Taking a Stand for CUNY

BUDGET BATTLE

A coalition of academics and college students from CUNY and SUNY marched on the State Capitol in Albany March 15, as lawmakers weighed whether to enact deep cuts in funding to higher education while cutting taxes for the wealthy. PSC members return to Albany March 23 to engage in a direct action protest for educational and economic justice. “This is a defining moment,” said PSC President Barbara Bowen. “We are taking a stand for an alternative.”

Pages 3, 4 & 12

TAX POLICY

Newsflash: the rich don’t leave

“If you raise taxes on rich people, they’ll leave.” It’s an idea that’s been repeated again and again – but the sound bite is not supported by the data.

PAGE 12

LIFE/WORK

Our shared humanity

Hunter’s Marnia Lazreg reflects on her youth in colonial Algeria, today’s Middle East protests, the value of literature and the temptation to torture.

PAGE 8

APRIL 4

Dr. King and union rights

Martin Luther King, Jr., believed ‘all labor has dignity.’ He was killed in Memphis on April 4, 1968, while supporting striking sanitation workers.

PAGE 11

WISCONSIN

Inside the uprising

Teaching assistants played a key role in historic labor protests against Republican attacks on state workers’ collective bargaining rights.

Pages 6-7
The truth about health and safety

By BEN CHITTY
Queen College

On March 4, longtime PSC activist Ben Chitty was given the NY State United Teachers “Unsung Hero” award for grassroots organizing on health and safety. His work with others at Queens College has affected a range of issues, including prevention of workplace violence (see the February Clarion). The article below is adapted from his acceptance speech.

I’d like to thank NYSSUT for this honor. I’d also like to thank my own union, the PSC, which has supported my cross-union organizing project with words of encouragement, hours of work, and especially money for pizza – without which no organizing project has any hope of success.

And I want to thank my wife, who has put up with my crusades and crankiness for too many decades, and who must wonder why a guy who hangs out with custodians, laborers, and plumbers can’t be a little better at vacuuming, taking out the garbage, or at least trying to fix the kitchen faucet which has been leaking for at least one of those too-many-decades.

POWER IN NUMBERS

My wife is a labor historian, so it was no accident that one day I went to Human Resources and asked – just out of curiosity – how many unions represent the employees at Queens College? They wouldn’t tell me – maybe they didn’t actually know, maybe they just thought it was none of my business.

I work in the library, so naturally I took that as a research challenge. If you count the different locals of AFSCME District Council 37, the total is 19, 20, or 21, depending on which positions are vacant at any moment. Some unions represent only one college employee. My union, the teachers’ union, has over 1,500 members at the college, mostly full- and part-time instructional staff.

HAZARDS OF TRUTH

Once I knew which unions represented my coworkers, I invited their stewards to a meeting. Getting them all to respond was harder than it sounds, but we started meeting five years ago last month, and now meet every month. The business agent for the Teamsters gave us a name, the Queens College Unions Joint Committee for Quality of Work Life. Our first campaign was to get an erosion of mold inside a bathroom wall properly contained, properly cleaned up, and properly removed.

Most of the committee’s work is about safety and health. Now, everyone agrees that workers have the right to a safe and healthy workplace. It’s even in my union’s collective bargaining agreement. And there are laws, and regulations, and standards, and recommended protocols and procedures – all designed to make sure that our workplaces stay safe and healthy.

And everyone knows they don’t.

Why is that?

In general, it seems to me, college and university administrators just don’t want to know about hazards to health and safety. Fixing them might cost money, which seems a little short these days. It can take time and attention which could be better spent – though truth to tell, I sometimes wonder what these folks do, aside from going to meetings. There is also the question of liability: if management knows about a hazard, and someone gets hurt, the institution, and for us, the state or local government, and ultimately the taxpayer, can be held liable for the damage. But mainly, I think, it’s a way to duck responsibility.

There is a lot of responsibility to go around. The City University has been systematically underfunded by the state and city for more than three decades, which has ramifications for safety and health. The administrators appointed by successive governors and mayors do not succeed by fostering great institutions of higher learning; they succeed – which means they keep their jobs – by cutting costs. One way is to cut maintenance, to dissinvest in infrastructure.

Physical plant management, like so many other aspects of educational management, becomes what you might call “management by crisis.” You wait for the drain to stop up, or the compressor to fail, or the wall to fall down, before you even begin to think about repairing or replacing it. You can save lots of money that way for quite some time.

COMMON CAUSE

You can mask the problems for a while by just not telling anyone. Most of the people who frequent Queens College are students, on campus only a few hours a week. Most of the employees teach, and come to campus mainly to meet with students in classes or conferences. But when you get together with the folks who spend 35, 40, or 50 hours a week on campus, you have to keep the place open and clean, who have to fix whatever breaks, you find out what the problems are, and why they haven’t been fixed. And just by letting your coworkers know about the problems, you can get the administration to fix them. Well, sometimes anyway – sometimes you have to call in the law.

Cross-union organizing can get results.

Longtime PSC activist Ben Chitty.

PSC backs Bronx apartment building workers

On March 3 Bronx apartment workers rally. The 3,000 apartment workers and the Bronx Realty Advisory Board reached an agreement March 15 that increases wages while preserving health care and pension benefits.

Nuts & bolts of making change

When Francis Fox Priven is right – and Jay Aron is wrong when he suggests that labor run candidates against the Democrats (Letters, February Clarion) – unions, of course, he means running in the Democratic primaries as members of the Democratic Party.

Look at history. Billionaire David Koch ran as a Libertarian – a waste of time and money. But since he founded, financed, and directed his tremendously successful Tea Party, as a wing of the Republican Party, he has been able to bash unions and other mainstream causes, effective- ly persuading middle-class people to make war upon the middle class – a familiar enough phenomenon. As the Russian proverb says, “The ax handle, too, is made out of wood.”

As a separate party, Koch’s Tea Party would have been useless, but as a branch of the major parties, it has become extraordinarily influential.

Rather than see the Democratic Party by running candidates against it, we should perhaps challenge Democrats in primaries, and if the average small and midsize candidates with our money and our votes, encourage them to speak out on issues that matter to us.

K. J. Walters
Lehman College
High-stakes budget fight

Cut CUNY to help out millionaires?

By PETER HOGNESS

On March 15, hundreds of academics and college students converged on the State Capitol to press for a restoration of public funding for higher education. As Clarion went to press the state budget had not yet been adopted, and PSC activists prepared to engage in a direct action protest in Albany on March 23.

“We call on our members and other New Yorkers to join us in a peaceful, non-violent action, during which some of us are prepared to risk arrest to prevent the passage of a budget that starves the ordinary people of New York in order to protect the wealthy,” said a PSC Executive Council resolution on the March 23 demonstration.

A DEFINING MOMENT

“This is a defining moment in national and New York economic policy,” Barbara Bowen, the union’s president, wrote in a message to members. “The governor’s budget slashes funds for schools, colleges, CUNY, health care and many other public services, yet includes a tax break for the highest earners.” While the Assembly’s budget proposal would restore some CUNY funding, Bowen noted, it would leave in place a 10% cut to CUNY senior colleges, and would only partially continue the modest income tax surcharge on the highest-paid people in New York (see sidebar).

