

FEBRUARY 2020



Academic Year 2019-20 No. 5

psc-cuny.org/retirees.org

CHAPTER MEETING MONDAY, FEBRUARY 3, 1-3PM

Adolph Reed will speak on the intersection of race and class. Reed is Professor Emeritus of political science at the University of Pennsylvania and the author of a number of books on American politics including *Stirrings in the Jug: Black Politics in the Post-Segregation Era*, *The Jesse Jackson Phenomenon*, and *Class Notes: Posing As Politics and Other Thoughts on the American Scene*.

PSC Union Hall, 61 Broadway, 16th floor.
Light refreshments as usual. ■

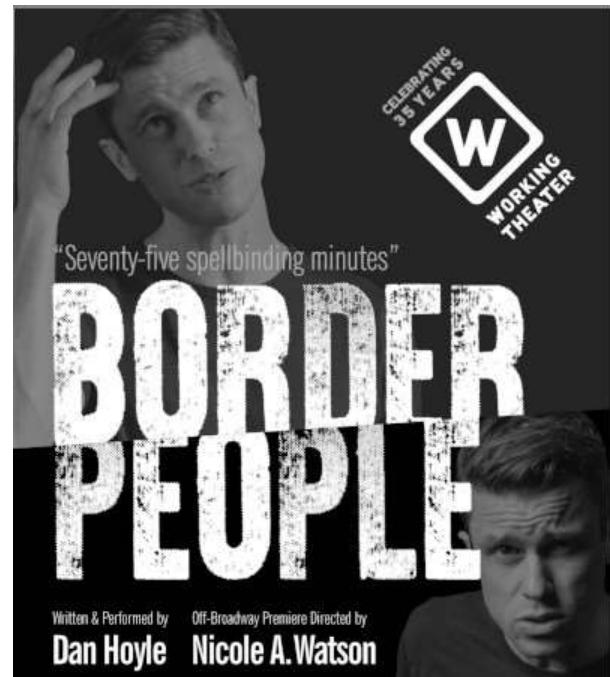
CHAPTER MEETING MONDAY, MARCH 2, 1-3 PM

Alan Feigenberg, recently retired from the CCNY School of Architecture, will lead a presentation on organizing for sustainability in our physical environments.

PSC Union Hall, 61 Broadway, 16th floor. ■

UPCOMING EVENTS SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 2 PM PSC THEATER PARTY **BORDER PEOPLE**

Once again PSC members are gathering for a theater event. This time we will see *Border People*, written by Dan Hoyle, directed off Broadway by Nicole A. Watson. The play is based on conversations with immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers and other border crossers. It offers a startling gallery of portraits of those who cross borders by necessity or choice.



SPECIAL PSC MATINEE SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 2PM GURAL THEATRE AT A.R.T. 502 W 53rd St. @ 10th Ave.

Discounted tickets \$22
Contact Steve Leberstein
sleberstein@gmail.com or
Marcia Newfield
mnewfield@pscmail.org
for tickets. ■

**ANOTHER THEATER PARTY
SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 29, 2 PM
A CIGARETTE GIRL IN THE SOUTH
BRONX**

Connie Gemson, a PSC executive committee retiree, is pleased to have her play, *A Cigarette Girl in the South Bronx*, produced by the Working Theater of New York, also at Gural 502 W 53rd St @ 10th Ave. Her play will be included in a six-session series called *Best of Theaterworks* from February 22 – 29. Connie was enrolled in the Working Theater’s free playwriting class for PSC members in 2018 and is delighted her play will be produced off-Broadway. Tickets for seniors are \$25. The box office # is (866) 811-4111. Say you’re calling for Working Theater tickets in NYC. The link is www.workingtheater.org ■

