WHAT WE NEED FOR A SAFE REOPENING

Members organize for a safe reopening of all CUNY campuses. PAGES 3, 12

TEACHING
Reflections on remote teaching
PSC members share tips on online teaching and how to create a sense of community, as they look back on a year in the virtual classroom. PAGE 4

CAMPUS
New chief at Medgar Evers
Patricia Ramsey is named president in the wake of intense faculty and student organizing against the ‘toxic’ leadership of former President Crew. PAGE 5

RETROSPECTIVE
Bowen’s historic union legacy
Barbara Bowen stepped down as PSC president after 21 years in May, leaving a record of fierce labor activism and social justice unionism. PAGES 6–7

COVID-19
Learning about the pandemic
Faculty at Brooklyn College devised a new course this Spring, meant to demystify many aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic. They spoke about the experience. PAGE 9
New leadership for PSC

Activists leading the union

By ARI PAUL

James Davis – who has served as an Executive Council member, chapter chair, delegate and all-around union activist – has been elected president of the PSC in an uncontested election.

Andrea Vásquez was reelected as first vice president. Felicia Wharton, who served as chapter chair of the Brooklyn Educational Opportunity Center, was elected treasurer and Penny Lewis, who previously served as the union’s vice president for the senior colleges, was elected secretary.

BROOKLYN LEADER

Davis is a professor of English at Brooklyn College and has been with the college since 2003. He has been a consistent leader for the union, engaging in political fights and leading rallies from Albany to the New York City Council, while also working at the grassroots level to develop the Brooklyn College chapter as one of the most organized and active in the union. He organized against tuition hikes and for keeping military recruiters off campus. He said that he hopes to continue his push for the New Deal for CUNY and fight for safety during the ongoing COVID-19 crisis.

“Some of our priorities must be won at the bargaining table and I am eager to build in the next round of negotiations on the gains we achieved in past contracts,” Davis said. “Others can be pursued outside the contract, and the New Deal for CUNY represents a critical – and winnable – set of priorities: legislative campaigns for common-good demands. “The many challenges of the past year compelled us to broaden and deepen our work as a union. I’m looking to enhance the PSC’s relationship with our state and national education affiliates, labor organizations and coalition partners in the CUNY Rising Alliance. Out of the violence and distress of the past year, new alignments and movements have emerged that present real openings for an active PSC to contest the austerity politics that have punished the communities we serve and to achieve a flourishing public university and CUNY workforce,” said Davis.

LEGISLATIVE CHIEF

For the last three years, Vásquez, who previously served on the Executive Council and as the chapter chair for HEOS, has served in the union’s Number Two position, playing a key role in political negotiations between the union and Albany and in forming progressive political alliances to demand fair funding for CUNY. She has also been a central figure in retaining membership after the anti-union Al- rus Supreme Court decision, which barred public-sector unions from collecting membership dues.

“We are here, still in the midst of a global pandemic and having to battle on every front for the health, rights and benefits of our members and our students,” she said. “I’m eager to work with members about what we can do, but I also seek to expand our legislative and coalition work. We cannot build the power we need if we don’t have strong student, community and union allies… and a changed Albany.” The New Deal for CUNY legislation made a splash this year and it should be at the core of our vision and of our coalition work next year. We won some new taxes on the wealthy, but there’s a long way to go for us to be able to transform CUNY,” said Vásquez.

EOC MATHEMATICIAN

Wharton, a lecturer at SUNY Brockport, has studied the challenges students and teachers face in adult mathematics education. Wharton brings a unique perspective to the PSC leadership, as she will be the first member from an EOC chapter to serve as a principal officer. She continues the PSC tradition of having a trained mathematician oversee the union’s finances.

“As a member of an EOC unit, I became intrigued by the supplemental agreement in the PSC-CUNY collective bargaining agreement covering the four EOCs: Brooklyn, Bronx, Manhattan, and Queens. In the summer of 2013, I took a giant leap, formed a slate, and reactivat-
Members question CUNY reopening

By ARI PAUL

Over the last 15 months, the trauma of the pandemic and CUNY’s decision to keep their campuses closed have caused many members of the CUNY community to experience a sense of loss and uncertainty. In many cases, these feelings have been compounded by a lack of clear communication and inconsistent policies. The decision to lay off 2,000 adjuncts, the remote situation has not only challenged faculty and staff to adapt to new ways of working and teaching, but it has also raised questions about the safety of returning to campus.

The CUNY administration has expressed appreciation for the PSC’s creative in adapting to remote learning situations. While faculty and staff have been working hard to make the necessary upgrades and repairs for a safe reopening of classrooms and offices, there is still much concern about enforcing masking and social distancing measures, especially in small, high-quality classes offered on campuses.

At a virtual town hall hosted by the PSC, Chancellor Félix Matos Rodríguez said that the cuts will mean a reduction of 25% in personnel who have a high COVID risk because of comorbidities, and that there is no excuse not to get testing if one is positive for COVID. In that case, there should be a campus point-person for COVID response that the CUNY administration can tap. In addition, if the campus is not safe for students and faculty, they are not safe for HEOs or others.

At the May PSC virtual town hall, members brought up issues such as: “What happens when someone on campus tests positive for COVID?” In that case, there should be a campus point-person for COVID response that the CUNY administration can tap. Another issue is that CUNY addresses what can be done for personnel who have a high COVID risk because of comorbidities, it falls short in addressing what can be done about other disabilities that can make COVID compliance difficult. After all, people who have hearing difficulties can’t read lips through a mask. People in wheelchairs can’t avoid elevators.

