

# ***The QC Catalyst***

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**PSC-CUNY/ Queens College Chapter**

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## **CUNY at War-- and the PSC Response**

**A Special Issue of Catalyst,  
the Queens College PSC  
Chapter Newsletter**

As we watch a seemingly heedless Administration prepare for war in Iraq, at home we see unfold a new war on CUNY: from the Governor a punitive budget, with a 12% decrease for senior colleges and 19% for community colleges, and a tuition increase of up to 41%; from the Mayor a call for union concessions just as we are about to negotiate a new contract; and from the Chancellor a hiring freeze on already stripped-bare staff positions and support for a tuition increase. We in the PSC may well feel at war on many fronts. The Queens Chapter Executive would like to involve the whole chapter in discussion of this situation, so as to mobilize our base effectively for the most critical test of union strength in years. We are sober but confident that we can build on our organizing capacity to meet the challenge: in the last three years we have added 3,500 new members (more than any other AFT local in the country), while 1,500 of us have been out negotiating, lobbying, fighting grievances, letter-writing, telephoning, conferencing, marching, and picketing--and the union promises a Spring of activism such as we have never seen.

The chapter meeting on XXX will discuss fully and prepare an effective response to all

these issues. Our view is that they are clearly linked, many fronts of a single struggle, but this is precisely what needs careful discussion and respectful debate among differing views, which can only strengthen the chapter in the long run. The main questions are these:

**Contract. Why should we make concessions?** It would cripple us to think so, giving up in advance. The Mayor demands concessions in the name of a supposedly inevitable "fiscal crisis." In reality, this is a man-made crisis, created by a politicians' tax policy which, for a decade or more, has starved the city and state of revenue for education and continues to do so. The latest step in this policy is the Governor's extending yet more tax "relief" to the wealthiest. In addition, New York State's share of a \$100 billion war is estimated at \$6.8 billion (National Priorities Project, 2002), in essence a huge war tax for bombs not books. Like other city unions which are not lying down and playing dead, we will argue--and back up with action--that we did not create the crisis and will not bear its costs. We took huge budget hits even during the boom years, which were no boom for us and our students. So we will press our contract agenda vigorously while demystifying the argument that there is no money. A broad contract campaign will unfold again, including writing letters to the Chancellor, going to the students and other unions for support, mass membership meetings, rallies, marches, picket-lines, and other actions to support our team at the negotiating table. A just contract is the goal for all of us.

**Budget. How can we prevent devastation by Pataki's budget?**

The redistribution of resources away from schools and universities has become even more egregious, as the Governor's tax policies continue to decimate our budgets. Education as a whole sustains the most severe cut in the entire Executive Budget: overall spending decreases 2.9%, but K-12 5.5%, and higher education a staggering 11.1%; CUNY is worse still, 12% at the senior colleges and 19% at the community colleges. The PSC began its budget campaign Jan. 31, testifying at a sympathetic City Council (after stopping a \$9.6 million cut to CUNY in the December City budget modification); Feb. 11 we went to Albany to testify at the Joint Finance Committee. Our main demands are focused and, in any fair context, modest: \$39 M for 450 new full-time faculty lines, \$4 M for graduate tuition remission, \$5 M for paid adjunct office hours, \$2 M for Worker Education Centers, \$11 M for community college base aid, \$10 M for restoring 150 non-instructional staff lines, and \$24 M for technology and maintenance of facilities. The campaign, to be outlined at our chapter meeting, will expand immediately into mass phone calls and visits to legislators' district offices. The arguments are made, the literature is printed: now we must all go into action at the State level, as we did so successfully at the City level in November-December. We have to debunk (again and again, if necessary) the myth that the fiscal crisis is an inevitable fact of nature, and demand a sensible tax policy for the education budget and an end to what is, in effect, an unjust war tax.

