



## DEFENSE OF Academic freedom

Political attacks fail to drive BC adjunct out of class.

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## SEEKING ALTERNATIVES TO AUSTERITY



# CONTRACT BARGAINING BEGINS

Negotiators for the PSC and CUNY sat down on January 26 to begin talks on a new contract. Above, negotiating teams for CUNY management and the PSC face each other across the table, in the board room at CUNY headquarters on 80th Street. At far left is CUNY's chief negotiator, Pamela Silverblatt, vice chancellor for labor relations; at far right is chief negotiator for the union, PSC President

Barbara Bowen. The talks start at a time when public-worker unions are under unprecedented attack, and bargaining team members say the key to winning a fair contract lies in the PSC's ability to build broad support for its vision of CUNY. "We have to reach not only our members and our students but also the larger public," said PSC bargaining team member Lorraine Cohen. **PAGES 6-7, 10-11**

### CAMPUS SAFETY

## CUNY flunks on State mandate

PSC members are pushing CUNY to comply with a new State law against workplace violence. The first step, they say, is to work with the union. **PAGE 2**

### CITY PENSIONS

## Mayor demands concessions

Mayor Bloomberg wants to condition pay raises for city workers on cuts in future pension benefits. Public-sector unions have vowed to fight back. **PAGE 5**

### WINTER WARRIORS

## Adventures in snow removal

Sanitation worker Gian Carlo Acquasanta describes his experiences clearing the city's streets during one of the snowiest winters on record. **PAGE 4**



### SKILL SET

## Researchers of the world, unite!

What's behind the campaign of lies and distortions directed against public employees, including CUNY faculty and staff? An invitation to help find out. **PAGE 8**

# CUNY cited for violating safety law

By CLARION STAFF

On February 2, CUNY was found in violation of a New York law requiring large public employers to develop programs to help prevent workplace violence. The Public Employee Safety & Health Bureau (PESH) found six violations of the law – four described as “serious” – and imposed deadlines ranging from March 21 to July 25 for the university to correct them. The PESH order applies to every CUNY college and administrative site; failure to meet deadlines will subject CUNY to a daily penalty. The University has 60 days to appeal.

## TOO LITTLE

Among CUNY’s “serious” violations of the law was its failure to provide for participation by campus unions at various stages in the development of a workplace violence prevention program.

“The standard requires employers to involve members in accessing the risks in their own working conditions,” said Joan Greenbaum, a coordinator of the PSC’s Health & Safety Watchdogs. “The law requires CUNY to ask for our input on unsafe conditions such as working alone, poor lighting, working late hours or handling money, as well as on training staff to cope with potential violence in the workplace, and reviewing the effectiveness of the program. This PESH citation requires CUNY to follow the law.”

The PESH action was a long time coming. New York’s legislature

## Workplace violence prevention lacking



Ben Chitty (center), a PSC Health & Safety Watchdog at Queens College, is working with members of other unions on campus to pressure the administration to involve employees in the implementation of a workplace violence prevention program.

mandated that workplace violence prevention programs for large public employers be in place by the end of August 2009, and required that employers consult with “authorized employee representatives” – in CUNY’s case, staff designated by the unions, not selected by the administration.

At Queens College, the PSC began asking the administration about its prevention program in October 2009. After retired Professor Richard Antoun was stabbed to death in his office on the SUNY-Binghamton campus by a graduate student in

December 2009, the union pressed for a response again in January. Finally, at a labor-management meeting in April, the college produced a copy of CUNY’s 2004 policy on responding to workplace violence and announced that it was in full compliance with the 2009 law. The union explained why CUNY was wrong on that assumption and eventually filed a complaint with PESH against the college on July 15, 2010.

In the last days of July, the University released a draft for a new policy on workplace violence to the

three largest unions at CUNY – the PSC, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) District Council 37, and Teamsters Local 237 – and asked for comments prior to implementing the policy on August 2. All three unions objected to the content and to being given mere days to respond.

The day after Labor Day, PESH conducted a two-day inspection at Queens College in which it became clear that the college and the University expected to rush a program into place without consulting campus unions in any significant way. PESH subsequently expanded the Queens complaint to the entire University.

## TOO LATE

By Thanksgiving there was little evidence of any further effort to consult the unions or to implement a program. The union reported CUNY’s lack of progress both to the Department of Labor and to Assemblyman Rory Lancman, chair of the Subcommittee on Workplace Safety (and a Queens College graduate). The University responded by issuing a revised draft program, and directing the colleges to begin site as-

## PSC 2.0

Come and check it out! The PSC launched its new website on January 28. The new site has a cleaner look and can be more easily navigated. You can log onto the site and customize your personal account to see links to the news and events of most interest to you. The union is training a corps of assistant webmasters – representatives from every PSC chapter and committee – who will be able to post local content to the website. “Our goal is for the website to become a vibrant, collaborative space where the local activists, chapters and committees who make our union strong have a much higher profile,” said PSC Webmaster Bill Friedheim. For more, see [psc-cuny.org](http://psc-cuny.org).

assessments and to survey staff about safety from violence in the workplace. But the assessments were scheduled for dates during intersession, and the online surveys closed before faculty returned to campus. Once again CUNY officials hadn’t attempted to review the 2009 State standard.

## BE PROACTIVE

The PESH inspector summoned CUNY officials to a meeting on January 4, and determined that there was still no program, and no provision for consulting the unions.

In the wake of the citation, CUNY Trustees are preparing to meet the first deadline by adopting a brief policy statement on preventing workplace violence at their February 28 meeting. Union activists describe the policy as “vague,” and say that the University’s compliance will have to be proved at the campus level.

“Contact your local union chapter get more information on the risk assessment walk-throughs and the reviews,” said Greenbaum. “In our work areas, PSC members are the best experts about the conditions where we work. We know the most

## University must obey requirement for union participation

about what may be unsafe.” (For further information or training, contact the PSC Health & Safety Watchdogs at [hswatchdogs@pscmail.org](mailto:hswatchdogs@pscmail.org).)

After the 2007 Virginia Tech shootings, everyone in the country knew that colleges had to become more proactive about violence in the academic workplace. And in New York State, after the SUNY-Binghamton professor’s killing, PESH cited the school for failing to implement a prevention program.

Why has the City University been so slow to implement a workplace violence prevention and policy program? “Perhaps CUNY management thinks that union involvement somehow infringes on their prerogatives? The only prerogative that appears to be at stake is management’s right to refuse to take responsibility for its errors and omissions,” said Ben Chitty, a PSC Health & Safety Watchdog at Queens College. “When safety is at risk,” he continued, “this prerogative is not worth spit.”

“CUNY must now implement a workplace violence prevention program at every work site,” said Chitty. “The union will participate in its development, implementation, and review, and we will all be safer for it.”

## Correction

Page 12 of our January issue misstated the end date for federal stimulus funds for New York State. In fact, most of those funds are scheduled to end in mid-2011.

## Write to Clarion

Tell us what you are thinking. Letters may be on any topic, but must be no more than 200 words and are subject to editing. Send in yours to [phogness@pscmail.org](mailto:phogness@pscmail.org).



## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

WRITE TO: CLARION/PSC, 61 BROADWAY, 15TH FLOOR, NEW YORK, NY 10006. E-MAIL: [PHOGNESS@PSMAIL.ORG](mailto:PHOGNESS@PSMAIL.ORG). FAX: (212) 302-7815.

# Egypt and the work of organizing

● The uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt hold so much potential and are inspiring to so many of us. But accounts in the corporate media are misleading when they describe the protests as “spontaneous.”

As with countless other “uprisings,” e.g., Oaxaca, Bolivia, Haiti, Guadeloupe, to call this movement spontaneous masks the years of organizing that made it possible. In each of these cases, national labor movements have been key to the broader movement for political and economic change. Unions know how to organize, create coalitions, gauge the political landscape, and negotiate. They’ve got the skills and political will.

Egyptian workers have organized over 3,000 labor protests since 2004, in the context of a brutal dictatorship. That didn’t “just happen.” With 28% of the Egyptian workforce unionized, mostly in the public sector, their training and participation in the recent protests was critical. Last year Professor Joel Beinin of Stanford University referred

to Egypt’s labor activism as “...the largest social movement in the Arab world since World War II.”

In our own national experience the labor movement has played a key role in antiwar, civil rights, women’s, and health-care/safety net movements. We need strong unions to help lead the way toward progressive politics around the globe.

Nancy Romer  
Brooklyn College

## Down on the Democrats

● The attacks on Professor Francis Fox Piven by Glenn Beck and his followers are outrageous and need to be condemned. However, these attacks must not prevent us from discussing among ourselves critical issues confronting the labor movement.

In the December *Clarion* Professor Piven theorized, importantly, an effective organizing strategy for labor. She argued US workers will have to forge a militant, mass strike movement to force the ruling

class to stop the ongoing cutbacks, and concede real material concessions, such as a new public works program. At the same time Piven underscored her own support for the Democrats and Obama, arguing “labor has been right to work for the Democrats.”

But how will our movement succeed while still tethered to the Democratic Party? We will fail in our aim of striking fear into corporate boardrooms as long as the ruling class knows the movement will ultimately subordinate itself to the corporate-controlled Democratic Party. Political independence from the Democrats, including running candidates against them, therefore, is crucial for realizing working-class power. A major obstacle in achieving this independence is not only the official union leadership, but left intellectuals who continue to provide a radical cover for the discredited policy of backing the Democrats.

Jay Arena  
College of Staten Island

## At Brooklyn College

# Victory for academic freedom

By PETER HOGNESS

On Wednesday, January 26, Kristofer Petersen-Overton was informed that Brooklyn College's provost had refused to approve his appointment to teach a graduate seminar on Middle East politics – a decision made shortly after a local politician complained. But five days later, Petersen-Overton had his job back.

The change was the result of a quick and outspoken defense of academic freedom – by his department, his union, fellow adjuncts, prominent scholars, other doctoral students, professional organizations, and others.

"Outside political interference in academic decisions about faculty appointments undermines the integrity of higher education," the PSC declared in a statement released on the heels of the provost's action. "When college administrators yield to such pressure, they compromise the academic freedom not just of the individuals directly affected, but of the university community as a whole."

## PRESSURE

Petersen-Overton had signed his hiring papers on January 24. The chain of events that led to his job offer being rescinded began when a prospective student complained to the college about the content of the draft syllabus for the class. The student also contacted Assemblymember Dov Hikind, who wrote to the college's administration to demand that Petersen-Overton not be allowed to teach.

Hikind's letter labeled Petersen-Overton "an overt supporter of terrorism," and objected to his research on suicide bombing and the concept of martyrdom in Palestinian society. "There's nothing to understand about someone who murders women and children," Hikind told reporters. "You condemn."