At a virtual town hall hosted by the PSC in May, more than 1,500 members gathered to hear from PSC leaders and the PSC Health and Safety Watchdog about the situation, and to ask their questions and express their concerns.

TALKING TO ADMINISTRATION

The CUNY administration has expressed appreciation for the PSC standards and has recently committed to resume preoccupancy walk-throughs with PSC members. Nevertheless, inconsistent and contested administration decision-making continues to frustrate PSC members who want to return to teaching and serving students.

After instructing colleges to prepare for roughly 20% in-person instruction in the Fall, the CUNY administration recently changed course and said colleges should plan for 60% in-person instruction on campuses in the Fall with a partial return of staff on August 2. This updated guidance is being treated by many CUNY colleges as a new mandate.

Chancellor Félix Matos Rodríguez said, “My office has made the careful decision to mark the week of August 2 as the date for staff to return to their work places in preparation for a more in-person Fall.” To this Rodríguez added, “Faculty will follow in accordance with the academic calendar of their campus.”

The chancellor, in a letter to campus administrators, said, “I’m encouraging it is safe to fully return to campus. Evidence of upgrade-
Teaching in a pandemic, a year later

Concrete lessons from virtual classes

By CLARION STAFF

CUNY faculty members now have a full academic year of remote teaching under their belts. When the pandemic first forced the city into lockdown in March 2020, the thought of virtual teaching seemed like a temporary emergency measure. But it’s now more than a year later. And while PSC members are getting vaccinated and CUNY Central is adamant about returning to in-person learning in the fall, the “new normal” has been virtual learning for the past year, with faculty deciding what method of teaching works best for them and their students.

Shakespeare online

I learned a lot really quickly in order to teach my classes asynchronously. It helped that I had already planned to teach an online Shakespeare course—one of my mad hat ideas from long before the shutdown. Shakespeare does not sound like a class that you can teach asynchronously online, but it’s worked enormously well. Why? Shakespeare is a visual medium. When they can watch an actor interpret a character’s words, students connect more empathetically with the drama, and they better understand the poetry. Lectures are therefore interspersed with performances of relevant scenes, provided by such resources as the Royal Shakespeare Company, Globe Theatre and Folger Shakespeare Library.

My class is organized as weekly units posted to Blackboard. It’s a best practice to corral material in one folder for easy referencing. Written instructions explain how students should proceed through the week’s materials. These are followed by the assigned reading, study guides, lectures and performance excerpts, and finally, the assigned writing. I record and embed thematically organized mini lectures, usually less than 10 minutes in length. One video may be about Hamlet and Ophelia, another about Hamlet’s grief, and the next about the Globe Theatre and Folger Shakespeare Library.

In order to support a classroom community when Carrie Conners moved her Introduction to Creative Writing class at LaGuardia Community College online in the Spring of 2020, Conners had her students write a collaborative poem “Out the window, I’ve seen.” Clarion commissioned the above illustration based on the final lines of the poem. To read about the collaborative writing project, visit tinyurl.com/collaborative-writing-project and read the full poem at tinyurl.com/out-the-window-poem.

Students can then focus on mastering the course content over navigating the technology.

Numbers game

I teach my Math for Elementary Education with Algebra class asynchronously. I try to create community through weekly discussions, whether it’s a reading reflection or a problem-solving exercise. I do group activities so students are working together to create information as a community. The big challenge is getting them out there to just try so I’m constantly sending emails, encouraging students to share in the discussion.

I am using open educational resources (OER) videos developed by one of my colleagues whose approach is similar to mine. I scour the internet for resources: fun math raps, songs to help them memorize the quadratic formula, strategies for graphing a slope, math history or math in other cultures. It is good to have the videos under 10 minutes; attention spans are not long. I’m not testing because procuring virtually is impossible. I have office hours over Zoom, where I’ll meet with a student or a small group. I break down the grade with weekly discussions, group projects, homework, drill and skill activities, reflective blog/journal posts and a final portfolio, where students unpack five of their learning tasks and expand on how the concepts work and how they would teach them.

In a blog assignment, students research and write about the Asian origins of math concepts; some examples are Fibonacci numbers in Hindu culture, poetry and music, the Asian roots of algebra or the origins to distance learning last March, I had two concerns about my classes: that they remain engaging and that they simulate an in-person environment as much as possible. I decided to use many of the same technological tools that I had been using in person.

In a blog assignment, students research and write about the Asian origins of math concepts; some examples are Fibonacci numbers in Hindu culture, poetry and music, the Asian roots of algebra or the origins of the Pascal’s triangle in China. Some students have submitted really nice projects. It’s a good feeling when I know that the students will do good work in their own classrooms with their own students.

SARAH MCALLISTER
Assistant Professor
Department of Mathematics
Borough of Manhattan Community College

Building community

When we first transitioned to distance learning last March, I had two concerns about my classes: that they remain engaging and that they simulate an in-person environment as much as possible. I decided to use many of the same technological tools that I had been using in person. Attendance is taken digitally through Mentimeter, mini lectures are presented via PowerPoint or Google Slides, course material is posted on Blackboard and Google Classroom, and in-class assignments are conducted in groups via the Google Suite of Apps for Education. With so many different technological options available, the conscious decision to use the right applications was to lessen any potential learning curve for the technology’s use at a distance, which provided students with an extra sense of comfort and certainty in their ability to use the technology.