With a fundamental shift in direction, the budget passed in Albany will force economic austerity on working people in order to concentrate even more wealth among the rich, Bowen said. “We are taking a stand for an alternative,” she told Clarion. As Clarion went to press, several community groups were pledging their support. (See pcuny.org for updates and more info.) The direct-action protest was one part of a broad effort by the PSC to bring grassroots pressure to bear on this year’s State budget decisions. The union’s campaign has included thousands of member e-mails and phone calls, a TV ad campaign, lobbying trips to the capital, testimony at legislative hearings, meetings in legislators’ local offices and more.

The rally and lobby day at the Capitol on March 15, dubbed Student Faculty Higher Education Action Day, drew nearly 500 hundred people. It was a coalition effort by the PSC, the student government associations of both CUNY and SUNY, University Professor Associations (SUNY’s union of faculty and professional staff), New York Public Interest Research Group (NYPIRG), and New York State United Teachers (NYSUT).

PAYING BACK

“I was first in my family to go to college, and I saw what CUNY could do with underprivileged families,” said Sharif Elhakem, a Lehman College, and I saw what CUNY could do with underprivileged families,” said Sharif Elhakem, a Lehman alum when he was a student. The surcharge would provide about $9.5 billion in public funding for CUNY and SUNY, which is what the current surcharge would bring in about 70% of the revenue that the current surcharge provided.

After two decades of tax cuts favoring the wealthy, it’s no surprise that New York has been running out of money to fund basic public services. But it’s a sign of wealthy New Yorkers’ outsized political influence (see p.4) that the biggest revenue fight in Albany this year is simply whether to keep today’s tax rates in place.

TV & RADIO BLITZ

TV and radio ads took the same pro-CUNY message to broadcast and cable channels in New York City and Albany in the last two weeks of March. In New York City, the PSC’s ad ran on WABC, WNBC, WCBS, CNN, NY1, MSNBC and other stations. (See the video at pcuny.org.) It was a popular perspec-
tive: in a February Siena poll, 56% of respondents were opposed to reduc-
ing CUNY and SUNY funding.

Detailed budget testimony was another part of the PSC’s push for CUNY funding. Bowen spoke at a joint hearing of the State Senate’s Finance Committee and the Assembly’s Ways and Means Committee on March 10, and members who work at community colleges testified at a City Council hearing on March 18. (Testimony is online at pcuny.org.)

PSC activists also traveled to Albany to meet with legislators on March 7-8 and 21-22. “We pointed out that to strengthen the economy, it’s necessary to invest in higher education,” said Joel Berger, a member of the Albany chapter. “During the Depression, Brooklyn and Queens Colleges were created. So even in those hard times, they made the right decisions.”

Coalitions like New Yorkers for Fiscal Fairness and Strong Economies and community groups together against Cuomo’s cuts. On March 9, SEIU 1199 President George Gresham told reporters that letting the in-

The sharpest fight in this year’s budget battle is over whether to re-

$4.5B LOSS

Enacted in 2009, the surcharge will expire at the end of 2011 un-

The surcharge applies to taxable income above $200,000 for individu-

The richest New Yorkers need to get a State tax break, too – especially when such deep cuts in public ser-

But even though total compensa-

A break from NY on top of Bush cuts?

The New York Times and oth-

The states at $185 million in 2010?” asked a Times editorial. “Doing away with about 5% of these deals would bring in nearly $1.5 billion.”

But even though total compensa-

Wall Street firms is up 6%,

The surcharge is paid only above

While these higher rates affect

While these higher rates affect

$200,000, would pay the additional 1.12% for taxable incomes above $500,000.

While these higher rates affect

$200,000, would pay the additional 1.12% for taxable incomes above $500,000.

Other progressive revenue mea-

The bonus recapture tax, pro-

The bonus recapture tax would provide between $9.5 and $14 billion in revenue, making most of this year’s budget cuts un-

TAX LAW FLAWS

The New York Times and oth-

After two decades of tax cuts favor-

For CUNY and SUNY, it’s a change that would bring in about 70% of the revenue that the current surcharge provides.

TAX LAW FLAWS

The New York Times and oth-

After two decades of tax cuts favor-

For CUNY and SUNY, it’s a change that would bring in about 70% of the revenue that the current surcharge provides.

For CUNY and SUNY, it’s a change that would bring in about 70% of the revenue that the current surcharge provides.

But it’s a sign of wealthy New York-

The richest New Yorkers need to get a State tax break, too – especially when such deep cuts in public ser-

But even though total compensa-

Wall Street firms is up 6%,

The surcharge is paid only above

While these higher rates affect

While these higher rates affect

While these higher rates affect

While these higher rates affect

Other progressive revenue mea-

The bonus recapture tax, pro-

The bonus recapture tax would provide between $9.5 and $14 billion in revenue, making most of this year’s budget cuts un-

TAX LAW FLAWS

The New York Times and oth-

After two decades of tax cuts favor-

For CUNY and SUNY, it’s a change that would bring in about 70% of the revenue that the current surcharge provides.
WHO IS THE COMMITTEE TO SAVE NEW YORK? Billionaires enter tax debate

By KEVIN CONNOR

NY president Spinalo, chair Mary Ann Tighe, and executive committee member Rob Speyer all sit on the Committee's board. Speyer is Co-CEO of Tishman Speyer, the giant real estate firm that is Cuomo's top campaign donor and the top donor to the Committee, to which he gave $1 million. Tishman Speyer formed the investment team that bought Stuyvesant Town for $5.4 billion, drew sharp criticism from tenants for poor stewardship of the property, and then defaulted on its loans in early 2010.

Another key group in the Committee to Save New York has a reputation for secrecy. It declined to disclose the names of all of its board members until January 16, after the lack of a list began to draw unfavorable press attention. Though organized specifically to work for passage of Cuomo's budget proposals, it avoided registering as a lobbying unit until late January, a delay that was criticized by good-government groups.

The Committee still refuses to disclose most of its donors. “We don’t have to report it, so why tell you?” board member Steven Spinalo told The New York Times.

Another early member of the Real Estate Board of New York (REBNY), which played a central role in founding the Committee. Real estate developer and former REBNY chair Larry Silverstein offered an illuminating take on what REBNY is and what it stands for in a 1996 profile in the Times: “Our membership list and the Forbes 400 wealthiest individuals in the United States have an enormous commonality. By virtue of our holdings, the board has the most intense interest in the well-being of the city – we recognize that our fortunes are honorably tied to the fortunes of the city.”

CORPORATE INTERESTS

The Committee to Save New York is just the latest expression of REBNY's “intense interest” in New York’s economic, social, and apparent belief that the interests of billionaire real estate developers and the public interest are neatly aligned. Silverstein himself has donated to the Committee, and REBNY

and, to a lesser extent, the Business Council, which appear to provide the bulk of the group’s funding and organizational support.

