

# PSC office to move downtown this summer

By CHRISTINA INGOGLIA

The PSC will move its office downtown to 61 Broadway this summer, and construction in the new space is already underway.

The old office will close on a Friday, probably in July, and the new office will be open for business the following Monday. The exact date of the move will not be chosen until construction is closer to completion. "The goal is to be fully functional for the Fall, 2006 semester," PSC Executive Director Deborah Bell told the February Delegate Assembly.

The new space will be more member-friendly than the union's current office in midtown – which has become increasingly crowded as the PSC's membership has grown by half. "If you volunteer or work at the office, you know we are piled on top of each other," said PSC Treasurer John Hyland. "There are evenings when we have three or four committee meetings going on at same time, and people end up stuck into corners, finding space wherever they can."

## CONFERENCE ROOM

At present, grievance counselors often meet with members in the lunchroom because it is the best location available. In the new office downtown, grievance counselors will continue to share a common workspace – but they will also have a small private conference room. "Members and grievance counselors won't have to worry about being distracted by phones ringing or other people walk-

## More space for less money

ing around," said Patricia Rudden, grievance counselor for Hunter College. "Privacy is always important for the grievant, and having a separate meeting room will make members feel more comfortable."

The reception area, offices of PSC staff, and two other conference rooms will be on the building's 15th floor, along with offices of the Welfare Fund. On the floor above, the union will have a room big enough to hold more than 100 people. This can be used for Delegate Assemblies, conferences, Labor Goes to the Movies and other large events, "We are reviving the old tradition of the

union hall – a place for members to come together," said PSC President Barbara Bowen.

## MORE ROOM

This large room will have a movable partition that can divide the space in half for committee meetings or smaller union functions. With the two main conference rooms on the 15th floor and the ability to subdivide the 16th floor, the union's office space shortage should be a thing of the past.

By moving downtown, the PSC will be getting more while paying somewhat less. Even after the costs

of the move are taken into account, it would have been more expensive for the PSC to remain in its current building on West 43rd Street. "Rents in lower Manhattan are lower than rents in midtown," noted Hyland. "In addition, our new landlord was willing to pay up to \$65 per square foot to renovate the new space – a total of \$1.6 million. There are also some tax incentives for moving to that area."

"The final design for the new offices is relatively straightforward," said Bell. "To keep construction costs down, we kept it simple. But there are some architectural features that will make the new space interesting, and provide access to plentiful natural light."

Since September 11, 2001, air quality has been a concern for residents, businesses and organizations in lower Manhattan. "On September 11, the building management at 61 Broadway shut down all air vents in the building before the first tower collapsed," Bell reports, "and they later cleaned the entire ventilation system." PSC Health and Safety Committee Co-chair David Kotelchuck told *Clarion* that committee members conducted several walkthrough surveys of the office. They inspected the office's ventilation system, which is separate from the rest of the building, and found it had been well maintained. As the rebuilding of lower Manhattan moves forward, Kotelchuck said, the committee will continue to monitor local environmental issues.

## WELCOMING

After 30 years in midtown, the move is a big change and while the new office will be less accessible for some members it will be a better location for others. Transit access to the area is good, and there is a parking garage a block away. Nearby subway lines include the 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, R, W, J, M and Z. The A, C and E lines are just a few more blocks away, and PATH trains are also close at hand.

"We wanted our new office to be a place that welcomes union participation, that welcomes union activity," Hyland said, "and we expect that it will."



The new downtown PSC office space before construction began.

Peter Hoogness

# RF Central Office contract talks enter 2nd round

By ELLEN BALLEISEN

Employees of the Central Office of the CUNY Research Foundation (RF) rejected a proposed contract in a ratification vote in February. On March 29 and April 12, union and management negotiators met to discuss terms for a new settlement.

The proposed contract would have provided pay increases of 3.75% in the first year, 3.5% in the second year and 3.25% in the third year, for a compounded total of 10.87% over 39 months, from October, 2005 through December, 2008, and would also have provided increased increments for longevity. But the deal would have also increased employee contributions towards health insurance premiums, and objections to some of those provisions led members to vote the deal down.

## CENTRAL ISSUE

Health insurance was a central issue from the start of negotiations for the 83 PSC members at the RF Central Office, who process grants received by CUNY faculty and staff. "Prior to the formal bargaining, we were told by the RF that if we did

## Members nix RF's 'best offer'

not agree to increase employees' share of health insurance premiums, then the RF would reduce the benefits provided," said Debra Bergen, PSC Director of Contract Administration. The expiring contract gave management the power to change the terms of benefit programs without negotiation.

## TOP PRIORITY

In response, members said that maintaining current health benefits was one of their highest priorities, even if there was an additional cost. Under the prior contract, RF Central Office employees pay 11% of the employer's health insurance premium cost. After three months of negotiations, management presented what it said was its "last, best offer," under which employees would pay 14% of the premium in the first year and 17% in the second year.

Based on member reaction in late December, the local union chapter's bargaining team was willing to take the proposal to a vote of the membership. But an incident right before

the New Year's holiday swung opinion against management's offer.

In late December, paychecks were distributed for the first payroll period of 2006 – and employees were shocked to find that management had illegally implemented the increase in employee health care contributions, before a membership vote on the contract had even begun. The RF did not, however, implement the pay raise – so instead of a net increase, members saw their pay decline.

"The members went ballistic, and so did the union," said Bergen. "Barbara Bowen got on the phone the same day with [RF President] Richard Rothbard and told him this was an unfair labor practice and had to be corrected immediately. You can't implement a contract, in whole or in part, before it's been ratified." Rothbard agreed it was improper, she said, and management moved quickly to correct the error, and members were paid back within a day.

While the deductions were reversed, the error put a spotlight on

the size of the premium contribution increase. "Once members saw the actual dollar amount that it was going to be in the future," said PSC Chapter Chair Anthony Dixon, "they decided the package wasn't a fair package to them." It was defeated by a vote of 30 to 20.

After discussions with members, the chapter's bargaining team circulated a petition to management that focused on two key issues. In the contract's first year, it asked for a larger pay increase. "Everyone understands that the cost of benefits is rising, and we are prepared to pay more," said Dixon. "But we want management to understand that the cost of benefits isn't the only rising cost of living in New York City."

For the second year, the petition asked RF management to withdraw its demand that employees' share of the health premium rise to 17%, because this would be 17% of "an unknown quantity."

"Members are concerned about the second-year health care increase because the premium for that year hasn't been set," explained

Antoinette Morizio, the chapter's vice chair.

The petition was signed by 83% of the bargaining unit. "It showed that we are united," said Dixon. "If management was thinking that there's a division among the members, the petition made perfectly clear that that's not the case."

## POKER FACE

After the March 29 and April 12 bargaining sessions, Morizio was cautiously hopeful. "We're not that far from an agreement – but we have to see if we get there," she told *Clarion*. "It's hard to say," agreed Dixon, "because everyone has their poker face on. But I'm optimistic." As *Clarion* went to press, RF management and union negotiators had scheduled a sidebar meeting to discuss specific numbers; the next formal bargaining session is set for TK.

The PSC has represented RF Central Office workers since 1974. In the last couple of years, campus-based RF employees at LaGuardia and City Tech have voted to join the PSC, and they are currently conducting their own separate contract negotiations.