The obvious change of meeting in a Zoom room rather than a room on campus provided its challenges in building a sense of community. In an effort to alleviate some of the stress that comes with participating in an online course, I open each class session asking students how they are feeling, what challenges they are facing, and if they have any updates they want to share with the class. Students have expressed that this time talking with their peers made them feel more comfortable in the class as well as feed that their voices were being heard during this incredibly difficult time.

As part of ensuring the class is engaging, I make an effort to change the task the class is working on regularly and not spend too much time on any one presentation or assignment. Whether it is a small group activity, full class discussion or individual assignment to engage with the material covered in class, the switching of tasks helps to prevent Zoom fatigue.

SALVATORE GAROFALO
Lecturer
Secondary Education and Youth Services Department
Queens College

Benefits achieved

To my surprise, there have been some remarkable benefits in teaching acting online as a hybrid, part synchronous, part asynchronous course.

Continued on page 9
MEC faculty welcome new president

By ARI PAUL

Patricia Ramsey, a biologist previously in leadership positions at Lincoln University and Bowie State University, has been appointed the new president of Medgar Evers College (MEC). Ramsey will be the first woman president of the college, an appointment many at MEC are heralding as a sign of progress.

A big issue for the college under Crew that Ramsey will need to address is accountability. Brown said. The college suffered, he explained, from a problem where executives who under-performed but were loyal to Crew were promoted, while faculty members “who were adding value to the college were disciplined because they didn’t toe the party line.” This created what Brown called a “toxic environment” where “budgets for services [were] being slashed” while the college continued “hiring individuals in executive level positions who were not bringing in resources that could help to provide the services to the students that the college is supposed to provide.”

REHIRING ADJUNCTS

Brown expressed confidence that Ramsey would address this problem. “I’m hopeful that she’ll be able to tackle this and I am willing – and other colleagues are willing – to provide assistance to her in this matter.”

Two of the biggest labor issues Ramsey will face at MEC are the PSC’s demand to rehire laid-off MEC adjuncts and address the issue of ballooning class sizes. Recently, PSC activists delivered a petition to the MEC administration and Crew demanding that the college reappoint all 66 teaching adjuncts eligible for new or renewed three-year appointments. The petition also called for reducing the maximum class size to the Spring 2020 level of 28 students.

CUNY said of Ramsey in a statement, “At Bowie State, she started weekly ‘Chat with the Provost’ sessions that became a valuable incubator of student-originated ideas that were later adopted by the university. Dr. Ramsey also played major roles in diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives. At Lincoln University, she oversaw a new office of equity and inclusion that advanced recruitment efforts, and under her leadership the university increased the number of women faculty across five academic departments in disciplines where females are traditionally underrepresented.”

SUPPORT FOR CREW

Some faculty, however, believe the criticism of Crew’s leadership was too harsh, and that it led an underfunded college as well as possible under the circumstances. Some even say he left behind a positive legacy. Chinyere Emmanuel Egbe, chair of the economics and finance department, credited Crew with expanding educational facilities at the college.

“This is a day that is elated at this historic time and new day for this unique and special institution,” said Zulema Blair, chair of the public administration department and the vice chair of the MEC College Council. “It comes at a time when racial justice is being placed front and center for all public policy platforms on all levels of government and I am sure that [the MEC and the Central Brooklyn community under the leadership of Dr. Patricia Ramsey will once again realize its true potential and exceed all expectations.”

Blair, who was highly critical of Crew’s leadership, added, “My colleagues and I are ready to work on behalf of the faculty, staff and students” with the new leader. She said the college community has “worked tirelessly for our voices to be heard and finally they were heard.”

Clinton Crawford, the PSC chapter chair at MEC, explained upon hearing of Ramsey’s appointment, “It’s about damn time.” He then added, “We look forward to the next, best chapter in the history of Medgar Evers College.”

And Kathleen Barker, the chair of the MEC Faculty Senate and a professor of psychology, saw an opportunity to rebuild trust between the faculty and the administration. “We look forward to reinstituting shared governance at the college and to

MEC faculty are optimistic for now.

Owen Brown, an MEC professor, called for Crew’s resignation, describing Crew’s leadership as creating a “toxic environment.”

Solidarity with NYU grad workers

PSC rallied in solidarity with the New York University graduate student workers in May on strike for better wages, health care, and childcare benefits.

Dave Sanders
As she stepped down from office at the end of May, Barbara Bowen sent a message to PSC members expressing her thanks for their vision and commitment. An adapted version of her message is below:

Thank you for entrusting me with the leadership of the union. It has been the privilege of a lifetime.

When the current leadership first took office in 2000, our aim was to make the PSC a fighting union. Thanks to you, individually and collectively, that’s what the PSC has become. We just saw an edgy demonstration by the Brooklyn PSC chapter about spending federal stimulus funds and a demonstration planned for next week at the Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC). PSC members and students protested at BMCC on June 1 against racist austerity, CUNY’s failure to rehire laid-off adjuncts, and the racist defacement of a college building. These events come after a PSC town hall on reopening in April that drew 1,500 participants and the release of the union’s detailed COVID safety standards.