The money moving the Committee’s message is drawn from the bank accounts of people like donor Stephen Ross, who is number 101 on Forbes’ Richest Americans list, CEO of the real estate firm the Related Companies, and also a major ($35,000) donor to the Cuomo campaign. The backers of the Committee to Save New York are not only people who take the subway to work, attend CUNY, use Medicaid or send their kids to public schools – so it is not surprising that they would back an agenda of slashing public services to pay for tax cuts for New York’s wealthiest.

BUYING FAVOR

Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker, who has moved to strip public employees of collective bargaining rights, recently received a great deal of media attention for taking a call from a Buffalo blogger posing as right-wing billionaire David Koch. Koch had given $43,000 to Walker’s campaign, and the Washington Post’s Ezra Klein wrote that the call showed “the access and power that major corporations and wealthy contributors will have in the next administration.” But Koch gave even more money to Cuomo than he gave to Walker – $50,000, plus another $37,000 that Cuomo received from Koch’s wife, Julia.

No state governor seeking budget cuts, including Walker, enjoys the level of public support from billionaires that Cuomo is getting from the Committee to Save New York. The Committee may evaporate in the wake of this year’s budget battle, but the political alliance it represents will have profound consequences for New Yorkers in the years ahead.

Kevin Connor is co-director of the Public Accountability Initiative, a non-profit, non-partisan research organization on corporate and government accountability, and co-founder of Litllie.lol.org, an “inivoluntary Facebook of powerful people” edited by a community of volunteers. He is lead author of a detailed study, “The Committee to Scam NY” (see tinyurl.com/nywscam).
Budget battle looms large

Campus contract meetings

By JOHN TARLETON

The PSC leadership is meeting with local chapters across CUNY throughout the semester to discuss the status of contract negotiations and how the outcome of current budget battles in Albany and at City Hall could affect the union’s ability to win a fair settlement. Upcoming meetings: March 24 – BCC; March 29 – Hostos; March 30 – Queens; March 31 – Brooklyn; April 4 – Retirees; April 5 – John Jay; April 7 – Hunter Campus Schools; April 12 – City College; April 13 – Graduate Center; April 14 – Manhattan Education; April 27 – Medgar Evers. For more information, see psc-cuny.org/calendar.

Research ready – Ajamu Sankofa (above left) of the Murphy Center makes a point during the March 9 HEO contract meeting at the Graduate Center while Jill Humphries (right) looks on. Humphries said she would like to see the PSC do more quantitative and qualitative research into issues that affect members including the bullying of HEOs. “We need a better understanding of what HEOs are experiencing so the union can take more effective action to help them,” Humphries said.

Benefits – Richard Yuster (above), a professor of electrical and computer technology, urged the union to use its new website psc-cuny.org to disseminate more information about member benefits. The benefits PSC members receive – from health care and pension benefits to professional development grants to disability and death benefits – are negotiated during bargaining as part of members’ compensation.

The money is there – After attending the March 2 campus contract meeting at QCC, CLIP instructor Anthony Prado (above) told Clarion he was inspired to do something he had never done before: write letters to his elected representatives urging support for CUNY. “There’s more than enough money out there,” Prado said. “The problem is that the State government is afraid to tax the rich.”

Getting students involved – Theresa Murphy (left), an adjunct lecturer in African American Studies at Lehman, and (above) Geniece Pacifici-Ejiajade, an HEO from City College, speak at recent contract meetings. “We should be talking about how to get students involved. They are a part of this too,” Murphy said of the union’s efforts to mobilize opposition to proposed state and city budget cuts.

Lehman – Manfred Philipp (above), professor of biochemistry at Lehman, speaks during the March 7 contract meeting at the school. Philipp, a former chair of the University Faculty Senate, is the PSC grievance officer at Lehman.

QCC on the move – Wilvena Gordon, a lecturer in the Basic Educational Skills Department at QCC, makes a point during the March 2 contract meeting. According to QCC Chapter Chair Judith Barbanel, the large turnout from QCC at the PSC’s Lobby Day in Albany was sparked by the discussion at their chapter meeting which encouraged faculty and student participation. “Defending CUNY during this budget crisis has brought the college community together and has given students the opportunity to experience the democratic process firsthand,” she said.
At City Hall Park on Feb. 26, thousands of New Yorkers supported Wisconsin labor and union rights for all.

“Wisconsin solidarity with WI”

Several New York unions sent activists to Wisconsin to help unions there cope with the sudden strain on their resources. Teamsters Local 237, Transport Workers Local 100 and IA 461 all sent delegations.

“It’s an important issue and a legitimate cause,” Local 237’s Pete Gutierrez declared.

PSC President Barbara Bowen was asked by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) to go to Wisconsin for a week to team up with the head of Wisconsin AFT in their organizing efforts.

New Yorkers help out in the Badger State.
The Wisconsin Constitution guarantees public access to the Capitol as part of the right “to petition the government, or any department thereof.” The protesters initially remained in the building overnight during round-the-clock hearings on the legislation, conducted by Democratic members of the State Assembly that lasted for over a week. Thousands of ordinary Wisconsinites used their two-minute-time allotment to describe the impact of Walker’s bill — not only its union-busting, but also budgetary provisions such as the evisceration of BadgerCare, Wisconsin’s health-care program for children and low-income people.

NEED A TASK?

“It was one of the most moving things I’ve ever witnessed,” Wrigley Field said. “So many people were talking about how their lives would be ruined if this bill passed.”

On February 17, fourteen Demo- cratic members of the Wisconsin Senate fled across the state line to Illinois, denying Republicans the quorum needed to call the Senate into session for budgetary mea- sures. Two days later, an estimated crowd of 68,000 descended on Madi- son, along with the national media.

Inside the ornate Capitol building, a small, self-organizing city flour- ished. The TAA took on a coordinat- ing role in the occupation, with an ad hoc headquarters in a third-floor legislative conference room. “One person staffed the door while read- ing Luther’s sermons for her disser- tation, and another wore a piece of masking tape with the simple mes- sage: ‘Need a task!’” recalled PSC President Barbara Bowen, who went to Wisconsin and stayed for a week at the APT’s request (see below).

Volunteers distributed donated food that poured into the building and set up a first aid station, a children’s space, an information booth, a library, a lost-and-found, and a charging station for laptops and cell phones. A visitor could leave her bag lying on the floor and come back to find it in the same place hours later.

Visitors walking down a long corridor toward the center of the Capitol building were greeted with an array of homemade signs (“In Wis- consin, We Drink Beer Not Tea”; “You can’t scare me, I work with high school students”; “Screw Us and We Multiply”) and then the growing roar from the center of the building. At the epicenter, the crowd swung between singing “Solidar- ity Forever” and chanting slogans like “Whose house? Our house!” and “This is what democracy looks like.”

When the singing and chanting subsided, ordinary citizens took turns speaking at an open mic on the ground floor of the 203-foot-high rotunda.

UNITY

“We’ve got anarchists and cops, socialists and small business own- ers, Green Party members and steelworkers, teachers and stu- dents and drop-outs all working together,” Jordan Peterson, a state- worker-turned-protest-organizer explained to Clarion. “There is some- thing very special happening in this building.”