THE MONTH THAT WAS

WINTER LUNCHEON

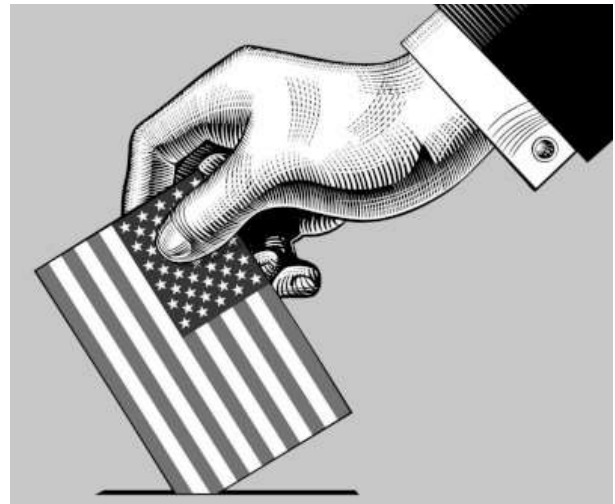
We gathered in a fully packed room at the Graduate Center on January 13, 2020 to hear two activists tell us about building power for the 2020 elections. **Peter Hogness**, editor of *Clarion* from 2001-2015, is now a leader of Water For Grassroots, a national organization for building political power in swing states. **Luke Elliott-Negri** is chairperson of the PSC Graduate Center chapter and the union’s VOTE COPE coordinator.

Luke Elliott-Negri:

We are in quite a moment. There is an unprecedented degree of ideological polarization and partisan sorting at the national level. The Bernie/Warren/AOC wing of the Democratic Party is on the rise, but the Republican Party has lurched rightward, sending white nationalists in to the White House. Meanwhile, New York State has made a leftward move in the last two years, creating

a real prospect for state-level experimentation with New Deal-style legislation—and a chance for a return to full funding for the City University of New York.

From 1982 – 2018, Albany decision-making was rightly characterized as “three men in a room.” There was a Republican Senate Majority Leader, a Democratic Assembly Speaker and the Governor. But in 2018, with the Democrats fully in control of the State Senate for the first time since 1964 (save for a brief, rocky period in 2009-2010), one of those three was a woman, and two of the three were African-American. The tripartite structure held through the budget cycle. But as the fight for rent laws heated up, something unprecedented happened.



After decades of erosion, a resurgent tenant movement capitalized on the new Democratic bloc in Albany and won a host of reforms that have led almost immediately to a reduction in evictions and reportedly cost the real estate industry *billions*. But how this happened is as important as what happened. Tenant activists themselves were in the room and made some big decisions. Leaders of both chambers met with the coalition, hammered out the agreement, and announced it. The deal went through,

brokered by a black woman, a black man, and a group of tenants. For one brief, powerful moment, a movement made the decisions in Albany.

Though the CUNY budget process is more complex, there are lessons for CUNY from the rent fight. An upstate-downstate coalition with support and leadership from the PSC and a deep base in communities who care deeply about CUNY and SUNY could produce the funding that we need. There are, after all, a million New Yorkers with CUNY bachelor's degrees and many more with SUNY degrees. A movement coalition with leadership and support from the PSC that truly comes from and represents that broad constituency could move Albany just as the tenants did in 2019. Our job is to do that work.

Finally, please do not forget to make VOTE COPE contributions to support the political work of the PSC! Please make a check out to PSC/CUNY COPE and drop it off or mail it to PSC Vote Cope, 15th floor, 61 Broadway, NY, NY 10006.

Peter Hogness:

Water For Grassroots works to support community organizing groups in the swing states and red states, helping them build grassroots political power that can last beyond a single election cycle. Based in NYC, Water For Grassroots (W4G) has helped local organizers register voters in Pennsylvania, worked with Florida activists to support a referendum on expanding voting rights & raised small-dollar donations for grassroots groups in Alabama and elsewhere. W4G has also canvassed & called for candidates like Andrew Gillum or Jess King that those community-based groups support. Much of its work has been in support of organizing against voter suppression. ■

**Heading to Florida this winter?
Care about the 2020 election?
Check HelpFloridaRegister.org**

The New York-Florida connection is strong – and we can use it to beat Donald Trump. Millions of people visit Florida every year from other states – more of them from New York than anywhere else. A new website, **HelpFloridaRegister.org**, makes it easy for Florida visitors (and residents) to volunteer for voter registration by connecting with local community groups. If we can get a small fraction of Florida's visitors to volunteer, in a state where elections are famously close, it could shape the outcome of the 2020 races. If you belong to a neighborhood group, a religious congregation, a political club, etc., let members know about this.

