

DOCUMENTS

Salinas Public Library Support

Saturday, April 2nd, 2005, I drove a group of librarians and fellow travelers to Salinas, California, to protest the closure of the public library. The event was a 24-hour read-a-thon, timed to coincide with celebrations of the Cesar Chavez holiday. Salinas, a Spanish-speaking agricultural community and home of John Steinbeck, had shut down its entire library system due to budget shortfalls, making it the largest city in the country without a public library.

The event was spectacular, with kids, and dogs and “books not bombs” placards, and speaker after speaker exhorting City authorities to find some way to keep these vital community centers open. Authors, musicians, and Hollywood stars took their turn at the podium. Local schoolchildren read poems, and unions expressed solidarity. As a listed speaker I had the opportunity to talk about the issue from a librarian’s point-of-view. This is a reconstructed summary of my remarks.

Buenas tardes, compañeras y compañeros de Salinas.

First, I want to let you know that I came with a delegation of Bay Area librarians. I also bring formal support of the Progressive Librarians Guild, a national activist organization of library workers affiliated with the American Library Association (point to colleagues holding PLG banner at back of crowd, applause). The Progressive Librarians Guild wishes to let the people of Salinas know that we see this issue as being at the forefront of public access in this country, and support your actions to reinstitute this system.

Second, I want to let you know that these cuts are not just aimed at Salinas, or even just at poor communities. Many people might think of academia as an ivory tower exempt from this sort of abuse, but last year I was laid off as a labor librarian at the University of California at Berkeley. I was paid through a statewide labor research program that was whacked by the Governor’s mid-year budget cuts, straight out of the gate in January, as his way to hurt labor for fighting the

recall of Gray Davis. Now, we all may have different opinions about how good or bad a governor Davis was, but I think we all agree about how Schwarzenegger is doing. My job involved outreach to the community about labor research resources at the University – your university, your tax dollars at work. The labor community has a long history of resisting abuse, and one of the slogans is “An injury to one is an injury to all.” Salinas may be taking the hit now, but we are all vulnerable.

Finally, I want to tell you some things about the library community you might not know. Most people think of a librarian as the person that checks out their book or answers a reference question, but there’s more to it than that. Many people work in libraries that are not “librarians” – that do not have a library degree – yet contribute mightily to the functioning of the institution. Also, many of us work behind the scenes, like the brothers and sisters you were just introduced to here working on this event. My job right now is cataloging Spanish language materials that come into the Bancroft Library at U.C. Berkeley – again, your public institution, your tax dollars at work. The materials I catalog include everything from rare 18th century manuscripts to books published last year in Honduras, and Guatemala, and Mexico. Most of these don’t already have existing catalog records, which means that if I don’t catalog it, you can’t find it. Other colleagues do things like conserve damaged documents, so that, say, you wanted to come to our library and look at an actual decree from the Mexican revolution, you could hold it in your hand without damaging it. Our work helps to make these resources visible. This is also a predominately female profession, which means a generally underpaid one – no one becomes a librarian to get rich. People do this sort of work because we care about serving the public good. These are all tasks that make the library community, the faces you never see, but we are all vulnerable.

And we must fight back.

Venceremos, Salinas!

Lincoln Cushing



photo by Eli Edwards

PLG members attending Salinas Public Library rally:
Eli Edwards, Lincoln Cushing, Jane Glasby, Gillian Boal

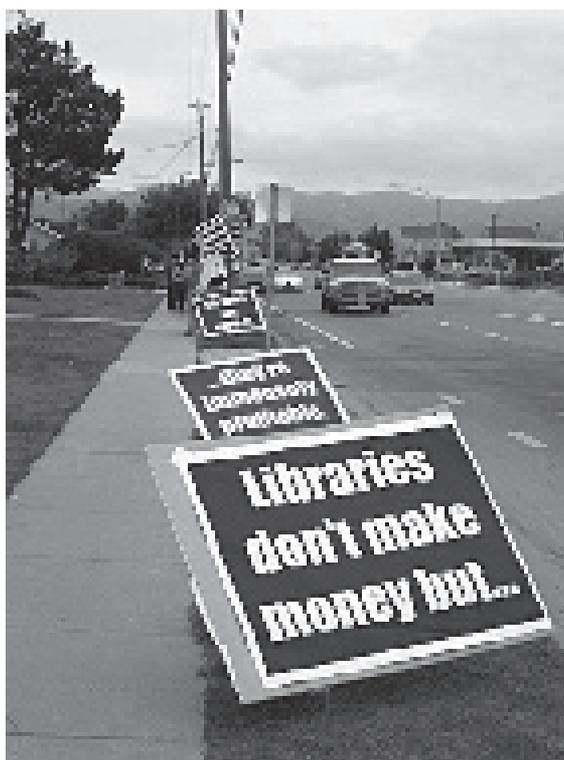


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