**Tuition. Why should we oppose any tuition increase?** A hike of 41% would devastate us, not only excluding the poorest students, but diminishing the education of all students who work and will have to work more hours for their tuition

check. Though some may call it a "user fee," such a tuition increase is no more nor less than yet another tax. This additional tax, levied on those who can least afford it, is outrageous; indeed, CUNY should be free. A tuition hike is also a disguised war tax, supplementing with student funds what is drained away from the state to pay for the war, and this on the backs of the very young people who fight these wars: many CUNY students or their family members have military obligations. Unlike the Chancellor and the SUNY administration (and, unfortunately, the SUNY union), the Executive Council and Delegate Assembly of the PSC have strongly opposed any tuition increase at CUNY, and we have already begun with NYPIRG and other student groups a mass campaign for no tuition hike. A narrow, shortsightedly self-interested union view might support some tuition increase on the grounds that it would help pay our salaries and (the specter always raised in this situation) even save our jobs. That is the Chancellor's position. We need to discuss this question thoroughly. In the view of the Chapter Exec, a more thoughtful and long-term approach sees the need for us to ally with our students to stop tuition hikes, rather than allowing ourselves to be pitted against students in a competition for scarce resources. (Again, the underlying rationale--the fiscal crisis and the needs of the war machine--has to be confronted.) We enjoyed very strong support from students in our last contract and budget fights, and have established the feeling that faculty, staff, and students are allies. Indeed, many students have come to know about the PSC for the first time through events like TeachCUNY, which we intend to hold again as a CUNY Day of Action on March 26. At the chapter meeting Feb. 25 we will engage this debate and press for strong faculty and staff action to stop the tuition hike.

**War. Why should the PSC oppose war in Iraq?** This war is not only wrong but crippling to us at home by way of the huge war tax, and it is a question that won't go away. At Queens last Spring we had a vigorous debate on the union's taking a stand against expansion of the so-called War on Terrorism, with many differing views being heard. Some maintained either that the war was right or that the union should take no stand, but after similar debates on all the campuses the Delegate Assembly passed a nuanced resolution against expansion (available on the PSC website, [www.psc-cuny.org](http://www.psc-cuny.org)). In July our delegates took this resolution to the AFT national convention where, after a struggle to get it on the agenda, one third of the AFT delegates voted to support it, against the bitter opposition of the AFT leadership. That leadership has again come out with support for expanded war, the AFT Exec voting in January a resolution supporting war on Iraq (again the PSC president voted no, and this time she was joined by a handful of other AFT vice-presidents). The PSC is already acting against the Iraq war on the grounds of our existing resolution, but we have scheduled campus debates during February to inform our Delegate Assembly discussion of a resolution specifically condemning the Iraq war. Bring your views on the war to the chapter meeting and engage the debate. To date, while our national AFT leadership supports the war, the PSC is one of 11 AFT locals to oppose it, along with 6 major national unions (AFSCME, Postal Workers, Communication Workers, SEIU, UE, and Farmworkers), 2 state federations (Hawaii and Washington), 17 central labor bodies (including Albany, Rochester, Hartford, and Philadelphia), and 55 locals. A national anti-war labor body, US Labor Against the War (USLAW) was formed with PSC participation in Chicago in January. We are

organizing for the antiwar protest February 15, which the Mayor is trying to repress by refusing a permit for more than 10, 000 people (we expect a quarter of a million). On the PSC website ([www.psc-cuny.org](http://www.psc-cuny.org)) you can see the USLAW resolution against the Iraq war, the AFT resolution supporting the war, and our existing PSC resolution.

In sum, these four questions--the contract, the budget, tuition, and the war--are fateful indeed for us in the PSC. Come to the chapter meeting prepared to discuss them all in their complex interconnections and, more importantly, prepared to commit to organizing around them. We don't promise to win everything we need, but the Chapter Exec does promise the most vigorous campaign this union has ever mounted, a campaign worthy of us and our students. We will give a good account of ourselves, we will grow in the process, we will cement our alliances with students and other unions, and we will make a difference.

--Queens College PSC Chapter Executive Committee