PSC Retiree Chapter members have been involved in coordinating meetings in NYC with unions and the NYC Central Labor Council to facilitate joint efforts. The project is moving forward. As a resident, "snow bird," or visitor you can do your part. Contact **HelpFloridaRegister.org** or email water4grassroots@gmail.com. Also let the Chapter know of your interest and/or involvement at retirees@pscmail.org.



**NEWS OF NOTE: NEW YORK'S
ENGINE OF MOBILITY**

-Glenn Kissack, retiree Hunter College
Campus Schools

In November 2019, the office of Jumaane D. Williams, NYC Public Advocate, pub-

lished a report entitled *Addressing the Underfunding of CUNY, New York's Engine of Mobility, Innovation, and Economic Support*. Citing research papers, data provided by CUNY, and newspaper articles, the Report is an invaluable all-in-one-place source of information for those advocating for increased funding for CUNY in order to secure a high-quality education for CUNY's 274,000 students. This is a brief summary:



The Burdens Faced By CUNY Students

- Many CUNY students come from poor families (42 percent from families with annual income under \$20,000, and 60 percent from families making less than \$30,000 a year). Nearly 45 percent of our students are the first generation in their family to attend college.

- Since the 2009 school year, tuition for full-time undergraduate students increased by more than 50 percent at both senior and community colleges. While many students receive tuition assistance from state TAP and federal Pell grants, students must also

pay for books, college fees, transportation and – for students not living at home – housing. This compels *more than half of all CUNY students to work more than twenty hours a week*, which, the Report notes, “can negatively impact their academic performance.”

- The Report laments that 48 percent of CUNY students, according to a recent poll, said they had been *food insecure* at some point during the previous 30 days, while 14 percent reported being *homeless* at some point during the previous 12 months.

The Effects of Underfunding

It seems reasonable to expect that an affluent society committed to improving the prospects of students coming from the poorest families would make every effort to provide a level of educational quality equal to that of the elite universities. Instead, the Report notes:

“Systematic underfunding amid a period of massive enrollment growth limits CUNY’s ability to maintain educational and operational excellence and alleviate the financial burden of thousands of students ... Over the past decade, per-student funding from New York State has *dropped 18 percent*, adjusted for inflation and enrollment growth.”

The Report warns that inadequate funding for CUNY has regrettable consequences:

- “CUNY has also been *forced to cut academic support services and course sections* – with more than one-third of students reporting in 2016 that they could not register for at least one course.” Class size has risen.

- “CUNY is facing a *shortage of both academic and health resources*. Right now,

“CUNY colleges have an estimated average of 600 – 1000 students per advisor.”

- The burdensome costs of attending CUNY “coupled with insufficient resources for students and the University has resulted in *middling graduation rates*.”

- Students, faculty and staff have had to endure a *deteriorating physical plant*: broken toilets, dangerous exposed wiring, leaking ceilings, mold, plentiful rodents and insects, and non-working elevators, of particular concern for students with disabilities.

- The Report is critical of the fact that the majority of undergraduate classes at CUNY are taught by *adjunct faculty*, who have been earning an average of \$3500 per 3-credit course. Adjuncts forced to work multiple jobs, stressed over their low-pay and job precarity, are strained to provide students with the attention they deserve. [Note: the new PSC contract now significantly raises adjunct income by both increased pay and an additional paid hour each week.]