Quiet time started at 10 pm, and the rhythmic pounding of the drum circle in the center of the political rocauda would give way to quiet jam sessions in corner alcoves. Children in paj- mas raced around the circular bal- cony overlooking the rotunda, while their parents chatted with friends at the end of a long day. Gradually, peo- ple would fall asleep on the sleeping bags and thin foam mattresses they rolled out on marble floors.

“I never thought it would happen in my lifetime,” said Elizabeth Milovets, a senior at a local high school who camped out overnight at the Capitol with a group of her teenage friends. “We’re living his- tory, not just listening to it.”

Milovets told Clarion she joined the protest to support her teachers, and out of concern that Gov. Walker would raise University of Wis- consin tuition.

While the protest at the State Capitol was suffused with a spirit of solidarity and a keen awareness of the high stakes of the legislative stand-off and working classes, the demands of most protesters were moderate and pragmatic. They understood unions make their members’ lives better and workers who want a union should not be denied the right to organize. For many, the anger over Walker’s power play was fueled foremost by a sense of betrayal. He had violated their Midwestern sense of fairness.

“I naïvely assumed that while I was earning a living and raising my kids, democracy would continu- e and everything would be fine. I was wrong,” said Maggie Wolfe, a teacher’s aide and mother of three who was sitting on a foam mattress with a sign propped in front of her that read: “Freedom is when the people speak. Democracy is when the government listens.”

The fight for demo- cracy was a theme that ran throughout the protest movement, especially the idea that there is more to democracy than voting on Elec- tion Day. It also meant taking action to hold elected officials accountable, demonstrators said — as illustrated by the fact that Walker never men- tioned gutting collective bargaining during last fall’s campaign.

On February 21, the 47,000-member South Central Federation of Labor in Madison unanimously endorsed considera- tion of a general strike, something no US city has seen since 1919. It noted that each union local had to make its own strike decision, but called for educating members on the “organization and function of a Wisconsin general strike.”

On Saturday, February 26, a crowd of close to 100,000 people marched on the State Capitol, un- deterred by a steady snowfall and temperatures in the teens. Walker had sought to limit opposition and fud- pit public workers against each other by expropriating police and fire- fighter unions from his bill. Instead, off-duty police and firefighters joined the throngs at the Capitol.

“We’re going to be next,” Adam Wunsch, a firefighter intern from Fitchburg, Wisconsin, told Clarion.

“A lot of police officers tend to be conservative. But they know the difference between right and wrong,” said Jim Palmer, Execu- tive Director of the Wisconsin Pro- fessional Police Association, which represents 11,000 municipal police officers from over 380 locals in Wis- consin. “We’re not going to take a short-term exemption and sell out so many devoted public servants.”

CONCESSIONS

The leadership of Wisconsin’s main public-sector unions agreed to Gov. Walker’s demands to have state workers pay 12.6% of their health insurance benefits and fund over 5.8% of their pay toward their pension (a 7% to 20% pay cut, de- pending on a worker’s income). The decision was designed to sharpen the focus on collective bargain- ing, and gain support from those Wisconsin residents who accepted Walker’s assertion that “we’re broke,” but were uncomfortable with taking away long-established rights.

Walker, however, refused to take “yes” for an answer. He continued to insist on adoption of his entire anti-union package — and his stand- ing in state opinion polls, already damaged, slid sharply.

“We were willing to give in on the money, but we want to have a voice in our classrooms because what happens to our kids,” said Kimberly Myers, a 13-year teacher from Colfax, Wisconsin, who came to Madison for the march on Febru- ary 11.

Private-sector unionists also came out to show their support. Walker “wants to get rid of all unions.” said a member of the Mil- waukee-based Steamfitters Local 60. “Break one union, break them all,” another steamfitter agreed.

JUST SAY NO

Over the following week, Walker used Capitol police to slowly squeeze the occupation of the Capitol building to an end. But it was a long, drawn-out process, as police who were not directly under Walker’s control declined to take part. Some off-duty cops, in fact, helped the movement by joining it, sleeping overnight on the marble floors.

After weeks of growing conflict, what happened at the Capitol seemed like a stone, Republican law- makers decided they had to bring the month-long standoff to an end. While rumors about negotiations circulated in the press, GOP state senators launched a surprise at- tack. In a late-night maneuver on March 9, they forced through the anti-union measures in a separate bill, dropping all the fiscal provi- sions that had triggered stricter quorum requirements.

Democrats charged that the sudden move violated Wisconsin’s open meetings law, and vowed to chal- lenge it in court. As the after-hours legislative drama unfolded, an angry crowd Outside the Capitol grew to 7,000, while thousands more inside briefly recouped the building.

By passing the “budget repair bill,” Walker and state GOP leaders aimed to make collective bargaining, the backbone of Wisconsin labor, unconstitu- tional. On Saturday, March 12, the labor movement responded with the larg- est demonstration in Wisconsin history. Well over 100,000 angry people vowed to win their rights back by forcing Walker and his Republican majority out of office through a recall drive.

RECALL

Eight Republican state sena- tors are targets of the recall effort. Others — and Gov. Walker — will not be on the ballot until they have completed the first year of their current term in office. But early indications are that all of them should be retained.

To force a recall election, organiz- ers must secure signatures equal to the total vote cast in the last election for governor within 60 days. That’s a tall order — but after two weeks of petitioning, recall ac- tors estimated last week about 45% of the number they need.

While chants of “General strike!” rang out on the night of March 9, that has not emerged as the movement’s NEXT PAGE
From Algeria to Austen

By JOHN TARLETON

Marnia Lazreg
Licence ès Lettres: University of Algiers
MA: New York University
Ph.D: New York University

A professor of sociology at Hunter College, Marnia Lazreg is a self-described “incorruptible theorist” who relies heavily on field work and archival research. Her research interests include gender and development, non-European sociocultural systems and their relationship to colonialism, torture and identity, Islam and politics, existentialism, and postmodern theory.

I loved school so much I cried
I was a studious girl who always had her nose stuck in her books. For me, my role model was the professor of anything, history, English, you name it. I liked being in the classroom situation. I liked learning. I liked doing my homework. At the end of the school year, I would cry because I wasn’t going to be in school for three months.

Colonization
Growing up in Algeria, the French presence was so massive, the buildings were built the French way, the economic system was in the hands of the French, the legal system was French, the army was French, the police were French. You just felt it would never change.

During the war, they subjected the whole country to a surveillance grid. On my block, we knew an old man who reported to the Army anyone who was absent for more than a day or any new people who came in. It was like 1894.

A change in the atmosphere
Something shook the spirit, if you will... There was an incredible feeling of elation from 1954 to 1962, during the war for independence. And of course it was mixed with fear and uncertainty, but there was that elation.

In the euphoria that set in after independence, we had this incredible awakening. You woke up and you said, “Ha, it’s going to be different.” It’s similar to what’s happening today in Egypt and Libya where people wake up one day and say ‘enough is enough.’