"Scholars have noted that writing about suicide bombers does not mean endorsing such actions," a report in *Inside Higher Ed* observed. And in fact, Petersen-Overton has made his views quite clear. "I absolutely condemn it, of course," he told *The New York Times*. "They're clearly heinous acts." On his website, Petersen-Overton writes that a key question in his research is, "How does the national subject reconcile atrocities committed on behalf of the nation; is there a threshold beyond which this allegiance cannot follow?" In an interview with *The Jewish Week*, he repeated his condemnation of the targeting of civilians, and added that he supports a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

When Petersen-Overton's job offer was pulled by the college in the wake of Hikind's letter, faculty members at Brooklyn College, the CUNY Graduate Center, and across the University were alarmed. They felt strongly that the issue was not whether Petersen-Overton had



Brooklyn College adjunct Kristofer Petersen-Overton after teaching his first class of the new semester on February 3.

passed a particular politician's litmus test, but rather why a politician was trying to reverse an academic hiring decision.

"Mr. Hikind does not have the credentials to evaluate Mr. Petersen-Overton's qualifications," wrote John Wallach, professor of political science at Hunter, in a letter to Brooklyn College Provost William Tramontano. "That is within the province of Brooklyn's Department of Political Science." In his own experience at the Graduate Center, Wallach said he had found Petersen-Overton to be an excellent and thoughtful scholar.

## UNITED

Mark Ungar, graduate deputy of the college's political science department, objected to the provost overruling the hiring of Petersen-Overton. "His decision to reject our appointment undermines academic freedom and departmental governance," Ungar said in a statement, shortly before the department as a whole unanimously backed Petersen-Overton's appointment. The department's clear and united stand was to play a central role in ensuring that Petersen-Overton was in the end allowed to teach.

Brooklyn College's administration maintained that the issue was not Petersen-Overton's views, but his qualifications. He "was not sufficiently credentialed to teach at this level," a college spokesperson said, citing Petersen-Overton's lack of a PhD. The course, which is part of a master's program at the college, "is an advanced course and he is only three semesters into his doctoral studies."

But numerous doctoral students who have taught at Brooklyn College said it was common for those

without PhDs to teach master's-level courses, including some who were still completing their coursework. Petersen-Overton noted that he was "somewhat more qualified" than many others because he already held a master's degree and has published in the field. In a strongly worded letter to the college, American Association of University Professors (AAUP) President Cary Nelson wrote that "testimony from many at the college confirms that other doctoral students like Petersen-Overton, with a master's degree, have regularly taught in the MA program without administration objection."

Hikind made quite clear that his objection was very much to Petersen-Overton's views. He told a student newspaper editor from Brooklyn College that he had also contacted CUNY Chancellor Matthew Goldstein, who had promised to "call a meeting" and "look at everything this guy has ever written." CUNY Trustee Jeffrey Wiesenfeld told *The Jewish Week* that he had also contacted Goldstein to object to Petersen-Overton's views.

## QUESTION

When *Clarion* asked CUNY what the chancellor had said in those conversations, whether he considered the objections to be appropriate, or what he said in subsequent communications with Brooklyn College administrators, it was given this statement from the chancellor in reply: "Such personnel matters are internal to Brooklyn College's academic review process."

With each passing day, more and more academics concluded that the college administration's account was not credible. "The department's deci-

sion to hire him should have carried the day," wrote the AAUP's Nelson. "The administration's intervention outside due process is a threat to academic freedom."

The PSC and CUNY's University Faculty Senate both spoke out against the cancellation of the appointment.

"Academic freedom is the bedrock of higher education; it covers an instructor whether part-time or full-time," UFS Chair Sandi Cooper and PSC President Barbara Bowen said in a joint statement sent to *New York Times*. "The whole University suffers if the adjunct faculty who teach half the courses are vulnerable to political interference and craven administrations."

The college administration had never contacted Petersen-Overton "to discuss his qualifications or the contents of his course," the PSC's Brooklyn College chapter pointed out. The provost's actions "were clearly taken in response to external political pressure," the chapter stated, and must be reversed.

Prominent scholars across the country and overseas weighed in, including well-known scholars and activists for academic freedom. Ellen Schrecker of Yeshiva University, a historian of the McCarthy era in academia, wrote that cancelling Petersen-Overton's employment "reminds me all too painfully" of "the dismissal of several Brooklyn College faculty members during that grim period." The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) was also sharply critical of the administration's action.

This rising chorus of dissent was sparked by an energetic effort to spread the word, and do so quickly. Petersen-Overton said that soon after he

was informed that he could not teach the course, he drew up a press release and sent it out widely. The website of the Graduate Center's *Advocate* newspaper became a major online organizing center. A petition there drew more than 1,000 signatures within 24 hours, while an *Advocate* blog on academic freedom served as a magnet for statements from a striking number and diversity of scholars.

"We were getting three or four hours of sleep a night," said Michael Busch, a doctoral student in political science and an adjunct at CCNY who worked on the blog. "It was heartening to see how many people were willing to take a stand."

On Monday, January 31, Brooklyn College's Department of Political Science voted unanimously to recommend that Petersen-Overton be hired to teach the course from which he had been barred. The department's Appointments Committee then voted unanimously to hire him. By that evening, the provost and college President Karen Gould had reversed course and approved the hiring. Citing the department's unanimous decision, Gould wrote that "it is now time for us to come together as a community and welcome Mr. Petersen-Overton to Brooklyn College."

Hikind and Wiesenfeld, however, said that they would continue to oppose Petersen-Overton's hiring.

## FREEDOM?

"What happened to me underscores the precarious situation of adjuncts with respect to academic freedom," Petersen-Overton told *Clarion*. "To complain about Hikind and others is a waste of time," he told the editor of the *Excelsior*, a Brooklyn College student paper. "I am mainly concerned that the college administration caved so easily."

"Mr. Peterson-Overton's experience is an ugly by-product of a labor system that undermines academic freedom for thousands of hard-working adjunct faculty at CUNY, who work with far fewer job protections than their full-time colleagues," PSC President Bowen emphasized. "Contingent faculty need built-in, contractual protections that allow them to remain critical and independent thinkers; they should not have to look over their shoulders when they craft their syllabi and teach their classes."

Corey Robin, an associate professor of political science at Brooklyn College, said it was a lesson in the power of collective action. "No one at the center of this storm – as I was – doubts that this would have happened were it not for the mobilization of hundreds of union members... who wrote letters, made phone calls, and got their friends and coworkers to do the same. When you're in the trenches, it's hard to believe that collective action will work. But guess what? It really does."

# On the job in the blizzard

By JOHN TARLETON

The December 26 blizzard had been raging for hours when NYC sanitation worker Gian Carlo Acquasanta received a call ordering him to come in for snow removal work.

It was a storm that dumped nearly two feet of snow on New York amid howling winds, leaving many neighborhoods paralyzed. The Bloomberg administration had failed to declare a snow emergency, giving the storm a head start.

Many sanitation workers like Acquasanta had been on vacation or had the day off, and now they struggled to make it to work. Acquasanta first had to dig his own car out of the snow, then dig out his parents' nearby home in Forest Hills. "Before anything, I have to take care of them," he told *Clarion*.

## HIDDEN DANGERS

Then what would normally be a five-minute commute to the Queens West Sixth Sanitation Station in Maspeth took an hour and 15 minutes.

Driving didn't get much easier once Acquasanta, an 11-year veteran of the Sanitation Department, was back on the streets driving a garbage truck with a plow mounted on front. The snow fell faster than it could be cleared and the wind blew piles of white powder that had already been moved back onto the roads.

## What it was like on city streets



Gian Carlo Acquasanta, an 11-year vet of the Sanitation Department, worked six weeks straight with only one day off following the December 26 blizzard.

In Forest Hills and Rego Park, where Acquasanta was working, abandoned cars rendered many streets impassable, a problem compounded by the storm's head start. "There were a lot of blocks you couldn't even go down," he

said. "I'd say 80% of the route was blocked."

Lack of visibility often made it impossible to see what might be around the next turn. A blocked residential street meant having to throw his vehicle into reverse.

"You've got ice forming on your windows, you can't see anything, you have no rearview mirror, you have no guide man working with you, you're just working with side mirrors," Acquasanta said. "It's risky business to back up your truck."

He estimated 12 to 15 out of roughly 40 snow removal trucks became stuck in the snow in his area, as did a tow truck sent out to rescue them.

Snowplows generally work in tandem, one positioned behind and to the right of the other, moving snow from left to right with a salt spreader following from behind. Acquasanta says he drives 60 to 100 miles per night during a typical 12-hour shift.

Instead of returning to the station as he usually would, Acquasanta took his breaks on the side of the road during the storm and its aftermath. That night, like many of the 75 or so workers at his station, he chose to crash there rather than make the trek home.

"When it's really bad, a lot of the guys, myself included, we'll sleep at the garage," said Acquasanta. "We'll just stay there for a few days because it's not even worth going home. Our own parking lot was bombed. After doing 14 hours [on the job], the last thing you want to do is shovel out your car."

Acquasanta worked mostly 12-hour shifts every day for six weeks straight except for a single day off. The December 26 blizzard was followed by the snowiest January in New York City history, and Acquasanta's coworkers kept the same brutal schedule he did. When the streets were cleared of snow, the sanitation workers switched to catching up on garbage collection.

## MISREPRESENTED

But while sanitation workers were putting in long, exhausting hours, they were reading newspaper articles that painted them as lazy, selfish and irresponsible. A wave of anti-worker media coverage began December 30 with a front-page headline in the *New York Post*: "ABOMINABLE SNOWMEN: Sanit workers in blizzard sabotage." The article insinuated that the city's

many uncleared streets were the handiwork of disgruntled sanitation workers, supposedly retaliating against layoffs and demotions within their department by doing as little as possible. But multiple investigations have found no evidence to support the charge (see below).

No one where he worked was slowing down, said Acquasanta: "If anything, it should've been called 'the speed-up,' because these guys don't want to be away from their families." Acquasanta thinks the "snowfu" started at the top, not the bottom, of the chain of command.

"It was just mismanagement, it was underestimating the storm," he said. "They knew a storm was coming but didn't think it was such a big thing."

## NEW YEAR'S EVE

Some media coverage, including much of the reporting in the *Daily News*, was more accurate. And Acquasanta, 33, says he likes his job doing work that everyone in the city depends on. "I enjoy interacting with people, I enjoy being outside," he told *Clarion*. "The last thing I want to do is be in an office where I count down hours. With this job the time goes by, especially in the snowstorms."

But some interactions are more enjoyable than others. Shortly before midnight on New Year's Eve, an SUV pulled up next to Acquasanta's truck. Instead of a New Year's greeting, one of the passengers leaned out the window to curse him. "The guy spits at the spreader and he goes, 'You fucking garbage men, you're not worth a shit,' and he peels off."