A Few Report Recommendations

- Both NY State and City should increase funding for CUNY.
- Close the TAP Gap – the estimated \$82 million difference between what CUNY charges for tuition and the maximum TAP grant, which CUNY currently pays out of its budget.
- Expand Access to NYS Tuition Assistance Programs: (The Report notes that many part-time students are not eligible for TAP grants and that Cuomo’s Excelsior Scholarships benefit only a minute percentage of CUNY students under current qualifying criteria, which the Report recommends be modified.)



Concerns and Questions

Although the Report is an admirable achievement, here are some concerns and questions:

1. The Report would be stronger if it included specific goals for how much additional money the state and city should provide to CUNY. The Report is vague on specifics and merely endorses CUNY’s FY 2020 request for an additional \$137 million, an amount that was woefully insufficient and the NYS legislature failed to provide even that. The Report is surprisingly weak in its proposals to provide low-income students with more support. It fails to demand free MetroCards for all enrolled CUNY students, or a monthly stipend to help pay for books, fees and living expenses.

2. The Report emphasizes that CUNY has been an engine for economic development for NYC and has helped millions of students attain better jobs and improve their lives. Why then does CUNY remain underfunded? Would a fully funded CUNY – paid for with higher taxes on big business and the very wealthy – really be more functional for NYC’s Wall Street and big real estate interests than a CUNY that continues to operate with strained finances? What if every CUNY student graduated with a high quality education, expecting to find a high-paying job? Is it possible that this would create a political “crisis of expectations” in an economy that produces far more poorly compensated jobs than well-paying ones? Perhaps NYC’s

economic elite, and politicians sensitive to their needs, resist higher taxes for outcomes that might lead to more social discontent?

Maybe our argument for a better-funded CUNY should center on the concept that a college education is *a vital social good*, an invaluable opportunity to learn more about the world, and to gain the skills and confidence to be active participants in making that world a better place.

The full report can be read at:
<https://www.pubadvocate.nyc.gov/static/assets/CUNY%20Report.pdf>. ■

CALLING ALL FRIENDS OF



-Cecelia McCall, retiree Baruch College

The Legislation Committee is asking you to join its recently formed **Friends of CUNY**, an umbrella organization of student, grassroots, community and CUNY alumni. We're not asking for you to give money but for you to help us get the money. You don't have to go to Albany or City Hall (though it would be great if you could). You can help from home by telephoning, emailing, etc. but above all, by recruiting other faculty and staff in your alumni associations to join. We would not have to ask for your help if CUNY would provide lists of alumni, but it won't. This is an appeal to you to join and encourage your fellow alumni to do the same.

This year marks my twentieth year as a PSC activist and advocate for the University. I have been privileged to be a member

of the PSC for far more years than that but when elected Secretary in 2000, I took on the additional role of Director of Legislation from 2000-2006. That experience gave me insights into the dire conditions that you and your students endured to give and get an education. Over the past twenty years, the PSC has become a force to be reckoned with in New York State and New York City. When we first began this work, a member of the City Council was heard to say, "Does CUNY have a union?" Well, that question has been answered by countless members of the PSC who join with the Legislation Committee to discuss with councilmembers and state legislators the conditions under which they labor at underfunded campuses and the burden that rising tuition and fees places on students.

Since NYC ceded financial control of the University to the State at the time of the fiscal crisis of the '70s, successive Democratic and Republican administrations, following an austerity regime, have not raised the revenue that would have provided badly needed resources. Over the decades, the funding stream has been reversed with the State and City contributing less and student fees and tuition more. And the physical plant has deteriorated while the shortage of faculty and staff has not been addressed. This year is going to be more difficult than ever. The State is already claiming a deficit and last year's enactment of a permanent 2% cap on spending further undermines our efforts. At a 2019 joint hearing of the NYS Senate Finance and the Assembly Ways and Means Committees, President Bowen testified that "the cumulative effect of... years of underfunding has been severe. The senior colleges face shortages of supplies and equipment, broken computers, reduced hours for writing and tutoring centers, even reduced hours for libraries." She further said, "The University desperately

needs funding to add full-time faculty lines, advisors and counselors.”