ACTIVE MEMBERSHIP

None of these actions would have been possible without an active membership. What I love about the union we have built together is that members have risked investing some part of their political hope – whether for a better university, a better city or even a better world – in the work of the union. All a leader of such a union can do is try to be worthy of people in struggle.

In a historical period of anti-worker organizing and obscene income inequity, the PSC was strong at the bargaining table because we did not limit our horizon to bargaining. We refused to accept that subpar working conditions for staff and faculty are inevitable at an institution that serves primarily people of color, the working class and the poor. We challenged the racist austerity policies that underlie our working conditions and understood the fight for a contract as a fight for our students’ right to a beautiful, imaginative, life-changing education.

As a result, we were able to break years of contractual stalemate and win salary increases, paid parental leave, increased sabbatical pay, targeted raises to address inequities of race and gender, health insurance for adjuncts, professional staff salary differentials, paid adjunct office hours, junior faculty research leave, professional development funds, graduate employee health insurance, dedicated sick leave, improvements in the reclassification system, gains in annual leave, a reduction in the teaching load, three-year appointments for adjuncts and more. Through the power of an organized membership, we were able to save the Welfare Fund from near-insolvency, and the Fund has now been able to enhance dental, prescription drug and vision benefits.

The PSC unapologetically asserted that unions are strongest when they work in the interest of all workers and their communities, not just of their own members. PSC members defeated a half-billion-dollar cut to CUNY imposed by Governor Andrew Cuomo in 2016 and responded by advancing our own agenda for funding CUNY. We worked with students and their communities to develop the New Deal for CUNY, legislation that reinstates free tuition, repudiates austerity, and dramatically increases the University’s public funding. Over the last six months. The New Deal for CUNY has ignited support in Albany, and an equally ambitious proposal for New York City is rapidly gaining ground. It calls for payments in lieu of taxes from the rich untaxed private universities, with the income dedicated to supporting CUNY.

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

At the same time, PSC members pushed our national union to reverse its support for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, campaigned against stop-and-frisk, against racist travel bans and for the rights of undocumented students; supported teachers’ and workers’ struggles in this country and internationally; defended academic freedom; and worked to keep our students and each other safe during this traumatic year.

Anyone who steps down from leadership, however, must be sharply aware of what
Barbara Bowen led the union through some tough times, including several years of stalled contract talks with CUNY.

What gives me hope, though, is our membership and the stirrings of political change. Consider the extraordinary way the entire faculty and staff transformed our work in a matter of days to keep CUNY going during the pandemic; the hundreds of members who have been trained by other members to monitor the safety of their own workplaces; the outpouring of members joining anti-racist protests last summer and organizing anti-racism coalitions on the campuses; the thousands of members who have rallied, marched, petitioned, testified and risked arrest in PSC actions; the members whose artwork and anger have fueled the recent demonstrations to free the federal funds and reject racialized austerity.

LOOKING AHEAD

A year ago I would not have imagined that the New York State budget would include $2 billion for undocumented essential workers, achieved largely through a tax increase on the rich. Nor would I have predicted federal stimulus funding in the billions of dollars for higher education. And few observers foresaw that the structural inequities laid bare by the pandemic, together with the murder of George Floyd, would spark a massive, sustained, worldwide demand to abolish racism.

The coming years may see new openings for political change, and I believe the PSC is in a position to contribute to and expand those openings. We have a membership with imagination and courage, and a new leadership ready to make the possible real. James Davis, Andrea Vásquez, Sharon Persinger and Nivedita Majumdar. Only they know how much I owe them.

Thank you, PSC members, for your generosity to me and each other, for your challenges, your criticisms and your hope. I’ll see you in the fight.

About A Legacy of Progress

In a series of five contracts for which Bowen was chief negotiator, PSC power increased salaries and benefits across the board, lifted pay for the lowest paid, added benefits and pay for part-time employees and introduced changes many had thought impossible to achieve at CUNY. Highpoints of the union’s gains include:

- Salary increases for all titles
- Dramatic improvements in PSC-CUNY Welfare Fund benefits: vision, dental, prescription drug, and more
- A series of additional “equity raises” for lowest-paid titles, targeted at salary inequities of race and gender
- Sabbaticals at 80% pay
- Adjunct health insurance
- Establishment of graduate employee health insurance and tuition waivers
- Establishment of a professional development fund for adjuncts and Continuing Ed faculty
- Paid sick days for adjunct CLTs and non-teaching adjuncts
- Protection of Continuing Ed faculty
- Creation of hundreds of full-time positions reserved for current adjuncts
- Pay differentials for CLTs and Assistants to HEO
- Paid parental leave for all full-time staff and faculty—the first won by any public-sector union in New York
- A dramatic increase in adjunct faculty pay, including paid office hours
- Major gain in annual leave equity for full-time faculty librarians
- Restoration of annual leave days for Counselors
- HEO salary differentials and improvements in HEO reclassification
- 24 hours of reassigned time for untenured full-time faculty for research
- Professional Development Funds and Research Awards
- Teaching load reduction for full-time faculty by three hours

The first PSC parents to enjoy union-won parental leave.
NEWS

Persinger reflects on six-year term

By SHOMAIL AHMAD

Sharon Persinger stepped down in May after two terms as PSC treasurer. She is no stranger to numbers or to unions. The associate professor of mathematics and computer science at Bronx Community College (BCC) grew up in West Virginia, the granddaughter of unionized coal miners from a working-class family. For her, the multimillion-dollar PSC budget is more than a collection of numbers. It is “the infrastructure,” comprised primarily of members’ dues, that makes the union work. “That’s the foundation of unions to improve the terms and conditions of employment for the people they represent,” she said. “In a union like ours, a lot of that [infrastructure] is connected. Our terms and conditions are our students’ learning conditions.”