The incident left Acquasanta shaking his head: "It's just messed up. My parents live in the district that I work. So every street, I treat it as if my parents need to go down that street." It's not an unusual attitude, he says. "A lot of these guys don't need their parents to live somewhere where they work, they just take pride in their district and the neighborhood that they represent. We take a lot of pride in the fact that what we do, we do well."

# What really caused NYC's epic 'snowfu'

The blizzard that hit NYC on December 26 was both a natural and a man-made disaster.

Trouble started the day before the storm arrived when top city officials decided not to declare a snow emergency. This left the Sanitation Department scrambling to mobilize its full workforce after the intense storm had already begun. "We walked hip-deep in snow to work," one sanitation worker told the *Daily News*. The delay in getting all plow trucks out on the roads meant that more cars got stuck, a problem that "snowballed" as abandoned cars made it impossible to plow many streets.

## BUDGET CUTS

"I started getting text messages from ambulance drivers at 3 am Monday that they were stuck in the snow," Pat Bahnken, head of the EMS workers' union, told columnist Juan González. "I urged the Fire Department to declare a snow emergency, but they were told City Hall said 'no.'"

Mayor Bloomberg's drive to cut spending on public services also played a role. The City laid off 300 sanitation workers last year, and the *News* reported that Bensonhurst Station had declined from 165 employ-

ees to 125 since 2006. A little-noticed report in the *Post* said that the City went light on snow preparations on the 25th "to save on added overtime that would have had to be paid [to workers] on Christmas Day."

In some areas there was a shortage of salt used to melt snow and ice on the roads. Sanitation employees said the department had switched to inferior, cheaper snow chains that easily broke – and left plow trucks stuck in the snow themselves.

"We never [before] had a perfect storm of fewer men, inferior equipment, 70-mph winds and a political failure to declare a snow emergency," a worker told the *Daily News*.

Bloomberg and Deputy Mayor Stephen Goldsmith, who the *Times* reported was in charge of snow preparations, were out of town December 25-26. The mayor has refused to answer questions about where he was, or who was in charge in his absence.

But according to some in the media, sanitation workers were the real problem. On December 30, the front page of the *New York Post* roared, "ABOMINABLE SNOWMEN: Sanit workers in blizzard sabotage." Its

report said that "selfish Sanitation bosses" had sabotaged the cleanup in retaliation for department cutbacks and demotions.

The *Post*'s sole source was Daniel Halloran, a Tea Party-backed City Councilmember from Queens, who claimed that two Transportation Department supervisors and three workers from the Sanitation Department had told him they were ordered to stage a slowdown.

The story was quickly picked up by Fox News, CNN, the *Washington Times*, *Investor's Business Daily*, and even "Saturday Night Live." It was used as a cudgel for bashing public-sector workers as lazy, overpaid and undeserving of public support.

"The real story here is how a single, poorly supported allegation against public workers gets inflated into a national scandal," said John Hyland of the PSC Solidarity Committee.

## INVESTIGATIONS

The allegations sparked investigations by the New York City Department of Investigation, the Brooklyn and Queens district attorneys, and the Brooklyn US attor-

**Media tosses garbage at the san man.**

## NO PROOF

On January 26, *The New York Times* reported that prosecutors had not found a single source to corroborate Halloran's charges, and had "no proof that anything occurred." The two supervisors did not back up Halloran's account when interviewed, and Halloran refused to divulge names of the three sanitation workers he says he spoke with. Halloran has begun to hedge his story, saying that workers were not exactly ordered to slow down, and that in any case it was probably just "a few bad apples."

The gap between media fiction and sanitation workers' reality was summed up by the *Post*'s indignant publication of a photo that showed a sanitation worker asleep inside his truck. In fact, according to the *Daily News*, the man was resting after 15 hours on the job without a break.

—JT

# Bloomberg seeks pension cuts

By ERIC LAURSEN  
& PETER HOGNESS

## Unions resist mayor's push

The front-page headline in the *New York Post* was short and to the point: "PENSION WAR." After months of negative press coverage about City workers' pensions, the Bloomberg administration is going on the offensive. In his January 19 State of the City address, the mayor vowed not to sign new City labor contracts with salary increases unless they contained major cuts in benefits. And on February 2, Bloomberg's commissioner of labor relations held a meeting with City unions to present the mayor's proposed pension changes.

The concessions they want include lengthening the time required to qualify for a pension from five years to ten for most new employees. New civilian employees' pension contributions would rise to 5% for their entire service. (Currently most pay 4.85% for the first 10 years, and 1.85% after that.) They would not be able to collect until age 65, regardless of length of service. And overtime hours, historically a major part of pension calculations for uniformed workers, would no longer count toward calculation of salary in these employees' final years, even if they had routinely worked overtime for decades.

### ANGRY

The net effect would be to create a new tier of employees accumulating significantly lower retirement benefits than the present city workforce. Meanwhile, the mayor refuses to consider raising taxes, even for the wealthiest in a city with an inordinately wide income gap.

Leaders of unions whose members would be directly affected were angry. "The mayor just set back labor relations forty years," said Harry Nespoli, head of the sanitation workers' union and the Municipal Labor Committee, to the *Daily News*. "We're fed up with this. [He's] going to have a battle. We're not just going to roll over."

"The mayor's saying we have to protect millionaires and at the same time take benefits away from municipal workers," Michael Mulgrew, president of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), told *Crain's NY Business*.

Bloomberg is making demands of all five pension funds that cover workers in mayoral agencies, including the Teachers Retirement System (TRS), which covers public-school teachers. About one-third of Professional Staff Congress members are enrolled in TRS, but terms of their pensions are separate: for example, when the UFT cut a deal on pensions in 2009, pensions at CUNY were not affected. But if Bloomberg forces pension concessions across the board for employees of New York City, there is sure to be pressure for CUNY to follow suit.

PSC President Barbara Bowen, who attended the meeting with the City, commented, "Bloomberg's proposals have nothing to do with balancing the City budget and everything to do with imposing economic austerity on working people and the middle class. The PSC will stand with the City unions as they resist these deceitful proposals." She added, "Any benefit reductions at CUNY would reduce the University's ability to attract the top-quality faculty and staff our students need."

### CRISIS?

The Bloomberg administration claims that pension changes are a necessity due to the City's current budget deficit. "This reflects the dire fiscal circumstances the city faces, the devastating impact of increasing pension costs, and the desperate need for aggressive reforms," said spokesperson Marc LaVorgna. Last fall Deputy Mayor Stephen Goldsmith said layoffs of some 2,100 workers were "inevitable" due to high pension costs.

In fact, the changes the mayor seeks would have relatively little impact on the current budget crunch. Under New York's constitution, basic retirement benefits cannot be diminished for current public-sector employees. Most of the changes Bloomberg seeks would only affect new hires, who would be forced to work longer and contribute more to earn smaller pensions. The City estimates that Bloomberg's concessions package would save \$200 million in the first year. But while savings would gradually increase over time, \$200 million doesn't go far toward cutting this year's \$2.4 billion shortfall.

The attempt to sell pension concessions as a budget fix is false, but Bloomberg's interest in cutting pension benefits is very real – and goes back several years. The mayor is counting on the sense of crisis created by the economic meltdown to help push through benefit cuts now – even though pension costs didn't cause the sudden shift in the City's fiscal fortunes, and pension cuts won't fix it. "Crisis creates its own opportunity," Deputy Mayor Howard Wolfson said in an October speech on pension costs. "The winds of change are blowing."

In fact, the current state of the City's pension funds is not as dire as it's sometimes painted to be. The 2008-09 stock market slump hit the funds savagely, causing an 18.3% decline in the market value of their assets. But the market has since bounced back and the pension funds have recouped most of those losses. In December, City Comptroller John Liu reported that the funds showed a 14.2% rate of return for the previous fiscal year ending June 30,

2010, and a 12% rate of return in the four months since then. That does not mean that the funds are out of the woods just yet: the City's pension contributions are calculated through a five-year phase-in of the market's ups and downs, so the crash of 2008-09 will require higher contributions for a while to come. But the sky is not falling.

Bloomberg claims that projected annual returns for public pension funds, which generally hover in the 8% range, are unrealistic – "The only one who's done that well is Bernie Madoff," he likes to say. The implication is that without deep cuts, a

lion the city had to pay this past year, the comparison is somewhat misleading: 2001 was an unusually easy year due to high investment returns and the resulting reduction in City contributions, and 2010 an unusually demanding one due to the market slump.

When the *New York Times* reports that "pension costs are now projected to eat up one of every eight city dollars next year, in contrast to 1 in 28 when [Bloomberg] took office in 2002" – a three-and-a-half-fold increase – the implication is that City worker pensions have skyrocketed to unaffordable levels. But that implication is false: City worker pensions did not grow by 350%.

Are public-worker pensions exor-

agers at the same rates paid by freelance writers and artists. Bloomberg has heaped scorn on all such proposals. Instead, he has set his sights on reducing future retirement income of City secretaries and janitors.

Press coverage has broken heavily in Bloomberg's favor. The *Daily News* and the *Post* frequently run angry editorials with headlines like, "It's the Pensions, Stupid."

### SCAREMONGERING

News coverage in the *New York Times* has been exceptionally one-sided, relying heavily on conservative business-funded policy advocates like the Manhattan Institute and the Citizens' Budget Commission, and framing their views as if they were disinterested experts.

In August the *Times* reported ominously on page one that "the gap in the [City] pension funds could be as wide as \$49 billion." That figure, the civil-service newspaper *The Chief* pointed out, was the result of "a 'what-if' exercise...undertaken by City Actuary Robert North at the request of the Bloomberg administration." North was asked to estimate the pension funds' earnings "if their assets were placed in risk-free investments, rather than having a large portion of their portfolios in stocks." Since that is approximately as likely as stuffing all the funds' capital into a mattress, it is unclear what purpose this figure served beyond scaremongering.

The pension cuts Bloomberg is seeking are even deeper than those achieved by Governor David Paterson when he pushed through a new Tier V for most State workers in December 2009. The PSC successfully mounted an intense campaign against a similar reduction at CUNY, arguing that it would impede the University's ability to recruit and retain faculty and staff. Bloomberg, however, can expect support for his proposals from both Gov. Andrew Cuomo and the Republican-controlled State Senate. Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver has been cagey about his stance, though there are increasing reports that he may support at least parts of Bloomberg's package.

Public-worker unions are determined to fight the attack on their members' retirement income. To win that fight, they are moving to build alliances with community organizations around their common interests. "The labor groups want to reframe a debate that they believe has overemphasized service cuts and cast public workers as selfish and overpaid," the *New York Times* reported on February 9.

Through coalitions such as New Yorkers for Fiscal Fairness and Strong Economy for All, unions and community groups are pushing for progressive tax measures instead of service and benefit cuts. Working together, they aim to focus public attention on what they see as the central questions: who benefits, and who will pay?



