



## Letter to Members from Barbara Bowen in Response to Gov. Patterson's Call to Re- open Labor Contracts

November 12, 2008

Dear Colleague:

For the last few days the news has been filled with reports that Governor Paterson expects to "urge labor unions to reopen the contracts they have struck on behalf of public employees as a way to avoid or decrease layoffs" (*New York Times*, November 10, page 1). Today in his budget message, the governor explicitly called for concessions by certain statewide public employee unions, including the elimination of negotiated 3 percent salary increases.

The PSC officers learned on Monday night from the governor's office that the PSC is not included in the group of unions with whom the governor proposes to reopen contract negotiations and seek concessions. CUNY is not a state agency, and the CUNY budget must be approved by the Legislature. New salary rates and retroactive salary will be paid this month by CUNY as announced.

My message, however, is not that we can relax. It is completely unacceptable for any union to be forced to reopen a contract in order to make concessions under threat of layoffs. Every single public employee in the state would be hurt if *any* union is forced to make that choice. The precedent it would set is disastrous. As union members, our first obligation at this moment is to stand in solidarity with the other public employee unions at the state level—including United University Professions, at SUNY. Solidarity is not just the right thing to do; it is the principle that our own well-being is directly tied to the well-being of other union members and working people. As a first step, I have offered our support to the statewide public employee unions, and pledged to rally with them on November 18 in Albany—the day the legislature returns for a special session to consider budget cuts.

Meanwhile, we are already feeling the effect of Albany's deep budget cuts to CUNY this year. Faculty in several departments report that spring schedules will include the elimination of some adjunct positions and an increase in class size. Such changes would directly contradict the assurances by CUNY management that midyear budget cuts would not hurt the University's core instructional mission. Responding to these developments is a priority for the union. It is in everyone's interest to resist further budget cuts, which would inevitably damage the University.

There is an alternative to *both* budget cuts and concessions: increasing revenue. New York State would have \$16 *billion* in additional revenue this year alone if it had restored the 1994 tax cut for the highest earners. What New York is really facing is a revenue crisis. The richest one percent of New York families (those earning \$1.6 million or more a year) pay only 6.5 percent of their income in state and local taxes, while the poorest New Yorkers (with incomes under \$15,000) pay 11.6 percent. Restructuring the unfair tax system would eliminate the need for budget cuts—and generate the funds for desperately needed new investment, starting with CUNY.

In the short term, the state could close this year's budget gap by drawing on the more than \$1 billion in the "rainy day fund" (Tax Stabilization Reserve Fund) and gaining support from a federal economic stimulus. The federal government is considering a stimulus package that would increase aid to state and local governments; announcement of devastating budget cuts before the decision on a stimulus bill is premature.

The PSC has joined economists, unions and community groups across the state in calling on the governor and the legislature to adopt a revenue proposal rather than resorting to cuts and layoffs that will deepen the effect of a recession. Brooklyn College, Queens College and Lehman College were all founded during the Depression. These times demand a similar, visionary investment. Public higher education is the key to reinvigorating the economy.

While the PSC contract has not been targeted in the governor's current proposal, we must build the strength we will need to resist budget cuts, potential attacks on our benefits and threats of retrenchment. Collectively, we have to change the conversation in Albany from one about cuts to one about revenue. The PSC has been working since September to build the force we will need this winter and spring. More than 40,000 postcards calling for increased public investment in CUNY have been collected by faculty, staff and students. Union members will present the cards to the governor as part of our budget campaign. The PSC has also developed a radio advertisement on the need for increased investment—not cuts—to CUNY, and it will be aired in Albany during budget deliberations. Public hearings on the University's budget needs are planned on many campuses for this spring, and teams of PSC members are already organizing to advocate directly with their legislators for our needs.

I anticipate, however, that an even stronger response may be needed. The PSC is working in partnership with other unions, students and community groups; and we have joined the One New York coalition, which will also be rallying in Albany on November 18. Our greatest resource, of course, is you—the members—organized as a political force. We will be ready with plans to show the strength of the membership behind the position that cuts to CUNY are unacceptable, and that there is an alternative to concessions and layoffs. Collectively, we have the political power to force a different kind of discussion in Albany; it's up to us to use it. Your chapter chair and the union's central leadership will update you on how you can participate as the campaign develops. Read "This Week in the PSC" and check the union website for the latest information.

Thank you for your support for investment in CUNY. This is an important year, and I look forward to building the union's strength together.

In solidarity,

**Barbara Bowen**

President, Professional Staff Congress/CUNY