On today’s Middle East protesters
People want a better life. They want transparent elections so that the same person will not be in power for 30 or 40 years, which makes you feel you’re in a kind of jail, rather than in a country where you count and your opinions matter. The satellite dish and the Internet now extend to the furthest reaches of the Arab world. Poor people in every building pool their resources to get a dish and they see people around the world have better lives. It has become evident to young people that the fired discourse of national interest responded to nothing tangible in their lives, corresponded to nothing they aspired to. They want change, and this is it.

In Egypt now, Mubarak has been toppled, but the very military that shared the spoils of power with him for over 30 years is still in place. I would think the future is still up for grabs.

Why I study torture
It makes me look into what constitutes a human being and how we protect that core of humanity that is in each of us. A democratic country is always in danger of reverting to torture because it is a source of absolutely boundless power.

My most recent books
Torture and the Twilight of Empire: From Algiers to Baghdad (2007), and Questioning the Veil: Open Letters to Muslim Women (2009).

Works in progress
I am working on a book to be published in 2012 about the French philosopher Michel Foucault and the conundrum of culture, i.e., why he was unable to make sense of non-Western cultures like Iran and China. After that, I am working on a book on Islamic law.

Recent reads
A Tale of Two Cities by Charles Dickens, Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen, Huckleberry Finn by Mark Twain.

Why I return to literary classics
I do academic work during the day. I want to do something different at night. The classics try to reach for something universal while they are addressing something local. They connect with something that transcends boundaries.

Why CUNY matters
It’s important to allow talented people who cannot pay $40,000 per year to acquire a college education. A college education develops one’s capacity for critical thinking, for not taking things at face value, for asking questions. This should be available to as large a population as possible.

Life/Work

Solidarity Summer School for Union Women

By BEATRIZ GIL

I come from a family of self-made women and men. My mother’s roots are in the countryside of northern Mexico while my father comes from the gritty streets of Mexico City. His last job in Mexico City as a taxi driver and the series of jobs he took in the US—working the lettuce and poinsettia fields, washing dishes, assembling golf clubs and fixing cars—taught me that all work is valuable even if it is not well paid.

Working Women

Today, I work as a special projects coordinator at CUNY’s Murphy Institute for Worker Education and Labor Studies, where I assist in developing new academic programs and partnerships for working adult students. Because of my experiences growing up, I bring immigrant issues to the forefront of the work we do. I participated in the United Farm Workers boycott campaign against strawberry growers as a college activist—but working at CUNY is the first time I have been a member of a union. So when I was offered the chance to attend the 35th Annual Northeast Regional Summer School for Union Women last July, I jumped at the opportunity.

The summer school brought together over 100 rank-and-file women workers, union officers and staff to strengthen their knowledge of the labor movement and develop the skills to become more active and influential in their unions. Women make up approximately 45% of the unionized workforce, but men still dominate the upper ranks of union leadership.

During our five days together on the Penn State campus, we heard from guest speakers and were given the chance to participate in workshops on collective bargaining, coalition building, public speaking, increasing rank-and-file participation, news writing, interviewing for radio, use of social media, labor law and the impact of the economic crisis on women.

In the collective bargaining workshop, I experienced what it’s like for union representatives and management to sit face-to-face—it’s a high-stakes situation. You have to know what your bottom line is and what you are willing to negotiate on. As part of the workshop, we divided into management and union teams, each taking our role very seriously in a mock collective bargaining session. I now have a deeper appreciation for each of the stipulations in our contract, such as having a right to union representation in disciplinary proceedings and investigations.

In the Radio Waves media workshopping, we took turns interviewing each other. In the process, we learned basic production skills as well as how a good interview can use storytelling as a powerful tool that makes people feel connected.

Generational Diversity

We also explored how women can form cross-generational alliances to challenge the deeply hierarchical workings of unions. A presentation on generational diversity in the workplace highlighted the challenges unions face in staying relevant to younger workers, but unfortunately it focused on generational experiences more common to the white middle class than those of working-class people of color. None-the-less, this got me thinking about how several generations striving together in the workplace can be a powerful force for change.

Labor Legacy

I met veteran labor activists like Ida Torres, President of Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) Local 3 here in New York, and Lois Gray, a long-time faculty member at Cornell University. I was inspired by their fiercelessness and lifelong passion and commitment to empowerment women in leadership and education. With fewer younger workers having experience with unions, forging these cross-generational ties can help cultivate future women leaders.

Pamphlet on the legacy of the struggle of women workers is a core mission of the Summer School for Union Women. Labor History Night featured stories of famous women like Sojourner Truth, Mother Jones, Dolores Huerta, as well as the not-so-famous, who have overcome great challenges in the workplace and who have labored to make our society a better place.

When I was asked to present a story about a woman who had fought for worker rights, I told the story of my mother and countless women like her who care for the elderly, yet don’t have a union contract to rely on and must bear exploitive working conditions if they want to hold on to their jobs. Retelling my mother’s story helped me realize what may have been the most important lesson of that week: solidarity means solidarity with all workers, regardless of their skill, trade, where the work is done in the US or what documents they carry or what language they speak.

The Northeast Regional Summer School for Union Women will be held at Rutgers University from July 17-22 (see tinyurl.com/UnionWomen1). Several women from the PSC attend the school each summer. For more information, contact Debja Bergen at dbergen@pscmail.org.

Solidarity Summer School for Union Women

By BEATRIZ GIL

I come from a family of self-made women and men. My mother’s roots are in the countryside of northern Mexico while my father comes from the gritty streets of Mexico City. His last job in Mexico City as a taxi driver and the series of jobs he took in the US—working the lettuce and poinsettia fields, washing dishes, assembling golf clubs and fixing cars—taught me that all work is valuable even if it is not well paid.

Working Women

Today, I work as a special projects coordinator at CUNY’s Murphy Institute for Worker Education and Labor Studies, where I assist in developing new academic programs and partnerships for working adult students. Because of my experiences growing up, I bring immigrant issues to the forefront of the work we do. I participated in the United Farm Workers boycott campaign against strawberry growers as a college activist—but working at CUNY is the first time I have been a member of a union. So when I was offered the chance to attend the 35th Annual Northeast Regional Summer School for Union Women last July, I jumped at the opportunity.

The summer school brought together over 100 rank-and-file women workers, union officers and staff to strengthen their knowledge of the labor movement and develop the skills to become more active and influential in their unions. Women make up approximately 45% of the unionized workforce, but men still dominate the upper ranks of union leadership.

During our five days together on the Penn State campus, we heard from guest speakers and were given the chance to participate in workshops on collective bargaining, coalition building, public speaking, increasing rank-and-file participation, news writing, interviewing for radio, use of social media, labor law and the impact of the economic crisis on women.

In the collective bargaining workshop, I experienced what it’s like for union representatives and management to sit face-to-face—it’s a high-stakes situation. You have to know what your bottom line is and what you are willing to negotiate on. As part of the workshop, we divided into management and union teams, each taking our role very seriously in a mock collective bargaining session. I now have a deeper appreciation for each of the stipulations in our contract, such as having a right to union representation in disciplinary proceedings and investigations.