Mayor Michael Bloomberg wants cuts in new City workers' pensions.

costly taxpayer bailout is inevitable. Not so, according to a recent study by the National Association of State Retirement Administrators: in the 25-year span ending December 2009, which includes the market collapse, the median return for state pension funds is 9.25%. The mayor also neglects to mention that the 8% target is based on the report of an actuary selected jointly by City management and unions.

The financial crash is not the only reason that New York has had to boost its pension contributions in recent years. In 2000, after several years in which the funds had built up a significant surplus, they opted to take account of these gains up front rather than phase them in over five years, and the City's required contributions were markedly reduced. The surplus helped to fund some benefit improvements, including a limited inflation adjustment. It also made it easier for Mayor Giuliani, a firm supporter of the change, to reduce the City's contributions and be able to cut taxes; Governor Pataki also supported the move. In 2003, when the tech bubble burst, slashing returns on its pension investments, the City's required contributions started to go back up.

When Bloomberg contrasts pension contributions of less than \$1.5 billion in 2001 to the nearly \$7 bil-

lions the mayor rarely talks about what typical City retirees actually receive. The average pension for retired members of DC37, the largest municipal union, is \$18,000 a year. The average for retired teachers – including principals who began their careers as teachers – is \$42,000. The limited cost-of-living adjustment is often targeted by right-wing policy groups and editorial writers as an unaffordable luxury, but they skip over how limited it really is: the adjustment is on only the first \$18,000 of income, at the rate of half of the Consumer Price Index, up to a maximum of 3%.

### REVENUE ALTERNATIVES

Current pension benefits are in fact well within the City's ability to pay. The real question is, who loses and who gains? Wall Street profits and bonuses have recently hit record levels, but Bloomberg has fiercely resisted all suggestions that the very rich should pay more.

The City Council's Progressive Caucus has proposed an income tax surcharge on the wealthiest households that would roughly equal the effect of canceling the Bush tax cuts. Such a charge would raise an estimated \$8 billion and eliminate the need for drastic cuts in services or worker benefits. Other revenue ideas include a surcharge on record Wall Street bonuses, or taxing hedge fund man-

REUTERS/SIU CHIU

# Medgar Evers provost's Texas tenure controversy

By JOHN TARLETON

In December, an open meeting of Medgar Evers College faculty overwhelmingly approved a resolution of no-confidence in Provost Howard Johnson, as well as in college President William Pollard (see *Clarion*, January 2010). But it was not the first time that Johnson had sparked a faculty revolt, and it was not his first no-confidence resolution.

Faculty members at the University of North Texas (UNT) say that Johnson's arbitrary actions as their provost from 2003 to 2007 damaged their university, and prompted its Faculty Senate to approve a resolution of no-confidence in Johnson by a vote of 72%.

"He was a complete disaster," says Don Smith, president of the UNT chapter of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP). "He has no regard for the rules. He makes up his own and he's vindictive as all get-out."

Friction with faculty was evident starting in Johnson's first semester, according to Smith – but it was Johnson's decision in the spring of 2004 to deny tenure to 12 out of 32 junior faculty that sent shock waves through the campus.

## BLINDSIDED

Junior faculty at UNT are evaluated within their departments on a yearly basis. At the end of their sixth year, they go up for tenure.

The 12 candidates shot down by Johnson were each endorsed by their deans. "None of the 12 rejected candidates ever received a written explanation from the provost as to why he rejected them for tenure," a faculty committee reported in 2008.

"None of them had any hint until the ruling came down," Smith recalled. "How can anyone adhere to a standard they don't know about?"

"It was like I got hit over the head with a 2 x 4," said Dan Peak, then an assistant professor of information technology who had been unanimously recommended for tenure by

## Multiple positions policy

On January 24, CUNY Trustees approved changes to CUNY's multiple positions policy, which covers work that full-time CUNY faculty do outside their regular professional responsibilities, such as outside consulting, teaching overloads, and special work with the University. The PSC has demanded to bargain over the policy changes, as they affect terms and conditions of employment. At press time CUNY had not yet posted the revised policy on its website.

## "Devastating" to the school

his department. "I was stunned."

Many filed appeals with UNT's Tenure Committee – and when the appeal hearings began, the varying reasons Johnson gave for his negative decisions both baffled and infuriated UNT faculty.

Johnson cited candidates' failure to write extensive personal statements with their tenure applications – even though such statements were not required at UNT, and Johnson did not ask for them in advance of his rulings, said G.L. Seligmann, who chaired the University Tenure Committee at the time.

Similarly, UNT requires that publications of tenure candidates be evaluated by their peers at three other universities. Seligmann said Johnson objected to external letters of review written by associate professors, even though there was no requirement that external letters must come from full professors.

"You don't fire someone because you don't like the rules," Seligmann said.

The tenure committee heard their cases over a period of several months, meeting each Friday for an average of 11 hours. Johnson, whose PhD is in mathematics education, asserted his expertise in fields ranging from journalism to computer science to economics.

Smith said that in Peak's case, Johnson admitted denying tenure based on an assessment of titles of published articles, without reading any of the articles themselves. At one point Johnson claimed he couldn't find two of Peak's published papers. "But it took me less than 30 seconds to find them on Google," Smith said.

"There was no evidence he did his homework," Peak added. "He said he did, but never could prove it."

## AFTER THE FACT

Some of the departments whose tenure candidates had been rejected by Johnson used databases to rate the caliber of journals in which their faculty members had been published. Johnson would dismiss their scores, arguing that he was using better databases. However, he would not reveal where these alternative rankings came from.

"It was shooting craps with invisible databases, and it always justified him not giving tenure," Seligmann told *Clarion*.

Seligmann's 11-member Tenure Committee heard appeals in six of the cases, and the process continued to a decision in four. In all four cases, the committee upheld the appeal by a large majority.

"When the University Tenure Committee hearings took place, it became evident that some of the analysis engaged in by the Provost's Office to justify tenure-rejection decisions took place after the Provost issued his tenure rejection decisions in the spring of 2004," said the 2008 faculty report.

"We had very serious differences over the nature of tenure," concluded Seligmann, who has taught history at UNT since 1967. "I can't imagine making a judgment on someone's career without making a good faith effort to read what they have written."

## MORE CONTROVERSY

In response to questions from the press as the controversy unfolded, Johnson said he could not discuss specifics of individual cases. In February 2011, *Clarion* asked for his response to the criticisms from UNT faculty, in particular the charge that he had denied tenure in one case without reading any of the candidate's published work. Johnson did not reply.

Johnson landed in hot water again in December 2004 when the *North Texas Daily* student paper found that he had lifted whole sections of his proposed strategic plan from several other universities without attribution. Johnson defended himself by saying that his proposal was essentially a draft – "something to react to," he told the paper. But one of the schools, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, threatened to sue for copyright infringement. "He profoundly embarrassed us," said Smith.

## 'DEVASTATING'

With two-thirds of full-time UNT faculty voting, a resolution of no-confidence in Johnson was approved in 2005 by a vote of 72%. In 2007 Johnson stepped down as provost to become a special assistant to the chancellor of UNT. He left for Chicago State University in 2008, and in 2009 was named provost at Medgar Evers by Pollard, who knew Johnson from their years at Syracuse University.

Johnson's impact on UNT was "devastating," said Smith. "We lost a fair amount of scholars who didn't want to be at a place that would do something like this."

"It seems evident that Provost Johnson's history followed him from the University of North Texas to Medgar Evers College," MEC PSC Chapter Chair Clinton Crawford told *Clarion*. "He has replicated the same behavior here, and this is why our faculty gave him a vote of no-confidence."

# Contract talks

By CLARION STAFF

The PSC bargaining team met with CUNY management representatives on January 26 to begin negotiating a new contract.

The session focused on preliminary matters: understandings about how the negotiations would proceed, and time-sensitive contract provisions and agreements that may be renewed or extended. While no formal ground rules were established, the two sides reached a shared understanding about how future sessions and subcommittees would be conducted.

## Ground rules set

Reaching agreement about procedures went much more smoothly than in the past. This time, there was no discussion of limits on the union's ability to invite members to attend sessions as observers – a right the PSC has fought for and won in the past.

"We are negotiating on behalf of the faculty and staff, and they should be able to see the process at work; we invite members to attend future sessions," said PSC President Barbara Bowen.



York College HEO Stephen Barrera speaks at a Spring 2010 campus meeting in which union

# Bronx CC awaits

By JOHN TARLETON

On January 24, CUNY Trustees voted to name Dr. Carole Berotte Joseph as president of Bronx Community College. She will take office this summer.

"The University is most fortunate that an individual of the extensive experience and stature of President Berotte Joseph has accepted the invitation to return home to CUNY," said Michael Arena, University Director of Communications and Marketing. Berotte Joseph received her undergraduate degree from York, was a faculty member at City College for more than 20 years, and served as vice president for academic affairs at Hostos from 1996 to 1998.

## SEARCH PROCESS

During the search process, faculty at BCC raised serious concerns about Berotte Joseph's contentious relations with faculty during her a six-year stint as president of Massachusetts Bay Community College in Wellesley, Massachusetts – and they

## Concerns raised

told *Clarion* they were frustrated that CUNY Central Administration had failed to respond.

But with Berotte Joseph's arrival as president just a few months away, faculty leaders at BCC sought to extend an open hand. Latest reports from Massachusetts said her relationship with the faculty union there had somewhat improved.

"It is important to recognize, as many of us at BCC do, that Dr. Berotte Joseph has done nothing against our faculty or staff," said Andrew McInerney, chair of the BCC College Senate and also a member of the search committee. "I believe she will be judged on the basis of her actions at the college, not for her past."

"The issues we have are with Chancellor Goldstein, who in no way paid attention to our concerns," said the chair of the college's PSC chapter, Sharon Persinger.

**Hoping for the best with a new president**

# ks begin

## , subcommittees formed

These negotiations will produce a successor agreement to the contract that expired October 19. Under New York State law, relations terms of the old contract remain in effect while bargaining proceeds.

In addition to the procedural issues, the negotiating teams agreed to establish three subcommittees on technical issues or provisions that need to be addressed immediately because they included time limits when originally negotiated. The subcommittees – on paid parental

leave; an existing agreement on certain payroll practices; and issues involved in determining the cost of the contract – will begin work promptly and make recommendations to the full bargaining teams.

Neither side presented contract demands, although the PSC gave a brief statement on its position that a short-term economic crisis must not be used to degrade working conditions at CUNY.

“We have seen in the past how temporary fiscal crises can lead to permanent damage for the University,” Bowen said.

The PSC indicated that the union is prepared to present demands, and asked CUNY for an economic offer. Management’s representatives said they were not prepared to make an offer, and discussed the relation of CUNY to New York City and New York State.