BUDGETS AND COLLECTIVE ACTIONS

Sharon Persinger, former PSC Treasurer

Sharon Persinger, former PSC Treasurer

Persinger stepped into her role during uncertain times for the union, and uncertainty was everywhere. A court of the Janus v. AFSCME decision that allowed public employees represented by a union to refuse to pay agency fees and, recently, the ongoing Coronavirus pandemic, which brought health and safety concerns into stark relief for a university system already plagued with serious health and safety issues.

“Accounting is about categorization, and it is about telling a story of the finances of the organization by looking at the finances with a lot of different lenses,” Persinger said. “There is looking at them in one day, looking at them over a year, and dividing money in pools – the money that comes in and the money that goes out.”

As treasurer, Persinger was the public face of the union’s finances, explaining at delegate assembly how the PSC spends its money. “Accounting is important enough to fight for,” she said.

As treasurer, Persinger was the public face of the union’s finances, explaining at delegate assembly how the PSC spends its money. “Accounting is important enough to fight for,” she said.

“More than 1,000 PSC members were trained by union staff and leaders to hold one-on-one conversations with members, to listen to their perspectives while both assessing and promoting strike readiness. Conversations with members were complemented with chapter meetings, organizing department chairs to commit to non-retaliation should their colleagues strike, and working with CUNY students to organize support for a possible strike. In the strike authorization vote, 92% voted ‘Yes,’ risking personal financial loss and heavy penalties to their union,” she said.

Majumdar looks back

“Im very excited to go back to teaching and developing new courses,” Majumdar said. “It feels really good to have spent six years in central leadership and to now return to chapter work. The organic connection of rank-and-file activism and leadership is the strength of our union, so it is wonderful to be actually doing both.”

“Union stalwarts like Mike Fabricant helped expand our power through coalitions with civic groups and bodies that share our vision of an egalitarian and robust university and city. CUNY Rising is a product of that vision and will have a lasting impact on our future struggles. Under Barbara Bowen’s leadership, the union tested the outer limits of what a single union can achieve in a hostile political climate. A more fundamental transformation of our work conditions will require a class-wide movement.”

NEWS

Activism in the streets, power at the contract table

By ARI PAUL

Nivedita Majumdar wants members to know that although she has stepped down as PSC secretary after two terms, the lifestyle activist and trade unionist isn’t going far. When she returns to her post as an associate professor of mathematics and computer science at John Jay College, she expects to be an active rank-and-file member, continuing the battle against austerity she waged as a principal officer and, before that, as a chapter chair and delegate.

“IT IS A MATTER OF DEEP SATISFACTION TO ME THAT THE PERIOD OF MY SIX YEARS AS PRINCIPAL OFFICER WAS ARGUABLY AMONG THE MOST EVENTFUL AND EXCITING PERIODS IN THE UNION’S HISTORY,” she said. “FIRST, WE DID NOT JUST GROW OUR MEMBERSHIP AMONG FULL-TIME MEMBERS TO OUR 27,000 MEMBERS FOR THE VOTE, BUT WE TOOK ON THE UNION’S ADVOCACY OF DOMINANT CULTURE THEORIES FROM A BROADLY MARXIST PERSPECTIVE.”

“IT WAS A MAHOMAND TASK TO ORGANIZE 25,000 MEMBERS FOR THE VOTE, AROUND HALF OF WHOM HAD CONTINGENT EMPLOYMENT. BUT WE TOOK ON THE TASK BECAUSE OF THE UNIVERSITY’S VISION TO MAKE AN ACCOMMODATING ECONOMIC OFFER AFTER FIVE YEARS WITHOUT A CONTRACT, MAJUMDAR SAID.

“More than 1,000 PSC members were trained by union staff and leaders to hold one-on-one conversations with members, to listen to their perspectives while both assessing and promoting strike readiness. Conversations with members were complemented with chapter meetings, organizing department chairs to commit to non-retaliation should their colleagues strike, and working with CUNY students to organize support for a possible strike. In the strike authorization vote, 92% voted ‘Yes,’ risking personal financial loss and heavy penalties to their union,” she said.

Majumdar told Clarion that while she is proud of many of the contract gains under the previous administration (see page 7), she hopes that the administration under Barbara Bowen set a standard for militant unionism that goes beyond contract fights.

“IT WAS A BATTLE THAT WE WERE GOING TO WIN, BUT RETURNING TO HER ACADEMIC WORK SHE RECENTLY WROTE THE WORLD IN A GRAIN OF SAND (VERSION), ‘A CRITIQUE OF DOMINANT CULTURE THEORIES FROM A BROADLY MARXIST PERSPECTIVE.”