In the Radio Waves media workshop, we took turns interviewing each other. In the process, we learned basic production skills as well as how a good interview can use storytelling as a powerful tool that makes people feel connected.

Generational Diversity

We also explored how women can form cross-generational alliances to challenge the deeply hierarchical workings of unions. A presentation on generational diversity in the workplace highlighted the challenges unions face in staying relevant to younger workers, but unfortunately it focused on generational experiences more common to the white middle class than those of working-class people of color. Nonetheless, this got me thinking about how several generations striving together in the workplace can be a powerful force for change.

Labor Legacy

I met veteran labor activists like Ida Torres, President of Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) Local 3 here in New York, and Lois Gray, a long-time faculty member at Cornell University. I was inspired by their fiercelessness and lifelong passion and commitment to empowering women in leadership and education. With fewer younger workers having experience with unions, forging these cross-generational ties can help cultivate future women leaders.

Pamphlet on the legacy of the struggle of women workers is a core mission of the Summer School for Union Women. Labor History Night featured stories of famous women like Sojourner Truth, Mother Jones, Dolores Huerta, as well as the not-so-famous, who have overcome great challenges in the workplace and who have labored to make our society a better place.

When I was asked to present a story about a woman who had fought for worker rights, I told the story of my mother and countless women like her who care for the elderly, yet don’t have a union contract to rely on and must bear exploitive working conditions if they want to hold on to their jobs. Retelling my mother’s story helped me realize what may have been the most important lesson of that week: solidarity means solidarity with all workers, regardless of their skill, trade, where the work is done in the US or what documents they carry or what language they speak.

The Northeast Regional Summer School for Union Women will be held at Rutgers University from July 17-22 (see tinyurl.com/UnionWomen1). Several women from the PSC attend the school each summer. For more information, contact Debja Bergen at dbergen@pscmail.org.
Junior faculty learn how to survive and thrive at CUNY

By JOHN TARLETON

“Make a small effort, but do it well,” Anna Marie Leveille, an assistant professor of nursing at Medgar Evers, asks a question during the PSC’s annual Junior Faculty Development Day on March 12.

BE PRO-ACTIVE

Hold on to the PSC Union Hall, the event drew more than 75 junior faculty from across the CUNY system. They listened to, and participated in, panel discussions in which tenured colleagues shared information on the ins and outs of the tenure process, how to assert one’s rights under the contract, and ways to obtain more funding and support for their research.

Panelists emphasized that expectations and practices vary across colleges and departments, and can also change over time – and that junior faculty have to be pro-active in shaping their careers.

“You’re not always going to get a job they want you to do,” said George, an associate professor of political science at Queens College. George also emphasized the importance of cultivating a research niche and a network of academics at other colleges; lorraine cohen, Penny lewis, felipe Pimenthal, community college officers; iris delutro, vice President, cross campus Units; donna veronica Gill, steven trimboli, Andrea Ades Vásquez, cross campus

PSC OFFICERS:

President emeritus; Peter i. hoberman, vice President emeritus, cross campus Units

officers; marcia newfield, vice President, Part-time Personnel; michael batson, susan diraimo, steve weisblatt, Part-time Personnel officers; bill Freidheim, eileen moran, retiree officers; irwin h. Polishook, Grievance officer; barbara Gabriel, coordinator, office services and human resources; rob murray, director of organizing; Kate Foy, Research & Public Policy; fran clark, coordinator, college website.

STAFF:

Margarita Aguilar, research analyst; Mary Antonelli, theatre arts; eileen moran, director of organizing; Pam Ortega, director of organizing; Lupe Sigala, communications; Diana Rosario, coordinator, Membership Department; Carol Wine, research associate; project on CUNY & Race; Peter J. Zmuda, director of legal affairs.

Clarion | April 2011

Wisconsin uprising

Continued from page 7

fokus. Some, like TAA activist Peter Rickman, question whether “it’s the best use of our resources, the best use of the sympathy...among the public at large.” Others say it’s a longer range option.

Union face a heavy burden simply dealing with the immediate consequences of Walker’s anti-unionism.

“All of our contracts that we have worked for over decades is null and void,” said the TAA’s Gibbons. “This bill is a nightmare.”

UNION DUES

Walker’s law bans public employees from accepting union members’ requests to have deductions from their paychecks, an attempt to cripple unions financially. “The essence of what TAA members fight for the United Way...but they are prohibited from collecting union dues,” notes a police union, the Wisconsin Law Enforcement Association. Dues checkoff was a central issue in the Memphis sanitation workers’ strike during which Dr. Martin Luther King lost his life (see p.11). The TAA plans to canvas members seeking authorization for monthly electronic transfers from their bank, and will organize union-building parties at which they hope to sign up many people at once.

Like other public unions, the TAA now faces annual certification elections, forcing it to put resources into a permanent organizing drive.

Also in the effort to overturn these restrictions, Gibbons says the TAA also has new sources of strength. “A lot more people are now aware of what a union is capable of,” he told Clarion.

General meetings now attract hundreds of participants, said Gibbons, and dozens of people are participating in each of the union’s committees. This provides a window of opportunity for the TAA can tap the energy of their new movement, before the long-term drag of Walker’s restrictions is in full effect.

“If there’s a time we can push through this,” Gibbons said, “now is the time.”

Union members across the state appear determined to win their rights back, and early signs suggest that labor’s new momentum could alter Wisconsin politics in ways that Walker never had in mind.

A popular chant on March 12 caught Wisconsin unionists’ current mood: “Scott, you may not remember me, but I can recall you!”

Clarion | APRIL 2011

Senior staff writer of the Professional Staff Congress/City University of New York, collective bargaining representative of the PSC/CUNY contract.

STAFF: Mark Anderson, executive director; Neeraj Zadunier, associate executive director; Faye H. Allin, coordinator, Financial Services; Debra L. Bergan, director, CONTRACT ADMINISTRATION & University-wide Grievance Officer; Barbara Gable, coordinator, Office Services and Human Resources; Rob Murray, director of organizing; Kate Foy, director of public policy; Fran Clark, Coordinator, Communications; Diana Rosario, Coordinator, Membership Department; Carol Wing, research associate; project on CUNY & Race; Peter J. Zmuda, director of legal affairs.

Cover design by Marcella Aguiler

Editor: Peter Hoogjes | Associate Editor: John Tarleton | Designer: Marcella Aguiler | Proofreader: Teri Durner

© 2011 Professional Staff Congress/CUNY
COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

Why we defend Triborough

By RICHARD CASAGRANDE
New York State United Teachers General Counsel
& DEBORAH MULHAM
New York State United Teachers Senior Counsel

If you are a public employee in New York, you might have read that something called the Triborough Amendment has to be repealed because it gives you and your union too much power.

Don't believe it.

The truth is that Triborough, a part of New York State labor law, has leveled the bargaining playing field and stops public employers from slashing your salary and benefits – including crucial health care benefits – while your union is negotiating for a new contract.

New York’s Constitution provides that human labor is not a commodity and that working people have the right to join unions and collectively bargain. For the public sector, bargaining rights are defined by the 1967 Taylor Law (Civil Service Law Article 14).