“We on the bargaining team share the members’ desire for a speedy resolution of contract negotiations,” said PSC President Barbara Bowen. “But as things stand now, CUNY has made it clear that it is not prepared to put forward an economic offer, and both the mayor and the governor, whose support CUNY will seek before it will sign an agreement, are talking about 0% wage increases and concessions. If we don’t want to accept concessionary bargaining – and we don’t – this may be a long round of negotiations.”

PSC bargaining team member Andrea Ades Vasquez, a HEO at the Graduate Center, said she anticipates broader discussions going forward. “I believe we are off to a good start. Both sides recognize that the City and State are making it difficult for CUNY to receive the funding it needs and both agree that we need more full-time faculty,” Vasquez said. “But we in the PSC also have a larger vision for the University. Part-time faculty must have job security and decent wages. HEOs, who are taking on more and more, especially in light of others’ early retirements, must be given a path to advancement. Full-time faculty must be able to spend the time they need with individual students.”

### POWER

Lorraine Cohen, professor of social science at LaGuardia and a bargaining team member, noted that the union’s power in negotiations comes less from what happens at the table and more from organizing on the campuses to build support for the PSC’s agenda.

In bargaining for a new contract, the PSC confronts a growing campaign “to destroy public-worker unions,” Cohen said. “We have to change the narrative. We have to reach not only our members and our students but also the larger public [and] build coalitions wherever possible.” The answer, Cohen said, “is not just cutting, but more revenue from those who can afford to pay.”

PSC members will have a chance to learn more about negotiations and how they can join the contract campaign at campus meetings that will be held across CUNY this semester. All meetings will be attended by President Barbara Bowen or one of the union’s other principal officers and several members of the bargaining team.

# Spring meetings on contract negotiations

For times and places To Be Announced (TBA), please check the new PSC website, [psc-cuny.org](http://psc-cuny.org), for updates.

### FEBRUARY

Feb. 17 12:45 pm **City Tech**, Namm 1002

Feb. 24 6:30 pm **CLT**, PSC office, 16th Floor

### MARCH

March 2 2:00 pm **QCC**, Oakland Dining Room

March 3 12:00 pm **York**, 1M06

March 7 12:30 pm **Lehman**, Apex 251

March 9 6:00 pm **HEO**, Graduate Center, C203-C204 Cross Campus

March 16 2:00 pm **BMCC**, N404

March 24 12:00 pm **BCC**, Meister 228

March 29 TBA **Hostos**, TBA

March 30 TBA **Queens**, TBA

March 31 12:30 pm **Brooklyn**, Alumni Lounge, Student Ctr.

### APRIL

April 4 1:00 pm **Retirees**, PSC office, 16th Floor

April 5 3:30 pm **John Jay**, TBA

April 7 TBA **Hunter Campus Schools**, TBA

April 12 12:15 pm **City College**, TBA

April 13 12:00 pm **Graduate Center**, TBA

April 14 TBA **Manhattan Educational (MEOC)**, TBA

April 27 TBA **Medgar Evers**, TBA



Dave Sanders

Union members discussed contract talks.

# as its new president

## in hiring process

“Community colleges have always been a place where people go for second chances in life,” said Jim Freeman, chair of the Social Sciences Department and a member of the presidential search committee. “We’ll aim to work with her, and build the best relationship we can.”

During her tenure at MassBay, Berotte Joseph received a 2007 no-confidence vote from its faculty for creating “institutional chaos” and a “divisive and distrustful atmosphere.” She was also censured by the Massachusetts Community College Council (MCCC), a National Education Association affiliate that represents 6,000 faculty and professional staff at 15 community colleges.

“She had more employees leave the college than the other 14 community colleges [in Massachusetts] combined,” said MCCC President Joe LeBlanc, who described Berotte Joseph’s administration as a “reign of terror.” But LeBlanc said that lately there had been some change.

“While she still has a long way to go to become a union friendly president,” he told *Clarion* in early February, “she does seem to be meeting us part way in the closing months of her tenure at MassBay.”

### CONCERNS IGNORED

In the 2007 no-confidence vote, complaints against Berotte Joseph included consistently refusing to settle even the most clear-cut grievances; allowing her chief academic officer to threaten local union leaders with a lawsuit for slander because of their criticism of the administration; repeatedly ignoring the first-choice recommendations of faculty hiring committees; and reorganizing faculty divisions with minimal consultation.

MassBay, a commuter college of 5,000 students, has had eight provosts during Berotte Joseph’s presidency. In 2007, a state agency barred the college’s popular nursing program from accepting new students due to a lack of key personnel.

BCC faculty questioned Berotte Joseph about her troubles at Mass-

Bay when she visited the campus on December 8. “She was very dismissive,” recalled Freeman. “Nobody in the room felt she adequately addressed their questions.”

The next day more than 180 members of the BCC faculty attended an open plenary meeting of the College Senate. They approved a resolution urging CUNY Chancellor Matthew Goldstein to add more candidates to the pool of finalists that at that point included only Berotte Joseph and Myrtle Dorsey, chancellor of Baton Rouge Community College in Louisiana. Goldstein did not respond until days before the Board action, and only at the insistence of faculty governance leaders.

### ROOTS

“The Chancellor followed University presidential search guidelines, which included campus visits by finalists designated by the BCC Search Committee and confidential input from campus constituencies, including faculty and staff,” Arena said when asked about the resolution.

In a statement after her appoint-



James Freeman, chair of the Social Science Department at BCC, served on the school’s Presidential Search Committee.

ment, Berotte Joseph stressed her CUNY ties. “This is a wonderful and very special homecoming for me as I return to my roots in the CUNY system,” she said.

Persinger expressed hope that Berotte Joseph would fare better on familiar ground in New York City, and

would act to revitalize a school that has suffered from lack of resources and official neglect. “She has quite a lot of energy, and it would be good to have energy for positive change,” Persinger said. “Is that what we’ll get?” BCC faculty, staff and students are about to find out.

Pat Arnow

# Ready for a well-earned retirement

By JOHN TARLETON

PSC Director of Pensions and Welfare Fund Benefits Clarissa Gilbert Weiss has educated union members about their health and retirement benefits since 1984. She has helped everyone from new hires mulling which pension system to join, to older members trying to decide if they are ready to retire. Now, Weiss will have the chance to enjoy a pension of her own.

"I love my work but I'm moving into a new life," Weiss, 64, told *Clarion* shortly before she retired on January 28.

Weiss's departure follows a whirlwind final seven months that began in June, when CUNY opted to participate in New York's Early Retirement Incentive (ERI) for State workers. Weiss estimates she spoke with about 1,200 union members while traveling to almost every CUNY campus this past semester to discuss the ERI. She also held private hour-long meetings at her office with an average of four to five members a day to help them better understand their options.

## EARLY DAYS

"She's been this priceless resource," Retirees Chapter Chair Jim Perlstein said of Weiss. "If retirement is heaven on Earth, Clarissa has been St. Peter waiting at the pearly gates to review your papers and tell you whether it is a good time to retire."

Brash, funny and dedicated to CUNY and the people who work for it, Weiss has been a fixture at the PSC since 1978. The daughter of two young Holocaust survivors who settled in Jackson Heights after World War II, Weiss dropped out of college in the mid-'60s to devote more of her time to the anti-war and civil rights movements. "It was exciting to be a part of something so big," she said. Enrolling at Queens College in the fall of 1969, she worked during the day and attended school at night. Weiss became a student leader at QC and moved on to a national role, as president of the National Student Association, forerunner to today's United States Student Association (USSA).

## AN ADVOCATE

Weiss worked for the PSC as a lobbyist and a research associate until 1984, when former President Irwin Polishook tapped her to become the union's director of pensions and welfare benefits. "I didn't even know what a pension was," Weiss recalls. But she quickly mastered the complexities of her new field and became a trusted guide to two generations of CUNY faculty and professional staff.

"I felt she could do the job because she was a dependable administrator and had the intellect to master these various pension systems and [had] a tremendously likeable personality," Polishook told *Clarion*. "She thought we were taking a chance on her, but I was convinced she could do the job."

## PSC benefits guru bids adieu

"Clarissa has a deep commitment to public service and to the idea of a public university," said PSC President Barbara Bowen, "and that commitment has been clear in her relationships with our members."

Weiss has watched with alarm over the past quarter century as retirement plans have moved away from a defined-benefit model to one based on defined contributions.

While individual faculty and staff can have their own reasons for choosing one system or another, Weiss feels that a society-wide trend away from defined-benefit plans "is all for the worse." The replacement of traditional pensions with 401(k) plans and similar vehicles creates a system, she says, where each individual is expected to be an expert investor, and where a bursting bubble—

like the 2008 market crash—can upend even careful planning.

Weiss said her experience has been that most PSC members give little forethought to retirement. "They are so focused on their area of knowledge, they don't even think about it," she says. "Retirement is as much an emotional as a financial issue," says Weiss. She urges PSC members who might consider retirement five years from now to attend the union's annual pre-retirement conference, usually held in late spring.



Former PSC Director of Pensions and Welfare Fund Benefits Clarissa Gilbert Weiss is embarking on her own retirement.

Weiss also encourages adjuncts to enroll in the Teacher Retirement System, the pension system available to them. "It's crazy not to," she says: When adjuncts don't join TRS, they allow CUNY to pocket money that otherwise would have been contributed to their pensions.

Public sector workers and their pensions have been under escalating attack by conservative forces looking to shift the public's ire over the economy away from Wall Street and onto other working people (see page 10). Weiss said it is wrong for politicians to portray pensions as a "handout," when in fact they are a form of compensation that employees have earned through their labor over many years.

"People who've earned their pensions by performing work for the people of New York City and their children should not have their pensions reduced," she said. "Scaling back a pension is a cowardly way of dealing with people who are no longer [seen as] useful."

## TIME TO ENJOY

As for her own retirement, Weiss is looking forward to relaxing at her home in Jamaica, Queens ("I'm a putterer," she says), to time spent with her husband Sam, ("My life partner and my best friend."), and traveling to Florida to visit her grandson. She is also set on doing needlework, and taking a class in modern Jewish history next fall with Professor Laura Schor at Hunter College. Weiss says she draws inspiration from the example of her father, who enjoyed a rich and creative retirement into his 90s after working from age 9 to age 71.

"Retirement should be enjoyable," says Weiss—and she is ready to enjoy her own.

# Union insists on no-smoke negotiations

By PETER HOGNESS

On January 24, the CUNY Board of Trustees approved a revised tobacco policy, with a mandate that all campuses be smoke-free by September 2012. While not dissenting from the policy's intent, the PSC said that these changes require negotiation with the union.

"The union's negotiations committee is completely committed to ensuring that CUNY create a healthy environment for students, faculty and staff," said PSC President Barbara Bowen, who stressed that the union did not anticipate opposing the revised policy's underlying goals.