“UNION STALWARTS LIKE MIKE FABRICANT HELPED EXPAND OUR POWER THROUGH COALITIONS WITH CIVIC GROUPS AND BODIES THAT SHARE OUR VISION OF AN EGALITARIAN AND ROBUST UNIVERSITY AND CITY. CUNY RISING IS A PRODUCT OF THAT VISION AND WILL HAVE A LASTING IMPACT ON OUR FUTURE STRUGGLES. UNDER BARBARA BOWEN’S LEADERSHIP, THE UNION TESTED THE OUTER LIMITS OF WHAT A SINGLE UNION CAN ACHIEVE IN A HOSTILE POLITICAL CLIMATE. A MORE FUNDAMENTAL TRANSFORMATION OF OUR WORK CONDITIONS WILL REQUIRE A CLASS-WIDE MOVEMENT.”
Teaching the COVID pandemic

Facilitating history, stopping disinfo

By MAURIZIO GUERRERO

In both the Fall and Spring semesters, the Brooklyn College department of health and nutrition sciences offered a class on the COVID pandemic — with input from many different instructors — to counter the spread of misinformation about the coronavirus and vaccination among undergraduates.

The faculty did not expect to learn as much as the students, but in the end, they learned a lot about how to reach out to a population, mostly of color, during a pandemic that has disproportionately ravaged communities of color. Nearly 65% of Brooklyn College students identify as people of color at a school where the majority (55%) of the faculty is white.

“I came up with the idea because I saw how much misinformation and disinformation about COVID-19 other people were exposed to,” said Michele Greene, professor and deputy chair in the department of health and nutrition sciences at Brooklyn College. “I was concerned that our students, their families, their communities were not getting the right information.”

A TEAM EFFORT

The course involved 13 professors from health and nutrition sciences and the CUNY Graduate School of Public Health and Health Policy. It covers topics such as the history of pandemics, infectious diseases and virology, social determinants of health and testing, tracing and vaccination. It attracted 26 students in the 2020 Fall semester and 37 this Spring.

“We did a poll in the class and found out that a lot of students, even after seven weeks into the semester, were still not willing to get the vaccine or have lots of questions about the vaccines,” said Greene.

“The history of medical abuses endured by people of color in the United States is a long one. The Tuskegee experiments let Black men die from syphilis for four decades until 1972. Marion Sims, ‘the father of modern gynecology,’ performed his surgical procedures on Black women without anesthesia.”

SKEPTICISM

In 2020, it was revealed that numerous migrant women from Latin America in the Irwing Detention Center in Georgia received forced hysterectomies—sterilization procedures— without their knowledge.

“The thinking there seems to be a reason to be skeptical of the medical care system,” said Greene.

According to the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment at CUNY, three in five undergraduates are from households with annual incomes of less than $30,000.

The pandemic has only multiplied such stressors, showed a study published last February by CUNY’s Graduate School of Public Health and Health Policy. Nearly 55% of the students reported anxiety or depression; 49% needed mental health services; 81 respondents lost household income; and half worried about losing housing.

In the midst of such a crisis, with so much misinformation on social media, it is natural for students to question vaccination, said Jolanta Kruszelnicka, a lecturer in health and nutrition sciences who coordinates the course.

“It is understandable that when you have a new disease and scientists are not able to provide satisfactory answers to all the questions, people may look up the answers by themselves,” said Kruszelnicka.

Margrethe Horlyck-Romanovsky, an assistant professor co-teaching the course, estimated that roughly 40% of the students were unwilling to be vaccinated.

“All of the fear and the hesitation, all of the conspiracy theories emerge, we are witnessing it as it is playing out like this. So, it was important to acknowledge that this is not new,” Horlyck-Romanovsky said. “Our fear of totalitarian measures is not new, but the message to overcome it is the same.”

That is, she added, building trust.

ANTIESTABLISHMENT

Students’ skepticism has to do with the safety of medical products rushed into development, Horlyck-Romanovsky said. Students also mistrust the medical establishment, particularly the pharmaceuticals—for profit oligopolies now entrusted with saving millions of lives.

According to a Pew Research Center survey published this past March, 61% of Black Americans said they would definitely or probably get a COVID vaccine, which is lower than the national average of 69%. The study also revealed that older Black adults are more inclined than younger adults to say they would get a vaccine.

During the course, Greene shows a clip that encourages vaccine confidence from a group called Hip Hop to Health, founded by two notable Black Americans: Olajide Williams, chief of staff and neurology professor at Columbia University, and the hip hop artist Doug E. Fresh.

BUILDING TRUST

“One of the things about health information is that people are generally more trusting of individuals who look like them,” said Greene. Yet, students rightly pointed out that all the characters getting vaccinated in the clip were Black, none of them white.

“Something intended to help build trust in the students who was interpreted in a different way,” said Greene. She urged me that we have to pay even closer attention to how students learn about their vaccination.

Horlyck-Romanovsky described her own learning with ambivalence: “I learned that what I was trained to do was really valuable, but that we have failed to prepare our society for this catastrophe,” she said. “We knew that it was not just a possibility, we knew it was going to happen at some point.”
PSC contract team, in overdrive

By SHOMIAL AHMAD

The union contract is a living document – it is not a mere collection of words on pages of paper, but rather a set of articles organized around workplace principles that is negotiated, enforced, defended and subject to constant reexamination. At the PSC, the contract enforcement department – a team of PSC staff and rank-and-file members trained in the nitty-gritty details of the contract – work to defend members’ rights every day.

“I talk about collectively bargained agreements as organic. They are living organisms, and as such, are constantly changing and being understood in new and different ways,” said Renée Lasher, PSC’s director of contract administration since 2018. “No contract ever captures all the details, so there are always going to be things that have to be wrangled out as things are put into practice.”

