its membership to paraprofessionals and had created an Executive Board seat for their representation. (CTA did not allow paraprofessionals to join them until 2005.)

Still wages and working conditions for paraprofessionals were not equitable, and Linda decided it



Linda Cook and James Nethers

was time to call the union. At the time, paraprofessionals worked for the school district but were still officially employees of the city. The dual-master paradox effectively meant that no one was compelled to take responsibility for them. Paraprofessionals had “no contract, no regulation on hours, no qualifications” for their jobs. People were treated differently and did not know who was ultimately in charge. Paraprofessionals were treated as casual employees, not knowing from year to year if they would be called back when school re-opened in the fall.

In 1977 SFFT Local 61 sought to represent all the paraprofessionals under the state’s new collective bargaining law and demanded an election in the school district. The school district denied that it was the paraprofessionals’ employer. The union filed a complaint with the Public Employment Relations Board, and PERB ruled quickly that the paraprofessionals were school district, not City employees. This still left the paraprofessionals in a “dual-master” quandary. As the paraprofessional representative on the San Francisco Federation Executive Board, Linda joined forces with the Federation’s

president Jim Ballard and worked closely with staff representative David Clisham and Julie Koppich to organize paraprofessionals.

The Rodda Act of 1977 granted collective bargaining rights for educational employees. Linda gathered a core team of paraprofessionals, including James Nethers, Maria Ehrlich and Aracelly Martinez, and together they formed a Paraprofessional Chapter within the San Francisco Federation of Teachers. A key initiative was to establish some clarity about the dual-master mess. A Memorandum of Understanding was negotiated with the City (not the school district) over working conditions, salary, and classifications.

The SFFT did not have the resources to hire staff to represent paraprofessionals, so Linda volunteered to set up a telephone answering service for paraprofessionals and spent long hours in the evenings after work answering members’ questions and dealing with job-related concerns. The arrival of collective bargaining made the task more exciting but no less difficult. Linda recognized the importance of paraprofessionals and teachers working together to improve education for San Francisco’s students and to improve working conditions for both categories of adults. She credits



Julie Koppich and Aracelly Martinez



Joan-Marie Shelley amid the sleeping bags and supplies in the Superintendent's conference room during the 1977 occupation that led to the first paraprofessional teacher contracts.

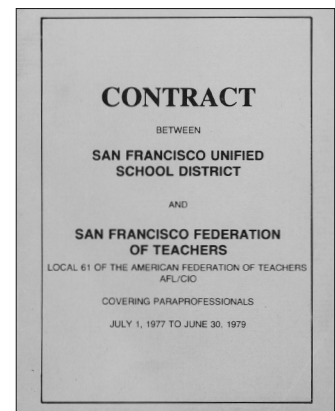
former UESF vice-president Rudi Faltus for attacking this problem head-on during her work for Restructuring in the 1980s and 1990s.

Thanks to the previous Memorandum of Understanding with the City, paraprofessionals won the right to form a contract between the union and the school district, even though salaries were set by the City.

Joan-Marie Shelley, former SFFT president and founding president of UESF, addressed this issue in a 1993 oral history, explaining that since 1974, paraprofessionals were classified as “permanent exempt” employees of the City, a designation that gave them some benefits, but blocked them from others. They had none of the protections of Civil Service and were not hired off a Civil Service list. They also had no movement on the salary sched-

ule, no paid vacation, nor a dental plan. Nevertheless, the SFFT Paraprofessional Chapter had a strong presence in the strikes in 1971, 1974 and 1979. The paraprofessionals could have easily been used by the school district to break the strikes, but they joined with teachers to turn back political attacks on the union, especially during strikes.

This solidarity was exhibited even during the weeklong sit-in in 1977 at the Superintendent's Office at 135 Van Ness, with



First contract between Paraprofessionals and SFUSD, 1977



Kathryn Tobie and Mary Lavalais

Linda joining her fellow Executive Board members including Jim Ballard, Bob Fesler, Larry Halling, Joan-Marie Shelley and Pam Clisham in the protest.

The sit-ins led to the first teacher contract and first paraprofessional contract with the school district over the objections and anti-union tactics of then superintendent Robert Alioto.

The strike of 1979 was more divisive and defensive, but it realized one critical goal: Medical coverage became a reality for all paraprofessionals who worked four hours or longer.

In 1981, despite all she had accomplished and the groundwork she laid, Linda decided to step down from her 11 year struggle for basic human and labor rights and take a six-month unpaid leave from her paraprofessional job. She convinced Peggy Gash to take her place as Paraprofessional Representative and Chairperson of the SFFT Paraprofessional Chapter. At this point, ironically, the union decided to make this a paid staff position, and Peggy became the union's first paid paraprofessional staff person. Kathryn Tobie, Mary

Lavalais, David Vega and David Oberweiser were among the paraprofessionals who volunteered to help.