## NEGOTIATIONS

But since the revisions concern terms and conditions of employment, the changes cannot be imposed unilaterally, the PSC said. Instead they must be negotiated, a point the union had raised prior to the vote by the Trustees.

Bowen's January 25 letter to members made clear that the union's aim was not to reverse the policy, but to address some practical concerns on

how smoking restrictions are implemented. "We do see some ways it might be modified, especially at large campuses such as The College of Staten Island or Bronx Community College," she wrote. The more fundamental point, PSC leaders said, is that the administration cannot choose to ignore a requirement to negotiate.

Bowen's letter invited members to comment, and dozens responded. Some said that CUNY's revised policy was "tyrannical" or "despotic," while others wrote that "smoking kills," and that "union shilly-shallying is shameful." Others addressed practical issues, or voiced support for both the union's right to negotiate and public-health concerns.

"I gave a lot of written feedback on this and was delighted to see its passage," one member wrote, "but agree that certainly the union should be able to work on specifics for adjustment at the larger campuses."

"I am not a smoker," wrote another. "I once was and although I realize the health implications of the

policy...I applaud your adherence to the legal right to bargain."

Many members welcomed the idea that the revised policy would make their personal environment more consistently smoke-free, and wanted to make sure that this would not be put at risk if the union pressed CUNY to meet its legal obligation to negotiate.

## Aim is not to reverse policy but address practical concerns.

Member e-mails often cited problems with secondhand smoke from those congregating by building entrances. "I sit all day in my lab inhaling secondhand smoke from outside my laboratory window," one member wrote. "It is awful." Another wrote that when smokers gather outside her building's door, "They are not 30 feet away, but instead right outside the doors, sometimes less than a foot away if it's raining or cold weather." The shape of the entrance then "act[s] as a wind tunnel, and push[es] the smoke into the building."

A common suggestion for larger campuses was to consider designated smoking spaces, "in isolated or low-traffic areas." Many who

suggested such adjustments noted that they do not smoke themselves, but said that this would be a more practical and enforceable alternative. "Simply put, I think designated smoking areas are a better route towards CUNY's goals," one said.

## POSSIBLE PROVISIONS

One smoker wanted to know what provisions CUNY would make for those, like himself, who were "absolutely addicted" for 40 years. A non-smoker wrote that CUNY should provide "the opportunity to engage in a smoker cessation program" for all. "Since smoking is actually an addiction," her e-mail continued, "it would behoove the University to offer the option cost-free to students and employees."

PSC leaders thanked members for contributing their views. "CUNY is attempting to make more and more changes through policy statements rather than negotiating with the union," Bowen said. "The union insists on negotiations to ensure that our members' voices are heard and their concerns addressed."

## ALBANY VOICE

## SUNY, CUNY systems at risk

By ASSEMBLYMEMBER DEBORAH GLICK  
Chair, Committee on Higher Education

The new mantra in public higher education is focused on the CUNY and SUNY systems becoming the “economic engine of the state.” Everyone from former Govs. Eliot Spitzer and David Paterson to Gov. Andrew Cuomo has touted the economic development potential of these institutions. Where has everyone been?

While their main mission is education – honing critical thinking and exposing students to new areas of study and interest – SUNY and CUNY for decades have been the most effective economic development investments the State and City have made. This is true even as the government has cut back those investments.

CUNY and SUNY have educated millions of New Yorkers who have been key to making the Empire State great. Many of those students who didn’t graduate, or never intended to obtain a degree, found new skills and opportunities based on the work they pursued at an affordable cost at SUNY or CUNY.

Upstate, communities that have SUNY campuses experience greater economic activity than their neighbors. In many places, the SUNY campus is the primary employer; campuses need clerical, food service and maintenance personnel, as well as professors. And while there may be the occasional town and gown friction, every community with a SUNY school sees local merchants hailing the return of SUNY students each autumn.

## EQUAL ACCESS LOST

SUNY’s larger role in responding to local business needs for specific courses and personnel development training falls mainly on the vibrant network of community colleges. Its university centers have always been where the research essential to the nation’s advancement has happened, with stellar results.

The public should know that the affordable nature of these institutions has been seriously threatened by consistent budget cuts. State support for each full-time equivalent student has diminished by 29% from 1990 to 2009. At a time when almost every job requires some college education, now is not the time to pull the ladder up behind us by making it more difficult for struggling New Yorkers to get the education they need and our future demands.

The brilliance of the SUNY system that was woven together and expanded by Gov. Nelson Rockefeller in the 1960s was that basic tuition at every four-year campus would be the same. This made it possible for working- and middle-class students to focus on course offerings that excited their curiosity and to apply to schools based on their academic ability, rather than on their parents’ or their own incomes. It made it possible for students with younger siblings to reach for opportunity without having to trim their goals based on the costs of individual campuses.

Now, the very genius of that system is threatened by a proposal that has gone by many names, most recently the Public Higher Education Empowerment and Innovation Act (PHEEIA). It has several components, but one of the most problematic is charging different tuitions at different campuses and for different majors. This undermines an essential element of the system. Pricing New Yorkers out of an education they desperately need is a self-defeating exercise for the systems as a whole.

The universities may be our crown jewels, but are losing their luster. The belief that we can spruce them up by allowing each campus to let the tuitions rise in an “everyone for himself fashion,” is counterproductive.

The universities may be our crown jewels, but are losing their luster. The belief that we can spruce them up by allowing each campus to let the tuitions rise in an “everyone for himself fashion,” is counterproductive.

## FUTURE INVESTMENT

We must recognize the extraordinary value of SUNY and CUNY and give them the resources we have readily provided to private enterprises. Our best investment is in our people and developing the most educated work force for the future. Now is the time to harness the power of SUNY and CUNY alumni to advocate for that investment.

*A longer version of this article was published January 16 in the Albany Times-Union.*

## SMEAR CAMPAIGN

## CUNY prof under threat

By DOROTHEE BENZ

“Frances Fox Piven Rings in the New Year by Calling for Violent Revolution,” announced a December 31 post on The Blaze, Glenn Beck’s news and blog site, in an all-caps headline. Of course, Piven did nothing of the kind – but if you know even a little about Beck’s obsessions, you already know that in his world, this distinguished professor of political science and sociology at the CUNY Graduate Center is “fundamentally responsible for the unsustainability and possible collapse of our economic system.” More recently, Beck called Piven “an enemy of the Constitution.”

As *Clarion* reported last May, Beck’s claim about Piven’s responsibility for our economic crisis is based on a 45-year old article that she and her late co-author and husband Richard Cloward wrote in *The Nation* titled “The Weight of the Poor: A Strategy to End Poverty.” In the retelling of Beck and others on the right, this article outlines “the Cloward-Piven strategy,” a master plan for the left to “hasten the fall of capitalism” by orchestrating fiscal crises.

## RAGE OF THE RIGHT

The assertion that Piven is calling for “violent revolution,” comes from an equally fanciful reading of an article she wrote for *The Nation* in January of this year. In “Mobilizing the Jobless,” Piven, a lifelong scholar of social movements, takes note that the unemployment crisis in the US has not resulted in mass demonstrations, and she analyzes some of the preconditions, as she sees them, that would have to take place for an American protest movement of enough breadth and power to create change to emerge. “There is



Frances Fox Piven

no science that predicts eruption of protest movements,” she writes. “We should hope for another American social movement from the bottom – and then join it.”

What Beck’s acolytes describe as a call for “violent revolution” is in fact a call for the mobilization of ordinary Americans acting in their own self-interest, perhaps the most fundamental definition of democratic action. The right’s rage at Piven stems precisely from her commitment to democracy. She has spent a lifetime of scholarship devoted to studying how ordinary people, particularly poor people, can and do fight for social change, and her work has underscored a basic truth: people can redress the imbalance of power and wealth in our society when they organize and disrupt business as usual.

That is the last thing Beck wants Americans to realize and it helps explain why he

and others on the right are working overtime to create a counter-narrative, one in which a sinister plot hatched by two radical professors in the 1960s explains the subprime mortgage crisis and the recession – rather than the lending practices of banks, financial deregulation, and increased corporate power and greed.

Beck’s attacks on Piven have been going on for two years, but the recent spate of accusations has sparked an increasingly disturbing response, moving from nasty *ad hominem* comments to repeated death threats, with a heavy dose of misogyny along the way. Piven’s address has been published on right-wing blogs and comments on The Blaze have included exhortations to “blow up Piven’s office and home” and declarations like “Somebody tell Frances I have 5,000 roundas [sic] ready.... George Washington didn’t use His freedom of speech to defeat the British, He shot them [sic].” “ONE SHOT...ONE KILL!” one post said; another, “I’m all for violence and change Francis, where do your loved ones live [sic]?” And another: “Maybe they should burst through the front door of this arrogant elitist and slit the hateful cow’s throat.”

These threats have alarmed Piven’s friends and colleagues. At the CUNY Graduate Center, Piven is known as an extraordinarily dedicated mentor to her students. “It’s hard to find a scholar of her rank who works harder than she does for her students,” a former student reflected. “She gives so much of herself...and she does this with enormous generosity, humor and warmth.”

The concerns of Piven’s fellow academics have been heightened in the post-Gabrielle Giffords shooting era, when we are sudden-

ly more conscious of the connection between violent rhetoric and violent actions – and many have rallied to her defense.

Articles, editorials, op-eds, petitions and more have circulated to challenge the Beck smear campaign and the thousands of personal attacks and threats against Piven.

The PSC, the American Association of University Professors, and the American Political Science Association have issued statements condemning Beck’s vilification of Piven. People for the American Way, and Care2 have taken up her cause, while the Center for Constitutional Rights has sent a cease and desist order to Fox News demanding an end to Beck’s false accusations. Piven herself has met with state police to alert them to the threats.

## DEMOCRACY AT STAKE

But none of this has stopped Beck’s attacks or his wild distortions of Piven’s words, nor has it stopped the massive right-wing online regurgitation of every anti-Piven blog post or the threats against her.

Those committed to the value of political dialogue and committed scholarship have a responsibility to speak out. What is at stake is not just the safety of one of our own, but the defense of American democracy. Beck and his would-be henchmen represent a politics that is antithetical to democracy; a politics of fear, smear, lies, scapegoating, raw intimidation and, in too many cases, violence. To the extent that these tactics go unchallenged and are accepted as legitimate, our democratic political institutions are weakened. As Barbara Ehrenreich put it in the *Los Angeles Times*, “When a congresswoman can be shot in a parking lot and a professor who falls short of Glenn Beck’s standards of political correctness can be, however anonymously, targeted for execution, we have moved well beyond democracy – to a tyranny of the heavily armed.”

*Dorothee Benz has more than two decades experience as an editor, journalist, Web manager and communications strategist in the labor movement.*

Colleagues speak out in her defense.