BUSY TIMES

Over the past year during the COVID crisis, the contract administration department has been working in overdrive to understand the contract in new and different ways to address remote work, life-altering health and safety issues at CUNY campuses and the mass layoffs of adjuncts.

“The shutdown impacts every aspect of work that our members do. It impacts how they communicate both internally and externally,” said Lasher, who worked for a decade in union representation in the entertainment trades before joining PSC’s contract enforcement team. Grievance representatives have been responding to the issues and figuring out how to navigate the work terrain whether it involves talking to members one-on-one, identifying issues for impact bargaining or filing both individual and class action grievances (when a certain issue is pervasive and affects members across campuses).

When 300 adjuncts who were eligible for three-year appointments were arbitrarily laid off in the Spring of 2020 and when around 2,000 adjuncts who were on semester and one-year appointments were non-reappointed, the union filed class action grievances. The union made arguments to a CUNY hearing officer in both of these grievances, but CUNY has failed to issue any decisions within the time frame given them under the contract, so both grievances have been filed to arbitration, where neutral arbitrators outside of CUNY will hear the cases separately. (For an explanation of the grievance process, see the illustrations, starting on this page.)

BIG TEAM

There is a team of people, made up of both PSC members and PSC staff, who work with members to file a grievance. Around two dozen rank-and-file members serve as grievance counselors for certain campuses and certain titles. These union members work alongside the full-time PSC staff, and they collectively have decades of labor experience. (For a list of grievance representatives, go to psc-cuny.org/who-we-are/grievance-counselors.)

Faye Moore joined the PSC in 2018 as a contract administration coordinator. She is a former president and vice president of grievances of Social Service Employees Union Local 371 – one of the largest locals in District Council 37, where she bargained contracts with the city and dealt with grievances, legal issues and organizing for nearly every New York City agency.

KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

Her advice to PSC members is to “know your contract and do not be afraid to ask questions of the union. There is a union structure in place,” she added, for members to reach out if something at work does not feel right. “Some people are hesitant to ask the question [about a workplace right]. To me, it is better to know the answer to your question and then let the answer govern your actions.”

Since COVID, Moore said, work has become more crisis-driven. Members are under enormous pressure to work in new ways and oftentimes dealing with inflexible and punishment-driven bosses. It is extremely important for members to contact the union as soon as an issue arises, she urged. Members have 30 business days from when an issue occurred or when they became aware of the issue to file a grievance.

Not every member issue is technically a grievance, which entails a violation of the contract. But even those issues outside of an official grievance can still be a valid workplace concern, and PSC grievance representatives can advise members on how to handle a situation.
“Most of the calls I take every day are not official grievances. I always tell members, ‘If something feels wrong, or you’re just not sure, there is no harm in giving us a call,’” said Emma Powell, a contract administration coordinator who has been at PSC since 2014. “We can always work through strategies, like writing a rebuttal to a guidance memo or an evaluation.”

Powell worked as an organizer at the PSC for nearly four years before joining the contract administration department and prior to that she headed membership at the National Union of Students in the United Kingdom, a confederation of higher education student unions. She often brings an organizing lens to a grievance.

For instance, there was an issue about HEO time sheets that was difficult to grieve. Instead, they found other HEOs with the same issue, and together along with help from the PSC organizing department, the HEOs worked collectively to turn in time sheets that reflected the hours they worked and submitted for comp time.

**Organizing is key**

Greg Douros, who has worked on organizing and contract campaigns in the United States and internationally, sees contract enforcement and organizing as linked. Both are critical to placing pressure on the university to do the right thing. Douros started working at the PSC as a contract administration coordinator in June 2020. Despite joining the staff in the era of remote work and having never worked in the PSC office, he has become an integral part of the contract administration team, getting to know his colleagues through virtual meetings and talking to members one-on-one. Everything that a member is experiencing “at work” during the pandemic is amplified, he said.

Common issues that members express are workload increases, out-of-title duties, increased work because of increased class sizes and shift work for CLTs.

His advice to members is to always keep good documentation: email a supervisor, summarize expectations, express workload concerns and write rebuttals to unfair evaluations even if you feel dispirited.

“When you enforce the contact, it becomes a real, living document. It’s not just a piece of paper,” said Douros. “Defending the violation of one member is the defense of all members.”

At the PSC there are more than two dozen grievance counselors, some who work for the PSC in-house and others who are rank-and-file members who are trained in contract enforcement. At campuses, chapter grievance counselors represent full-time faculty. For a full list of representatives, go to tinyurl.com/chapter-grievance-reps. The PSC also has in-house grievance counselors and advisors who are designated to represent titles at certain campuses: HEOs, CLTs, full-timers and adjuncts. For a full list, go to tinyurl.com/house-grievance-reps.

If you have a workplace concern, even if you are unsure that the concern rises to the level of a grievance, contact the union immediately.
Safety standards at CUNY

By BARBARA BOWEN

CUNY students, faculty and staff are eager to resume working and learning together on campus after a year of remote learning— but only if we can do so safely. We are intensely conscious of the value of in-person learning and interaction at CUNY, especially because the communities CUNY serves have been pummeled by deaths from COVID, loss of income and the intensifying effects of systemic poverty and racism.