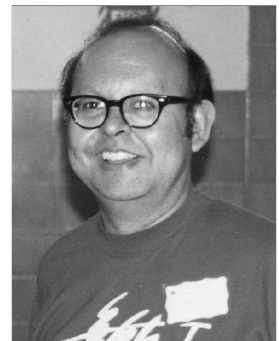
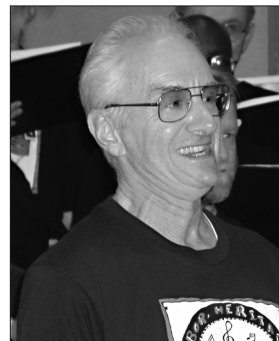
In addition to her staff position, Peggy was elected Paraprofessional Vice President in 1981 and served for 22

years, under presidents Ballard, Shelley and Kent Mitchell. For more than 20 years, she had the onerous responsibility of both policing the paraprofessional contracts and responding to problems and grievances.

Major changes to the union structure came about in 1989, when the San Francisco Federation of Teachers, AFT #61, and the San Francisco Classroom Teachers Association merged to form the United Educators of San Francisco. At that time, the SFCTA's affiliate bodies had different ideas about paraprofessionals. The national affiliate, NEA, accepted them. The state affiliate, CTA, did not. UESF's paraprofessional members became



Peggy Gash



David Oberweiser and David Vega

NEA members, and NEA paid a “fee-for-service” to CTA to represent them on the state level. AFT accepted paraprofessional members at all levels.

By the 1990s, paraprofessionals were working in a wide variety of classrooms. In addition to serving as classroom aides, many paraprofessionals worked in bilingual classes and in special education. About 200 paraprofessionals were security aides and another few hundred worked in the children’s centers maintaining the crucial adult-student ratios. The district had begun to add community relations classifications as paraprofessional jobs.



Bradley Reeves

In 1992, the paraprofessionals finally succeeded in separating themselves from the City. The main purpose for this action was to be able to create a retirement plan for paraprofessionals. Because few paraprofessionals worked eight-hour shifts, they did not qualify for City Retirement. Unfortunately, the retirement plan that the district could afford and that the union settled for was the flawed Public Agency Retirement System (PARS) offering. It took another decade to resolve many of the problems.

In 2003, Bradley Reeves was elected Paraprofessional Vice President. During Bradley’s tenure, the number of staff representatives had grown. Paraprofessionals day-to-day issues and concerns fell to staff, while Bradley concentrated on policy is-



Janet Eberhardt and Madeline Cabading

sues. Early in his term, the union became aware that the contractual right for paraprofessionals to cash-out sick leave was unenforceable under the PARS system. This also alerted Bradley to concerns about the PARS retirement plan in general. These and other issues were worked on in negotiations by Bradley Reeves’ successor, Carolyn Samoa. With Carolyn at the helm, the accrued sick-leave buy-out was settled, and paraprofessionals got their sick-leave hours converted into 403(b)s upon retirement.

In 2005, Executive Vice President Linda Plack undertook organizing another unit of classified employees, the Health Workers, who came under the paraprofessional contract in 2007.

In 2005, another piece also fell into place. After two failed campaigns to include paraprofessionals in membership, CTA’s leadership finally succeeded in doing so. San Francisco’s active paraprofessional delegates largely paved the way by making their presence felt at over a decade’s worth of CTA State Council meetings. Janet Eberhardt, Madeline Cabading, Aracelly Martinez, Roberto Michel, Mary Lavalais, along with Peggy



Carolyn Samoa

Gash and Bradley Reeves, were key players in bringing about change. It did not hurt that the entire UESF delegation refused to sit in their “assigned” seats, but, instead sat in the back of the hall in the “Guest” section where the paraprofessionals had to sit.

Together AFT, CTA and CFT tackled the larger issue of retirement and managed to move all paraprofessionals to Social Security as the basis of retirement. Among its many drawbacks, PARS offered only a lump sum at retirement which could possibly last no more than 3-10 years. Social Security, on the other hand, is a life-long benefit. This improvement was the result of many years of negotiations.

Meanwhile, other negotiations were in progress as well, including the 2008 agreement on the use of a planned parcel tax to provide an annual \$250 bonus for every paraprofessional member. During the same time, Carolyn worked with the union’s experts in Early Childhood Education, Elaine Merriweather and Betty Robinson-Harris, to create eight-hour jobs for paraprofessionals working in the Child Development Program.

Over the past decade, the number of paraprofessionals has remained stable. At over 1,500 members, the unit is about 500 fewer than at its peak. Elimination of classroom aides has resulted in the

majority of the paraprofessional workforce serving in Special Education and Early Education schools.

Today paraprofessionals work at every level of the union. In addition to the Paraprofessional Vice President and the elected members of the Executive Board, Roberto Michel served as the union’s Sergeant-At-Arms, one of the seven officers,

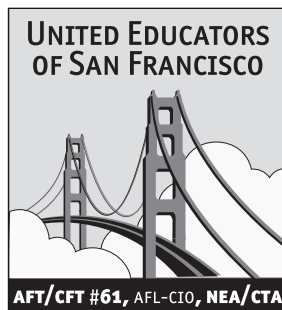


Roberto Michel

until 2012, when he was succeeded by another paraprofessional, A.J. Frazier. Tom Harriman, Catherine O’Byrne-Shewchuk, Karen Quinn, and Ida Mae Stanford are among today’s paraprofessional leaders.

Over the 40 years since Linda Cook undertook the battle for paraprofessional rights, San Francisco’s paraprofessionals have made significant strides and come a long way. But the road ahead is never straight and will always need repair. The union recognizes that we need to work continuously to raise the status of all workers so we can participate in cooperative labor for the education of all of our students. Together we can do it.





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