## BUDGET BATTLE

# The consequences of our tax cowardice

By RICHARD WOLFF & MAX FRAAD WOLFF

A national campaign is now fully launched to make local public-sector employees pick up a major share of the costs of economic crisis. Years of rising spending and falling revenue have carved a path of destruction through federal, state and local budgets. Deficits and debts have mounted, and taxpayer support for government spending in general, and for public employees particularly, has eroded. Major efforts are under way, from California to Maine, to balance budgets through major cuts in services, wages, benefits and employment.

Federal, state and local governments are staggering from decreased tax revenues most recently reduced by unemployment, faltering production, lower investment and the housing collapse. Washington borrowed huge sums from foreign investors, domestic big business and the rich. These funds went to bail out select businesses and to help (partially and temporarily) broken state and local government budgets. Because Democrats and Republicans agreed last December not to increase income, estate and capital gains taxes, broken state and local budgets face declining federal support. This is driving governors, mayors and state legislatures to raise taxes and/or to slash payrolls and programs.

## WHO SHOULD PAY?

The real social decisions involve the balance between spending cuts and tax increases, who will pay the cost and who will benefit.

The pressure is on to shift the heavy costs of economic crisis onto the middle- and lower-income communities already stung by unemployment, foreclosures, reduced job benefits and rising job insecurity. The campaign to make the middle- and lower-income Americans pay now focuses on public employees – especially their numbers, incomes and benefits. Battles loom over which state and local job holders get fired, whose pensions/benefits will be reduced, and which public services will stop being available.

Politicians will keep silent on the key alternative to deep cuts – precisely because it would otherwise be on most citizens' agendas. That alternative would be to raise the tax share paid by leading firms and the wealthiest 5-10% of citizens. In most cases, this means returning to the levels of taxation in the 1980s. Whatever may be needed in the way of reasonable rationalizations and savings in government budget outlays, we will not exit the continuing economic crisis by massive reductions in public service provision and employment. Those only further depress the economic conditions and well-being of middle- and lower-income communities. This would be a more and more cruel version of the track we have been on for decades. Sadly, this approach is neither new nor likely to work.

The facts don't support the attacks on public employees. Last year, total state and local public employment declined by 407,000 jobs.



Several hundred Camden, New Jersey firefighters and police officers were laid off on January 18. Renee Muhammad, one of four women firefighters in Camden, reacts as she waits to hand in her gear.

There are about 20 million state and local workers in America today: 14.3 million local and 5.2 million state employees. Until the last decade, the numbers of public employees grew steadily, as did the US population. Unemployment levels in our communities would have been much higher had those workers not found public jobs. State and local governments would have spent and provided far fewer and/or poorer public services had state and local employment not grown. Of course, there are stories of waste and corruption. Nonetheless, we all need and benefit from many state and local services.

## PUBLIC VS. PRIVATE

Over the last decade, state and local employment did not grow very rapidly. As the US economy moved towards crisis, state and local governments did not notably expand their payrolls. Their economics did not spin out of control – as did our financial industry and other parts of the private sector. Some states and localities even trimmed their tax rates. Assumptions were made about a lasting housing and equity market boom. These proved false. In many cases, the pain emerges slowly as properties are reappraised, sales tax revenues fail to rise amid record unemployment, and huge numbers of citizens do without health-care coverage.

Some now paint public employees as “fat

cats.” In 2009 (the latest available data), the average state employee earned \$23.67 per hour or \$49,240 per year. The average local government employee earned \$21.68 per hour or \$45,090 per year. These are averages. There are considerable differences among individual public employee earnings depending on her/his location, age and job type. There are huge ranges in pay by locality and union membership, as well.

By comparison, the national average earnings per hour for all employed Americans in December of 2009 was \$22.38 or \$44,760 for a 2000-hour year. In other words, state and local government employees earned about the national average in 2009 and 2010. State and local government employees' earnings were close to the national averages in most occupations. Labeling all public employees “fat cats” is an attempt to make mostly middle-class earners and all social service consumers pay for what the economic crisis did to state and local budgets.

## UNIONS

Another part of the campaign against state and local workers is aimed at their unions. But here, too, the facts offer a more honest picture. State and local government employees are more unionized than private-sector workers. Approximately 12.3% (or 14.7 million people) of the total US

labor force is represented by unions. That includes a 612,000 member decline across 2010. About 36% of public sector workers were unionized in 2010, as compared to 6.9% of private-sector workers (local public employees – teachers, police and fire personnel, and others closest to the communities they serve – were the most unionized). But the majority of state and local public employees are, in fact, not unionized – just like the vast majority of private-sector workers. Portraying public employees or their unions as a problem is not supported by the facts – and wrongly assumes that there is something unfair about their current levels of compensation.

## A CLOSER LOOK

In conclusion, consider exactly who public employees are. Equal Opportunity Employment Committee data from 2007 suggests that 18% of full-time state employees are African American, while that number for local employees is 19%. Public employment has reduced African American unemployment, reaping social benefits for everyone. Because African Americans have a higher than average union membership, attacking state and local union jobs targets them especially. Veterans are also significantly over-represented in public-sector employment at both the state and local level. In 2009, nearly 13% of all employed veterans worked for state and local government. Third, public-sector employees tend to stay at jobs longer and tend to be older than private-sector workers. Our at-risk state and local workers are disproportionately likely to be people of color, in unions, older and veterans.

Most importantly, state and local employees provide vital services to all. Our education, transport, protection, courts and civic participation rely on public sector workers. Over 85% of Americans are educated in public institutions, from first grade through university. Our police, fire, courts, social workers and clerks keep all of us and our property secure. Our roads, bridges, tunnels, ports, trains, buses and security are public-sector work. Our diversity and our veterans are well represented among our public-sector workers. Cutting the public sector will worsen the economic crisis, while deepening many social problems. No discussion about real and serious budget adjustments should proceed from ignorance about what public-sector workers do, who they are and what they are paid.

## CHALLENGES

However, our political system is increasingly beholden to those whose wealth and income have risen the most in recent decades. Unless challenged from below, it will pander to them by cutting public services and employees rather than taxing corporations or the richest among us. The dense ideological cover for that program will claim a need to counter over-powerful unions and reduce wasteful government.

No society moves wisely without acknowledging and factoring the real lives at stake and the real effects of budget decisions.

*Richard Wolff, professor of economics emeritus, UMass Amherst, is now visiting professor at the New School. He taught at CCNY from 1969 to 1973. His work can be found at [www.rdwolff.com](http://www.rdwolff.com). Max Fraad Wolff's work can be seen at the BBC, NPR, Al Jazeera English, Bloomberg TV, The Wall Street Journal and elsewhere; he teaches economics at The New School Graduate Program in International Affairs. Another version of this article was first published online at [www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree](http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree).*

## Scapegoating public workers hurts us all

## ACADEMIC LABOR

# Researchers of the world, unite!

By **BARBARA BOWEN**  
PSC President

I cannot remember being as frustrated as I am now about the persistence of a lie. In the space of less than two years, the political right, the finance industry and the class whose interests they serve have succeeded in shifting the blame for a worldwide economic crisis from the finance industry itself to the salary, pensions and benefits of public employees.

Two years ago, middle-class Americans were calling for historic reforms of finance capitalism. Now the same class is expected to rejoice because “the stock market has come roaring back,” as President Obama said in his State of the Union address, and accept that the real cause of the continuing crisis is us and our pensions.

Even as class war is being waged against working people, workers are being cast as the aggressors.

## PUSHED

Many of us see through the lie, but it has proven surprisingly difficult to dislodge. Like all Big Lies, it has succeeded in part *because* it is so outrageous. We seem to have fallen through the looking-glass and entered a world where down is up and up is down. But of course we didn't fall; we were pushed.

The apparently spontaneous reversal of public discourse is in fact a triumph of a campaign that stretches from Davos to Wall Street to the White House to Albany. Its most impressive accomplishment may be not in what it says, but what it makes unsayable. Almost all talk of an alternative to economic austerity for the working class, the middle class and the poor has been written out of the script. Cuts to CUNY, increased tuition for our students, wage freezes and concessions for us – all are described as “inevitable.”

This column, however, is not about the success of the Big Public-Employee Lie. There are many strong analyses available, including the one by Richard and Max Fraad Wolff in this issue of *Clarion* (p. 10). My subject is how we can fight back.

## POWER

As public employees and as educators who care about the quality of public college education, we are up against power, not just spin doctors. Ultimately it will take an assertion of power, a people's campaign, to counter the effort to further concentrate wealth in the hands of a few. (New York already has the highest income inequality in the country, and nationally, income has not been this skewed since the eve of the Depression.)

The PSC is working seriously on developing such a campaign, helping to build the coalitions that will make it possible. I will be calling on each of you to join that effort. But there is something else we can do with the power we already have.

Fight the lies. Do what we do best as academics: unravel false logic, investigate orthodoxies, question “common sense” – and teach what we learn. Research alone is clearly not enough to unseat the powerful interests demanding reductions in education, health care, and services, but it is key to building a strong movement. I am inviting you to participate in a shared research project, starting with the PSC and possibly expanding far beyond New York. We do

not have to be silent in the face of massive untruths. Take on one of the research questions below – or perhaps develop one of your own – and share your research. We will post selections on the new PSC website, and work with you on other ways to use what you discover in union meetings, testimony in Albany and activist campaigns.

## VIRTUAL TEACH-IN

Think of it as crowd-sourcing or a virtual teach-in. Lay claim to the most energetic tradition of academic research at a time when academic freedom is also under renewed attack. Whether you are a computer technician, a program director, a senior research scientist or an adjunct instructor of writing, I am asking you to do unapologetically what academics do: discover the truth and make it known.

1. What is the pattern in migration into and out of New York State during the last decade? The standard response to proposals to close the State's budget gap by restoring a progressive income tax is that higher taxes will drive out the rich and undermine the tax base. We have evidence from several years during the past decade during which a high-income tax surcharge – “the millionaire's tax” – has been in place. What does the evidence tell us?

2. In whose interest is the attack on public employees? If public employee pensions are only a fraction of the New York State budget, and if the radical pension reductions Mayor Bloomberg seeks would do little to address the City's current budget issues, why are pensions such a focus of attack?

3. What is the evidence that the right-wing campaign against public employees is connected to the demographics of public service workers? Richard and Max Fraad Wolff write in this issue of *Clarion* that government employment has historically been a route to middle-class stability for African Americans. Some have argued it has played the same role for white women. Is there evidence that the sudden outcry against public employees is connected to an effort to limit economic advancement for these groups?

4. Is there evidence that the scapegoating of public employees for the budget crisis is part of an attempt to break the remaining power of unions? Some have argued that ruling elites were willing to destroy manufacturing in the US to weaken labor unions; does the attack on the public sector now – the only sector where union membership is relatively high – arise from a similar agenda?