Under the Taylor Law, unions are prohibited from striking, the traditional weapon of last resort used by labor to pressure management. Management, in turn, is prohibited from reducing or eliminating contract rights or benefits while the parties negotiate for a successor agreement.

To shift the current balance in management’s favor would encourage employers to delay or avoid bargaining in order to make unilateral changes to contracts.

In its 1972 Triborough Bridge & Tunnel Authority decision, the Public Employee Relations Board (PERB) interpreted the Taylor Law to prohibit employers from changing terms and conditions of employment while a successor agreement was being negotiated. This principle became known as the Triborough Doctrine.

PROTECTIONS

The doctrine, however, did not protect all contract provisions, only those dealing with mandatory subjects of bargaining, such as salary and hours. Movement within salary schedules and implementation of increments were excluded. Further, when a contract expired, public employers were free to alter contract provisions on permissive subjects of bargaining, such as retiree benefits, class size and staffing levels, among others.

Binding arbitration provisions also lapsed when the contract expired. This meant that once the contract expired, the union was still powerless to strike, but the employer could diminish or discontinue important contract benefits at will.

To address this imbalance, the legislature in 1982 enacted the Triborough Amendment, which had strong support from labor and management. The governor’s office, in fact, issued a supporting memo, noting the amendment would guarantee that labor and management came to the table as equals.

The amendment expanded the Triborough Doctrine by making it an improper practice for an employer “to refuse to continue all the terms of an expired agreement until a new agreement is negotiated,” unless the union violated the no-strike provision. This meant that all provisions of the contract, except those specifically intended by the parties to sunset on a certain date, would continue until a successor agreement was negotiated – unless, of course, the union engaged in a strike.

Before Triborough, the number of public sector labor strikes in New York peaked at 28 annually. In the years following the amendment, no more than four strikes have taken place in any given year, and there have been many years with no strikes at all.

Further, Triborough ended the practice of overreach by public employers who, without the amendment, could and would threaten unions and working women and men with loss of crucial contract benefits in order to get negotiating concessions.

Repeal of the Triborough Amendment would have a chilling effect on public sector labor relations. Public employers would regain the power to eliminate or diminish important contract provisions while negotiating a new contract. They would have an incentive to delay negotiations past the contract’s expiration date so they could alter your contract unilaterally.

This kind of unilateral power could have a devastating effect on New York’s public sector labor relations and on your contract rights – rights that we have fought for. New York State United Teachers (NYSUT) will oppose any Triborough repeal.

A full version of this article was published in the February 16 issue of NYSUT United.

The Glass Factory

“Morals in the glass factories are proverbially bad.”

~ An inspector’s comment, caption to a 1908 Lewis Hines photo

Even a decent girl can hide nothing here.

I see the boys and even the old ones
stare at my smock, then my eyes, as if they can see
clean through. It’s mighty dangerous, too.

If a body’s not careful, you can get scraped
by sand, burned, or cut real bad.

Between the boys and the heat
and the broken glass, I tried to carry myself
as if I was a babe wrapped tight
in one of the thick quilts ma makes.

They still stared – maybe even more –
and I got tired trying to hold back.

The words they say to me! Even with the furnace
roaring, they whisper against my ear ‘til
I feel something taking shape inside me,
first soft as taffy, then sparkling like the glass beast

I saw a man make once, blowing through his lips.

I want to keep their words like the preserves
from its perfumed vault.

From The Passage

(From an undated photograph
of New York City subway construction workers)

3. Four Men Under a River

They’ve arrived. Survived the Atlantic, that oily black cur growing day and night like the ship’s engine at their ears. Survived the deepest deck heaving human muck, the awful undertow of yearning that pulled them clear across the sea. They’ve arrived, landing in this cave below a river, on the jagged shores of an underworld reserved for men like them. The work boots of the man up front till oddy, as if struggling for a toehold, high laces like rope ladders climbing the darkness. Entering the airlock to descend the caisson, did they know that hunger would return to consume them?

That with every breath, they would once more feel the crashing ocean in their heads?

They’ve arrived, shoulders sloped as if the men themselves were ballast – a giddy mass laid down at the foundation of what will surely rise.

Unmentionable

Buried at the bottom of my lingerie drawer, an antique, skin-toned wisp of silk trimmed with lace and snatching shut in complicated ways.

A frayed label says Triangle Shirtwaist Company.

I cannot remember when or how it came to be here.

I cannot see this confection without seeing smoke, locked doors and fiery dives through cruel, unmothering space.

Whose hands cut the silk, sewed stitches so fine?

Did she hang by a thread for days
to die, or survive, a wild-eyed girl-child?

This garment I‘ll never wear
sears me, sighing from its perfumed vault.

[March 25, 2011, is the 100th anniversary of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, in which 146 women workers were killed. For information on events remembering the disaster and the movements it inspired, see page 9.]
ON April 4, 1968, an assassin robbed us of one of the greatest prophetic voices of the 20th century. Although many believe that day marks the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., died in Memphis, many don’t know what he was doing there. They don’t know that he died in a struggle for the right of public workers to have a union. Throughout his life, King stood up for union rights. His teachings about the rights of labor can serve us well in our own trying times, when those rights are under fresh assault.

One of King’s phrases that we rarely hear is this: “All labor has dignity.” King spoke these words to a mass meeting of over 10,000 people in Memphis on March 18, 1968, in the midst of a strike of 1,300 black sanitation workers. Some 40% of these workers were so poor they received welfare benefits even though they worked 60-hour weeks. Speaking of both sanitation workers in Memphis and the working poor across the country, King said, “You are reminding, not only Memphis, but you are reminding the nation that it is a crime for people to live in this rich nation and receive starvation wages.”

But the strike was not just about pay. “Let it be known everywhere,” King declared, “that almost everywhere in the South, and in other areas, the other securities that you are struggling for, you are also struggling for the right to organize and be recognized.” The key issues for the Memphis workers were then and are today that the City of Memphis grant collective bargaining rights and the collection of union dues – the very two items that Gov. Scott Walker, the city’s Republican governor, and public officials have been fighting to eliminate. The sanitation workers, students, and working poor across the country know that if they don’t have the right to organize, if they can’t negotiate their terms of employment, they will be able to make Mayor Loeb and others say yes, even when they want to say no.

King’s support for the sanitation workers reflected his long-held concern for economic justice. With some 25 million unemployed and many more underemployed, with 50 million without health insurance and 44 million living in poverty, King’s prophetic words in Memphis ring true today: “Do you know that most of the poor people in our country are working every day? And they are making wages so low that they cannot begin to function in the main-stream of the economic life of our nation.”

The second phase of the civil rights movement, King said, would have to be the struggle for “economic equality.” To that end, he came to Memphis as part of his Poor People’s Campaign. He sought to organize a mass movement to demand that Congress shift its priorities from funding military buildup and wars to funding jobs, housing, health care, and education. The richest country in the history of the world, he said, could afford to eliminate poverty. What it lacked was the will to do it.

