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Retirees Newsletter

Professional Staff Congress
Jack Judd, Editor

Have you made your reservation for the June 6th luncheon? If not, contact Linda Slifkin at the PSC, 212-354-1252.

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT: JIM PERLSTEIN

I. THE CONTEXT FOR OUR WORK. The PSC has never met a context it couldn't enlarge. And sometimes we look a little out of touch, imagining that the flap of our butterfly wings has worldwide climatic consequences. But most of the time, our engagement with the big issues of the day marks our manifest awareness as a union that we don't exist in a vacuum, that we affect and are affected by our larger environment. It's that awareness that earns us much of the respect we enjoy in the labor movement.

So consider this: the U.S. has the greatest inequality of income and wealth in the industrialized world. Real unemployment stagnates at Depression era levels. We have the lowest social mobility, the lowest life expectancy, the greatest ill health, the highest percentage of mental illness, and the highest homicide rate per million among developed economies. And we address these problems not by creating jobs at living wages but by proposing to reduce taxes and curtail social programs. No reading of history supports such an agenda.

Absent full employment, living wages and a social safety net, no campaign for a union contract or funding for public higher education stands much of chance. That is why, over the past few months, the PSC, even as it has continued to lobby in Albany and at City Hall for CUNY funding, and has continued to engage 80th Street in contract negotiations, has invested time and energy in solidarity struggles with other unions and community organizations. We mobilized for May Day under the banner of "Worker Rights, Immigrant Rights and Jobs for All."



We have joined the campaign for the Living Wage Bill before the City Council. We have partnered with immigrant youths pushing passage of the DREAM Act in Washington. We have lobbied to maintain funding for city-run childcare. And we mobilize, as I write, to demand that the rich pay their fair share.

The members of the Retiree Chapter have been extraordinarily responsive to the demands of the day. Your engagement with the issues and your willingness to put in time and effort has played a major role in making the PSC's contribution to the common cause so significant. On behalf of the Chapter's Executive Committee I want to thank you all. I know the good work we do together will continue.

II. JOHN BLOOM, WDL. Summary of remarks made by our guest speaker, Mr. John Bloom, at the May meeting of the Retirees Chapter, prepared by Vice-Chairman Joel Berger:

THE WORKERS DEFENSE LEAGUE - 75 YEARS OF ACTIVISM

Outlining the beginnings and mission of the Workers Defense League (WDL), Jon Bloom, its executive director, said "the WDL has fought good fights for free speech, decent working conditions, civil rights, and the right to organize." He then focused on the issue of unemployment and the rights of unemployed workers to unemployment insurance benefits.

"Even in normal times, about one million people a year in New York apply for unemployment, and 15-20% are denied benefits," he said. Many of the workers turned down have no union representation and may have been fired for reasons that are not fair, according to Mr. Bloom. Employers often cite employee misconduct as a reason for dismissal. Employees have a right to a hearing before an administrative law judge, but the majority of dismissed

workers are unfamiliar with court procedures. Very few lawyers will accept cases because of the low fixed fees. Unions haven't been engaged in the process. Therefore, the WDL assumed responsibility for representing the unemployed.

The WDL wins 80% of the cases it presents, largely, as Mr. Bloom put it, because the "individuals who have been denied, shouldn't have been denied in the first place."



The doctrine of Employment at Will provides no recourse to employees if the firing violates no laws. Other countries have established procedures to protect worker rights. In the United States, without union contracts and grievance mechanisms, workers are largely unprotected.

The hearing process for appeals of denials of unemployment benefits allows the worker to present his/her version of the facts. The WDL educates the worker about the procedure and how the case will be presented, and may act as a representative. "If this is an issue that interests you," Mr. Bloom told the Chapter, "and if you want to get involved in a different issue," then "you can become an advocate for the unemployed." He continued, "We are interested in training people like you." Mr. Bloom then invited interested members of the chapter to contact him at 212-627-1931, or to write to him at Workers Defense League, 220 East 23rd Street, new York, NY 10010. A lively discussion then ensued regarding the activities and composition of the WDL.

III. "TOP DOWN DISASTER." In a recent Paul Krugman article (*New York Times*, May 8), it was pointed out that while the general public is now castigated as the source for all our economic woes, blame should be placed upon the shoulders of those responsible, and who now once again rule the roost. He said: "... what we're experiencing right now is a top-down disaster. The policies that got us into this mess weren't responses to public demand. They were, with few exceptions, policies championed by small groups of influential people — in many cases, the same people now lecturing the rest of us on the need to get serious. And by trying to shift the blame to the general populace, elites are ducking some much-needed reflection on their own catastrophic mistakes." We all are aware of major causes of the current shortfalls. Krugman's list points to three main occurrences. "First, there were the Bush tax cuts, which added roughly \$2 trillion to the national debt over the last decade. Second, there were the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, which added an additional \$1.1 trillion or so. And third was the Great Recession, which led both to a collapse in revenue and to a sharp rise in spending on unemployment insurance and other safety-

net programs." We then add to his list of causes, according to the media and TV pundits, the exorbitant salaries paid to teachers. Hope this helps to get the record straight.

--Jack Judd

IV. CORRECTION: In article reporting the presentation of Ellen Schrecker (April 2011 *Newsletter*), the last sentence on page 3 should begin with, "During the McCarthy period more than one hundred faculty members nationwide were fired for political reasons."

V. E-MAIL ADDRESSES. We are repeating our request for **email addresses** from those retirees who are computer friendly, and have not already submitted them to us. When it is believed that a substantial number of addresses are in the files, we will notify everyone as to the month when we will switch to an email news letter. For those without email addresses, a hard copy of the news letter will still be sent by regular mail. Again, that will occur only at the time when it is announced. Sending the newsletter by email will substantially reduce monthly mailing costs.

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