But there must be no return without a safe return. As our employer, CUNY has a legal and contractual responsibility to provide a workplace that is free of recognized hazards with the potential to cause serious illness or death. To date, the CUNY administration has failed to provide unified guidance or enforcement of the standards that must be met in order for colleges to reopen more broadly. Instead, responsibility for developing reopening plans has been delegated to individual colleges, with a patchwork of plans and uneven enforcement as the result.

RESEARCH

Drawing on the latest research on safe reopening and the scientific expertise available throughout the University, the PSC has developed ten standards to promote a safe reopening of CUNY. While the union will continue to seek to negotiate over specific reopening provisions, we believe there is an urgent need for thoughtful and rigorous standards that prioritize the lives and the safety of the entire University community.

The standards were developed in partnership with the union’s Environmental Health and Safety Committee, which benefits from the leadership of faculty and staff with academic expertise in public health and environmental safety, and with reference to the New York State Guideline and Supplemental Guidance for safe reopening of higher education. The standards are rooted in the most recent and relevant scientific knowledge about the SARS-CoV-2 virus and what is needed to keep workers and students safe. They also reflect the requirements of the 1970 Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA), as enforced by the New York State Public Employee Safety and Health (PESI) plan.

The responsibility for providing a safe workplace rests with the employer, and the standards are not intended to be exhaustive. Are CUNY campuses ready for in-person classes?

They will be updated frequently and supplemented by a technical document specifying how CUNY can achieve each standard and providing references to authoritative sources. Nothing in the document waives any right of the PSC or its members under the contract or the law.

MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION IN REOPENING PLANS: PSC representatives—designated by the PSC, not by management—as well as student governance representatives and designated representatives of other unions, must participate as full decision-making members of each college reopening committee. The resulting plans, as required by the New York State Guidance, “should reflect engagement” with these representatives.

MAXIMIZE VACCINATION: CUNY must take actions to maximize vaccination within the University community, including providing education, opening vaccination sites on campuses, facilitating community vaccination and providing adequate time, not charged to annual leave, for receiving vaccinations and boosters. As a public university, CUNY should also take a lead role in making vaccination available to underserved communities. PSC-represented employees must be provided with sufficient time off to receive vaccination, and employees who do not accrue sick days must be afforded appropriate time off at full pay after being vaccinated if they experience symptoms or side effects that interfere with their ability to work.

MINIMIZE INTRODUCTION OF INFECTION ON CAMPUS: CUNY must ensure that all colleges take the necessary measures to detect COVID-19 infection in asymptomatic and asymptomatic people and prohibit individuals who have contracted the virus from entering CUNY campuses. For entrance onto campus, CUNY must require either proof of complete vaccination or a negative COVID-19 test within the timeframe established by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). Detection through regular COVID testing of PSC-represented employees may be implemented only if such testing is negotiated with the union, if appropriate privacy measures are in place and if testing is provided on campus and at other CUNY workites.

TRANSMISSION OF COVID-19 ON CAMPUS: CUNY must take all measures necessary to ensure that opportunities for transmission of COVID-19 on campus are minimized. Such measures include mandating wearing masks on campus, supplying PPE in clinical classes and other settings that require close contact, maintaining occupancy of classrooms, offices, labs and other spaces to numbers that can maintain the required physical distance; maintaining a rigorous cleaning schedule; and employing a sufficient number of trained cleaning staff and protecting their safety.

PANDEMIC VENTILATION: CUNY must permit occupancy of buildings, workites, rooms and other spaces only if such spaces can be made to comply with authoritative ventilation guidelines designed to reduce transmission of COVID-19. CUNY must also adjust maximum occupancy limits to conform to distancing requirements and ventilation capacity.

ACCOMMODATIONS FOR REMOTE WORK: In order to protect the safety and health of individuals and the public, CUNY must permit PSC-represented employees in the following categories to work remotely: employees who, for documented medical reasons, cannot be vaccinated or cannot gain immunity through vaccination; and employees whose households include an individual who cannot receive COVID-19 vaccination for documented medical reasons and who is at high risk of serious illness or death from COVID. In addition, CUNY must seek to accommodate requests for remote work from employees who have the conditions currently identified by the CDC as incurring high risk of serious illness or death from COVID-19. CUNY must also be alert to the needs of employees covered by the Americans with Disabilities Act who may need additional accommodations because of changed worksite conditions.

RIGHT TO INSPECT: PSC members and/or their representatives continue to have the right under the law and the contract to conduct walk-throughs and inspections of any workplace in which PSC-represented employees are required to work. Inspections may be conducted proactively and during occupancy.

STANDARDS FOR LABORATORIES AND STUDIOS: CUNY must adhere to enhanced ventilation, occupancy and PPE standards developed for laboratories, studios and other situations where distancing may not be feasible. The PSC has offered more detailed guidance on standards for labs and studios in a separate document.

WORLDBLA: The transition to in-person work and the continuation of remote work must in no way increase the contractual workload of PSC-represented employees or require out-of-title work. Changes to duties related to reopening that require additional work time must be compensated with appropriate overtime pay, compensatory time or contact teaching hour credit. The right of academic departments to determine appropriate teaching modalities for all classes offered by the department must be respected.

COMPREHENSIVE AND ACCESSIBLE PLANS: CUNY college reopening plans for Fall 2021 and Spring 2022 must incorporate the above standards and be easily available for inspection by all CUNY students, staff and faculty. Colleges must also make available all relevant environmental inspection reports and records of compliance with approved reopening plans.

Standards for a safe return to work

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