In that regard, King reminded strikers and their supporters in Memphis of the story of Dives in the Bible, who went to hell because he passed by the suffering Lazarus every day without ever paying attention to his brother’s plight. “And I come by here to say that...if America does not use her vast resources of wealth to end poverty and make it possible for all God’s children to have the basic necessities of life, she, too, will go to hell.” Today our government and media seem incapable of grasping King’s moral vision – but King emphasized throughout his life that human rights include labor rights.

It is a little remembered fact that Martin Luther King was protesting for worker rights in Memphis at the time of his assassination on April 4, 1968. Pictured above: Memphis sanitation workers on strike in the 1968 strike supported by Rev. King.

The AFSCME union insisted that workers had a moral and constitutional right to act together – to bargain collectively, not just individually. Field organizer P.J. Ciampa, sent in to help, reminded strikers of their rights under both the Thirteenth and First Amendments. “I don’t know of any law in Tennessee that says you have to subject yourself to indentured servitude,” Ciampa told striking sanitation workers. “As a free American citizen you are expressing yourself by saying: ‘I am not working for those stinking wages and conditions.’”

King, who was no stranger to confrontation, was also no stranger to the power of words. He was a master of the pen, as well as the pulpit. In a letter to the sanitation workers, he wrote: “The system which takes necessities from the masses to give luxuries to the classes.”

UNION POWER

King always saw unionization as a moral as well as a political question. As he told organizers at the Highlander Folk School, “I never intend to adjust myself to a system which takes necessities from the masses to give luxuries to the classes.”

King’s rhetoric focused the central question in today’s budget battles: Who should pay? Today’s public employees have won better wages and conditions than those faced by Memphis sanitation workers 43 years ago. But they still live fairly modest lives – and it was not teachers, firefighters or sanitation workers who caused our nation’s economic and fiscal collapse. Why, then, should they be asked to pay for its cost, instead of the private-sector profits that go to the people who caused the over-age of the middle class? Who created a gambling casino on Wall Street and left the public to pay the bill? Is that economic justice?

King believed that power concedes nothing without a struggle, and for that reason he long supported union organizing. Indeed, he went beyond that to support other forms of direct action that may be increasingly appropriate today as Republicans try to break the last hold of public employees on a living wage. In Memphis, King called for a general strike in support of the sanitation workers’ demands. “You may have to escalate the struggle a bit,” he told his audience. “If they keep refusing you, then you will not recognize the union, and will not agree for the check-off for the collection of dues, I tell you what you ought to do, and you are together here enough to get together and just have a general work stoppage in the city of Memphis.”

FIGHTING ON

King’s audience responded with thunderous applause and cheers, because they knew that African Americans did so much of the city’s work. If teachers, sanitation workers, students, and workers across the board went on strike they could definitely shut the city down.

King said, “All labor has dignity.” There is no more important time than the present for us to remember that we have a duty to follow King’s lead in fighting for union rights as human rights. In the wake of the anti-union assault and pro-union protests in Wisconsin and other Midwestern states, let us reflect on where King would have stood in that fight were he alive today.

My hope is that our leaders will never allow the streets, fighting for the rights of workers, by starving them of funds, while, in King’s words, providing “no rights and no work.” In King’s framework, killing public employee unions today would be immoral as well as foolish. He said the three evils facing humankind are war, racism and economic injustice. “If we can eliminate the latter, and without them, unions wages and living conditions will go down for a significant number of workers, especially women and workers of color.

It’s a struggle. It’s a fight. It’s our fight.
Evidence points the other way

By SUNSHINE LUDER & CHLOE TRIBICH

Supporters of tax cuts for the rich never get tired of repeating the same claim: If you tax rich people, they will leave.

Governor Cuomo has said it. Mayor Bloomberg has said it. The Partnership for New York City, a group of 200 CEOs, has said it. But despite how often this line is repeated, there’s no evidence for the claim that wealthy populations are moving in response to tax rates – and quite a bit of evidence points in the opposite direction.

THE FACTS


Even E.J. McMahon of the right-wing Manhattan Institute concedes the point. “I kind of clench my teeth every time [then-Gov.] Paterson says people will leave,” he told the Times in 2009. “It’s the selling point. It’s also a dumb point,” McMahon said. “Nobody says your wealthy enclaves will shrink dramatically.”

Here’s some of what recent studies have found:

- From 2003-2005, New York imposed a temporary tax hike on its highest-income residents. During the years that surcharge was in place the state saw a 30% growth in high-income tax returns.
- New York consistently ranks high in its percentage of high net-worth households: currently New York is 12th among the 50 states. Significantly, four of the states that outrank New York have top income tax rates that are as high or higher.
- The current income tax surcharge on the highest-paid people in New York was adopted in 2009. In the year after these high-end tax rates went into effect, the number of high-net-worth households in the state grew by more than 10%.
- California voters raised the top rate on millionaire earners to 10.3% – higher than New York’s current top rate. The outcome there? California’s millionaire households increased by nearly 38% over the three years after the voter-approved tax hike took effect in 2006 – while the total number of taxpayers rose only 4.2%.
- A similar trend – disproportionate growth of high-income households – also followed when California temporarily raised high-end income taxes in the 1990s. The California Budget Project calls the idea that rich people have left the state due to taxes “one of the oft-cited urban legends in California politics.”

When the number of high-income households in a state increases, it can be hard to distinguish how much this stems from incomes rising in the upper brackets, and how much it stems from people moving from one state to another. Still, it’s striking that none of these studies found evidence for predictions that the rich will flee from higher taxes.

PRINCETON STUDY

Following the passage of a “half-millionaire” tax in New Jersey (at the same income level and rate as New York’s current surcharge), Princeton University researchers conducted a detailed analysis of individual New Jersey tax data before and after the tax change, which took effect as of January 1, 2004. The bottom line? New Jersey’s tax increase has raised close to $1 billion a year – and led fewer than 1% of affected households to consider a move out of state.

The authors of the Princeton study noted the difficulty of pinning down the motivating factors for migration patterns. But here’s what they did determine: people moving out of New Jersey are more likely to be on the lower end of the income scale, and move to places with lower housing costs.

SKEPTICISM

Similarly, a 2007 study by the New York City comptroller looked at population data for a recent period when New York City temporarily increased income taxes on top earners (also 2003-2005). According to The New York Times, the City’s study found that “households with incomes of $250,000 and higher were the least likely to leave.”

It’s possible that some wealthy people may consider moving out of state when their taxes rise, but studies have yet to demonstrate any statistically significant evidence for the idea. Rush Limbaugh loudly declared his departure after New York’s current surcharge was approved, but he’s likely outnumbered by others who move into New York for a job opportunity, or to be near family, or to take advantage of the concentration of business and cultural amenities supported here.

Wall Street Journal concludes that it’s a myth.

If the surcharge on New York’s highest incomes is allowed to expire, public services will deteriorate – and regular New Yorkers will suffer. We should make sure that budget decisions are based on facts, not myths – no matter how often those myths are repeated.

Sunshine Luder & Chloe Tribich are Senior Policy Organizers with the Center for Working Families (www.cwfny.org).