5. What are the rhetorical strategies used by those in power to rule out any consideration of alternatives to cutting the public sector? We could use a good analysis of the strategies of silencing in Obama's State of the Union, Cuomo's State of the State and Bloomberg's State of the City addresses.

6. Who profits if austerity is imposed on the middle class and the poor in New York?

7. Is there evidence that the ruling elites are seeking to ration education? This is not their expressed aim, but it is worth investigating whether limiting access to education is the underlying agenda of the current frenzy for educational “reform.” And if so, why would it be in their interest?

8. How has the role of foundations working in education changed in the last decade? Why are they demanding a seat at the national policy table, when in the past they had largely worked on projects outside of major

policy debates? What are the implications of that shift for higher education?

9. What are the examples from the past of successful efforts to change public discourse? What strategies were employed, and what can we learn from them? How have progressive movements gained from and contributed to a change in discourse?

## USE OUR SKILLS

These questions are just a start. I'd also like to see colleagues research how unions rose from a similar paralysis at the start of the Depression to fight back. I'd like to hear more about how austerity pressures are shaping scientific research. And I'd like to see reports from faculty who incorporate their research on these topics into relevant classes. We do not have to be silent in the face of outrageous lies. As academics, we have had an immensely powerful training, a training being actively denied to millions of others. We have a responsibility to use it.

## Do what we do best: unravel false logic.

## CALENDAR

**TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 15 / 9:30 am – 3:00 pm:** Meet with NYS Legislators in Albany. Meet with legislators in Albany who represent our campus. NYSUT reimburses PSC members for travel expenses. Contact Amanda Magalhaes at 212-354-1252 x221 or [amagalhaes@pscmail.org](mailto:amagalhaes@pscmail.org).

**FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 18 / 6:00 pm:** Labor Goes to the Movies. *La Cienega*, or *The Swamp*, is Lucrecia Martel's withering portrait of a bourgeois Argentine family in its country home on the Bolivian border. PSC Union Hall, 61 Broadway, 16 Fl.

**THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 24 / 6:00 pm:** CLT Cross-Campus Chapter Meeting. PSC Union Hall, 61 Broadway, 16 Fl. RSVP 212-354-1252 or email [asimmons@pscmail.org](mailto:asimmons@pscmail.org).

**FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 25 / 8:00 pm:** PSC Theater Party “James Baldwin: Down from the Mountaintop.” Celebrate Black History Month with a performance by writer and actor Calvin Levels. National Black Theater of Harlem, 2031 Fifth Avenue. Tickets, \$20, 866-811-4111 or [theatermania.com](http://theatermania.com).

**SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 26 / 9:30 am – 4:00 pm:** Budget Briefing and Advocacy Training open to CUNY students and faculty. Learn about the State budget process, how higher education cuts will affect you,

and prepare for the March 15 Student Faculty Higher Education Action Day. PSC Office, 61 Broadway, 16 Fl. RSVP at 212-354-1252 x221 or email [amagalhaes@pscmail.org](mailto:amagalhaes@pscmail.org).

**FRIDAY, MARCH 4 / 4:00 pm:** The Committee for Part-Time Instructional Staff First Fridays. Open discussion about issues affecting adjuncts, graduate employees, CLIP and other Continuing Education teachers. PSC, 61 Broadway, 16 Fl.

**TUESDAY, MARCH 8 / 12:00 pm – 2:00 pm:** International Women's Day: Voices of Women. Celebrate Women's History Month. Bronx Community College, 2155 University Avenue, Roscoe Brown Jr. Student Center, Hall of Fame Playhouse. For more info call 718-289-5735 or visit [www.bcc.cuny.edu](http://www.bcc.cuny.edu).

**TUESDAY, MARCH 15 / 6:00 am – 6:00 pm:** Student-Faculty Higher Education Lobby Day, Albany. Fight for your rights! Buses depart from several borough locations. For details please contact Amanda Magalhaes ASAP at 212-354-1252 x221 or email [amagalhaes@pscmail.org](mailto:amagalhaes@pscmail.org).

**THURSDAY, MARCH 24 / 9:00 am – 6:30 pm:** Out of the Smoke and the Flame: The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire and its Legacy. A day of reflection, panels, and debate to mark the 100-year anniversary of the Triangle Fire. CUNY Graduate Center, 365 Fifth Avenue. Free registration and information at [trianglefireconference.org](http://trianglefireconference.org).

## Clarion FEBRUARY 2011

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## 15-MINUTE ACTIVIST

### 'Act Now' to save higher education

Affordable access to higher education is on the chopping block in Albany. Make sure Governor Cuomo and your legislators know that the current economic crisis is no excuse for cutting funds to CUNY or penalizing public employee pensions, which make up a small fraction of the overall budget deficit.

Encourage your representatives to renew the income tax surcharge on the State's highest income earners, rather than place the burden on the lower- and middle-classes.

Join PSC-CUNY in signing our "Act Now Letter" available at our new website [www.psc-cuny.org](http://www.psc-cuny.org) under the tab "Our Campaigns."

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# Cuomo's CUNY cuts are deep

By PETER HOGNESS

On February 1, Governor Andrew Cuomo presented the first budget proposal of his administration, with a heavy emphasis on budget cuts and no new taxes. PSC activists warned that the plan would cripple community colleges and undermine quality of instruction throughout CUNY.

The governor's proposed budget for CUNY senior colleges would carry over a \$11.9 million cut, enacted in the middle of the current budget year, and would impose an additional cut of \$83.2 million, for a total reduction of \$95.1 million in direct state aid. Continuation of most of last year's cuts to the Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) is also part of the governor's budget plan (only the \$75 per award was restored), along with a 10% drop in community college base aid funding, by lowering base aid by \$226 per full-time equivalent student (FTE). If enacted, this would bring the total reduction in State FTE base aid to community colleges over the last three years to \$641 per FTE – a cut of almost 25%.

PSC leaders say that the governor's deep cuts to education, health-care and social services threaten the state's economic recovery and unfairly target the most vulnerable. Cuomo firmly opposed renewal of the income tax surcharge on the state's highest paid – the so-called "millionaire's tax" – adopted last year, and has refused to consider other progressive revenue proposals.

#### STUDENTS LOSE

"Larger class sizes, fewer courses, fewer full-time faculty, less student mentoring and guidance, longer time to graduation, and more students failing and dropping out – these are the choices Governor Cuomo made in his budget," said PSC First-Vice President Steve London "Instead of asking millionaires to pay a little more, Cuomo would ask CUNY students to put their future on hold. That will hurt all New Yorkers."

Union leaders argue that the governor's plan essentially delivers a Bush-era tax cut to those who need

## Students, not millionaires, asked to take hit



Alex Vitale (front left) of Brooklyn College & PSC First Vice President Steve London (front right) meeting with State Sen. Marty Golden (R-C-I Brooklyn) on February 4. Behind Vitale are Ed Snajr & Shonna Trinch of John Jay College.

it least, while forcing new costs onto those who are struggling to overcome New York's huge – and growing – economic inequalities.

Cuomo's budget proposal would make permanent the cuts to TAP that were enacted during last year's budget process. The current-year implementation of these cuts has reduced or eliminated TAP aid for graduate students, dependents of retired workers, and students who are struggling with their federal student loans or grades.

Instead of making it harder to get a college education, CUNY faculty and staff said that New York needs to provide its students with a path to opportunity.

"During the Great Depression, Franklin Roosevelt understood that government had to play an active role in expanding economic activity and opportunity," said Ron Hayduk, an associate professor at BMCC and member of the PSC Legislative Committee. "In those hard times, New York made the smart decision

to expand public higher education, founding Brooklyn College, Queens College, and the campus that became Lehman. But instead of following Roosevelt's example, Cuomo's budget is closer to Herbert Hoover's."

PSC members are mounting an intense program of public education, organizing and direct advocacy to expose the danger of the state's continued disinvestment in CUNY and press for better budget alternatives.

On February 4, just days after the release of the governor's executive budget, PSC members from chapters across the city met face-to-face with key members of the State Legislature in their district offices. The visits, part of New York State United Teachers' statewide resistance against Cuomo's call for deep cuts to both higher education and K-12 schools, focused on both the specific issues that impact CUNY and the need for realistic, progressive revenue measures instead of slashing education.

"In Queens, we were especially pleased that legislators we met

with – Senator Stavisky, Senator Avella and Assemblymember Lancman – all said they are prepared to support extending the income tax surcharge despite the governor's opposition," said Eileen Moran, member of the Legislation Committee.

#### BUILDING COALITIONS

Moran noted that the PSC and its allies won a partial victory against the odds in reversing some of Mayor Bloomberg's mid-year budget cuts. On January 6, the City Council restored \$4 million to CUNY community colleges out of a \$11.8 million mid-year cut. The bulk of the \$4 million restoration will be directed to instruction. The organizing behind this gain included PSC members collecting petitions, reaching out to their students, mobilizing for a rally and press conference, and presenting testimony at a special City Council hearing.

"When PSC members get involved, it makes a difference," said Moran. "The relationships that we build with legislators are critical to our ability to have an impact."

In addition to district visits, the PSC is also organizing a number of grassroots lobbying days in Albany – including a March 15 joint effort with the CUNY University Student Senate (USS), the NY Public Interest Research Group (NYPIRG), and United University Professions (UUP), SUNY's union of faculty and professional staff.

"Coalition-building is key to a strong fight as we go forward, especially dealing with budget cuts of this magnitude," said USS Chair Cory Provost. "The best way to get any results is for all the parties affected to come together."

#### ACTION IN ALBANY

Community colleges are a big target of some of the governor's cuts, Provost said, and restoring those funds needs to be a major focus. "If his plan goes through, the community colleges are going to take a beating," Provost told *Clarion*.

In addition to March 15, the PSC is planning grassroots lobbying trips to Albany on March 7-8, 21-22, and May 9-10. For more information on these Albany efforts, or meetings in local legislative districts, contact Amanda Magalhaes in the PSC office ([amagalhaes@pscmail.org](mailto:amagalhaes@pscmail.org), or 212-354-1252 x221).

"With a budget deficit of this size, the conversation about the budget must include consideration of ways of increasing revenue," said PSC President Barbara Bowen in February 10 testimony at a joint hearing of the Senate Finance Committee and the Assembly Ways and Means Committee in Albany. "And we can't have an honest discussion about revenue without addressing the growing income inequality in New York State."

New York is now facing a level of income disparity it has not seen since 1928, she noted. In New York City, for example, the top 1% of income earners collect 44% of all income.

"With two trillion dollars sitting on the corporate balance sheets and record profits for the Wall Street firms responsible for the financial crisis that precipitated the State's budget shortfall, we should be talking about ways to ask those who benefit most from our system to pay their fair share," Bowen said, "not about further enriching them while crushing the middle class."

Dave Sanders