In Fiscal Year 2021, CUNY’s administration is proposing a \$200 increase in tuition for both senior and community colleges and a first-time, but permanent, Health and Wellness Fee of \$120 to be paid by all students. While politicians claim to empathize with poor and low-income students of color, they are not yet putting the money for these students where their mouths are.

As a retired member of the faculty or staff (and possibly a graduate of a CUNY campus or program as well), you are enjoying the benefits of decades of the PSC’s collective bargaining: a pension from TRS or TI-AA that in many cases enables you to maintain the standard of living enjoyed prior to retirement; supplemental benefits from the Welfare Fund - pharmaceuticals, a free annual eye examination and prescription refills as well as hearing-aid and dental plans. And above all, you know that when you call the PSC Welfare Fund office with a question or problem, a good faith effort will be made to resolve it. While the federal government seeks to cut and/or weaken Social Security and Medicare, our union-won benefits continue to grow. The leadership, however, pays for them in innumerable hours of negotiations and lobbying with the University, City and State. The PSC dances for our supper.

Over the next few months, we need you to augment our numbers so that we can increase and maintain pressure on the politicians who will be deciding how much money CUNY will be allocated. We’re not asking for your money, but for you to help us get the money.

To paraphrase, it may be time to ask not what the union can do for you, but what you

can do for the union and the University. **Join Friends of CUNY** and the effort. To sign up, go to

<https://cunyrisingalliance.org/cuny-alumni>.



SOCIAL SECURITY DISABILITY CUTS: IF AT FIRST YOU DON’T SUCCEED...

--Dave Kotelchuck, retiree Hunter College



Last November 18, a week before Thanksgiving, Trump’s Social Security Administration inserted a notice in the Federal Register proposing changes in its Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) and Supplemental Security Insurance (SSI) programs. The new rules would cut off disability payments to many thousands of the 18 million disabled Americans who receive benefits under these two programs. These proposed cuts have largely escaped public notice during the national tumult over impeachment, The Social Security Administration currently conducts regular reviews of all program recipients. It now proposes to:

- Add a fourth category for reporting these results entitled “Medical Improvements Likely.” The three existing medical-improvement categories are: Expected, Not Expected and Possible. Many of those in the new category will be childhood disability cases “in which we ex-

pect the child's impairment(s) to improve," according to the notice.

- Increase the frequency of reviews with greatest attention given to Medical Improvements Likely and Expected. Over the next decade, Social Security plans to conduct 1.1 million more case reviews to implement these changes.

Given the complexities of applying for and renewing benefits under SSDI and SSI, both of which are administered the same reviews with the same criteria, experts expect *hundreds of thousands of disabled people to be cut off from these two programs* – some by being denied renewal, others by giving up during the programs' labyrinthian renewal processes, and yet others by being discouraged from applying in the first place. "The government is trying to kick us out of SSI," said Jahan Johnson, 34, a mother of three. "What they're doing is wrong, and making life harder," she said in an interview in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* (12/12/19).

These Trump Administration rules, if passed, would increase stress and suffering among millions of disabled Americans. It would also save the government money.

President Reagan tried a similar approach in 1981, ordering a widespread review of the eligibility of SSDI applicants and recipients. By 1984, a half-million applicants had been rejected as ineligible for the program and 150,000-200,000 had their benefits cut off before the "review" ended (NYT, 4/14/84). Trump's rule changes would be expected to have a similar, if not greater, impact today. But remember, these rules have not been enacted. The comment period to stop them has been extended to January 31, 2020. You can register opposition by internet: <http://www.regulations.gov>. Search for docket SSA-2018-0026 and click on "comment" right now! ■

CHICAGO: BARGAINING FOR THE COMMON GOOD

-Jackie DiSalvo, retiree Baruch College

After a two-week strike in October 2019, the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) ratified a landmark contract with the Chicago Public Schools (CPS). The CTU, with 27,000 members serving 361,000 students, struck in solidarity alongside SEIU 73, the school staff union. The strike, which began to reverse 40 years of attacks, involved the militancy and solidarity which has characterized the CTU since its leadership was taken over by the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE). It raises the question whether, as its 2012 strike anticipated the later national "Red for Ed" strike wave, its espousal in this strike of a broad social justice agenda will have a similar influence.



