



THE CONTRACT: STATE OF EMERGENCY

An Editorial Comment
By Barbara Bowen

From the February, 2005

Clarion

Last month I wrote that January would be a period of intensified contract negotiations followed by an assessment of whether we were making sufficient progress toward a settlement. If not, I promised, the union would enter into a new level of mobilization and a more militant campaign to win the contract we need. Both things have happened – intense negotiations and serious assessment. The result is that on January 27, the union’s Delegate Assembly voted unanimously to declare a state of emergency in the contract negotiations.

While some progress has been made and we have begun to reach tentative agreements on different pieces of the contract, the central problem remains. Management has not budged from the position that our final contract settlement will be at the minimal level forecast by their initial offer. Their December offer of 1.5% over four years (with a \$400 one-time cash payment and a further 1% “increase” to be funded by increased work) points to a final settlement that barely brushes the level of inflation.

There are two overriding reasons such a settlement would be a disaster. The first is that it would mean we lose ground in salaries and make no progress in working conditions, and thus no progress in our ability to serve our students or advance in our own research and professional lives. The second is health care.

HEALTH CARE COSTS

Like almost every group of workers in the country, PSC members are faced with outrageous increases in health care costs, driven by a profit-obsessed pharmaceutical industry. Many of those increases fall on the Welfare Fund (WF), which supports the costs of members’ prescription drugs.

After years of underfunding by CUNY management, our WF needs a substantial increase if it is to provide any meaningful support. We have already endured the shift of about a third of the cost of our prescription drugs – and much of our dental care – from the employer to the employee. If CUNY is to offer its faculty and staff an adequate dental plan and any useful drug benefit at all, there must

be a significant increase in Welfare Fund contributions. Despite painful benefit changes and extremely careful management, the Fund's reserve has less than a year left.

Management's response to this at the bargaining table has shocked some of you who have attended negotiating sessions as observers. They coolly take the position that the cost of health care should be subtracted from inflation-level non-raises, or that we should cut benefits, especially for retirees. One of their stated rationales is that "many places don't have any benefits for retirees at all." Many places lock the doors so workers can't get out, too. Does CUNY really want to be the university that wins the race to the bottom in health care benefits? Current and future retirees *earned* their WF benefits as part of their compensation while they were working. Health care – including the prescription drugs that increasingly *are* health care – is part of our wage, not a gift of employer largesse.

The other ominous thing we've heard across the table during the past month is a repetition of the City's dictum that we will have to "increase our productivity" just to claw our way up to an inflation-level increase. In other words, work more just to stand still. One example of a "productivity increase" proposed by CUNY management is that full-time faculty would be required to return to campus on August 20 – without any extra compensation or other gains for that work. The fact that we have already experienced huge "productivity increases" as our class sizes have boomed and workload has increased means nothing. Nor does the argument, obvious to anyone who knows anything about academic life, that real productivity is not measured in the number of student-widgets you process on an academic assembly line: real productivity means smaller class sizes, a manageable courseload, more research time. It's astonishing that the same Chancellor who has built his career at CUNY on the "excellence" of the faculty can now propose cutting into the little time we have for research.

The City's position on "self-funded increases" is being tested in the arbitration process on contracts with police, firefighters, and teachers; and until the first of those decisions is issued, sometime around the end of March, many other municipal negotiations are on hold. Even if the City is forced by a legal decision, however, to provide larger increases to the police union, each other union will have to make its own case. And only the police and fire unions have the option of arbitration that is legally binding.

VAST CHASM

If it's hard to square all of this with my initial report that some progress is being made, I agree. Collective bargaining is an oddly compartmentalized and almost schizophrenic activity: the two sides can work quite productively together on fine points of accrued annual leave or performance evaluations while operating across a vast chasm of disagreement on more global issues. The PSC

negotiating team is committed to continuing to work toward progress at the bargaining table, but the chasm has not shrunk. If anything, over the past month, its outline has become clearer.

ACTION

That's why the union's Delegate Assembly declared a state of emergency (the full text of the resolution is worth reading; see www.psc-cuny.org). We resolved that the union would "call on every member of the faculty and staff to become part of the mass effort that will be required, given the current political climate, to win the contract we need; that we rededicate ourselves to old-fashioned, one-on-one organizing so that every member is informed and engaged." The state of emergency is a state of mobilization; we need to be in a position to act as action is needed.

Movements are built one by one, and the enraging truth is that it will take something like a movement to win, when you think about it, a rather modest agenda: to maintain the value of our salaries and health care and to make gains that will strengthen the education we offer. That such an agenda places us in such sharp conflict with management is a measure of how regressive *their* agenda really is.

The second part of the resolution is a commitment to initiate a union-wide conversation on the tactics the labor movement has historically used to break contractual logjams – and their relevance to our situation. By engaging in a new level of critical conversation throughout the union, you will prepare your delegates to vote on more militant actions that we may be forced to consider this Spring. Meanwhile, the other union officers and I are doing everything we can to increase the pressure behind the scenes: meeting with legislators, working with the statewide teachers' union, and engaging in talks with the City and State.

The message I hear from the membership is that you don't want to be forced to take more militant action but that you are also not willing to give up on your own professional lives and on CUNY. Management may have given up on the intellectual and political promise of CUNY, but we haven't: we are not willing to concede that a serious professional life is impossible at a city university. That's what this contract struggle is about.