The main issue was not wages, so the union settled for the 16% cost-of-living wage increase offered by the CPS, but it did achieve a 40% increase for the lowest paid workers. Instead the proposal was an example of *Bargaining for the Common Good*, a strategy initiated in its earlier strike's opposition to school closures. This approach goes beyond business unionism's bread and butter issues of wages, benefits and work rules, to which a 1995 state law restricted bargaining, and adopts a social unionism that addresses issues of social justice affecting the wider working class. While the *Chicago Tribune* editorialized that the

CTU “made outlandish demands as if the city owed the teachers not just a big wage bump but a utopian version of Chicago,” that broader agenda won the union support of parents and the community, bringing its members onto the picket lines and into a mass demonstration that shut down the streets of downtown Chicago. Demonstrating that support, Chance the Rapper wore a red CTU sweatshirt as host of Saturday Night Live. Such wide-based community support is especially crucial for teachers who are otherwise portrayed as selfish and not caring about students.

The CTU contract addressed both the immediate economic demands of teachers, such as freezing its health insurance premiums, and wider issues such as limiting class size and capping the number of charter schools. Historic, however, were contract items directly affecting students. The union pointed out that many of the students suffered from poverty, homelessness, lack of health care, hunger and violence and brought their psychological trauma into the classroom, where their difficulties in learning affected the teachers’ working conditions in their ability to teach. Hence, CTU Vice President Stacy Davis Gates charged, “It’s not fair for us to go into school communities to manage poverty . . . manage white supremacy and manage low expectations.” With a slogan, like that of the PSC—“Our working conditions are students’ learning conditions”—the union sought “A School Chicago Students Deserve.”

Thus, the CTU demanded that the contract deal with homelessness and immigration. In place of “the school to deportation pipeline,” the contract designated the school a sanctuary, a safe zone, forbidding schools from ascertaining students’ immigration status and prohibiting ICE, the immigration agency, from entering schools without a warrant. It also called for more bilingual education

and Latino staff. The union was less successful in its demand for affordable housing for the 16,000 homeless students whose traumas disrupted instruction. It did, however, gain community representatives who would direct students to housing resources, and establish early intervention to prevent homelessness. In addition, the contract would guarantee social services for students, putting nurses and social workers in every school and increasing the numbers of counselors and librarians.



With these measures, costing \$1.5 billion, the union was immediately embroiled in political conflicts over revenue. The strike pitted the CTU against Mayor Lori Lightfoot, who maintained that there was no more money to meet union demands. The CTU countered that funds existed but were being allocated inequitably, for example, with \$1.3 billion going to a wealthy developer to build in an upscale neighborhood. The union also proposed increasing taxes on property and corporations. Thus, the contract fight exposed class conflicts in the city and forced the union to confront the inequitable distribution of power between corporations and working people.

The CTU strikes, the “Red for Ed” strike wave and the LA teachers strike were all opposed to the underfunding of public schools. It remains to be seen to what ex-

tent unions across the country will take up such bargaining for the common good. ■

Support Divestment from Fossil Fuels

The union's Delegate Assembly [passed a resolution](#) in early 2019 in support of divesting public pensions and other retirement savings from fossil fuels. Divestment helps protect our planet and our retirement savings. PSC members can help press CUNY management and that of our retirement

funds to take action. Visit www.psc-cuny.org/DivestCUNY to sign one of two petitions for CUNY workers with their retirement funds invested in either TRS or TIAA. ■

Turning the Page collective (Joan Greenbaum, Michael Frank, David Kotelchuck and Bill Friedheim) welcomes new members to work with us, to suggest articles, photos, and ideas, as well as to write. Please write to us at: retirees@pscmail.org with Newsletter in the subject line.

