

October 9, 2009

Dear Principal Investigator:

On September 24 the staff of the CUNY Research Foundation's central office voted to authorize the Professional Staff Congress, by whom they are represented, to call a strike. The employees' vote was 91 percent in favor of the strike authorization, with a turnout of 83 percent. I want to emphasize that the vote does *not* mean that a strike has begun, but it does give the PSC the authority to call a strike. The employees took the authorization vote after 11 months of negotiations that have failed to produce a reasonable offer.

The RF workers sincerely hope, as I do, that we do not have to strike. The PSC is doing everything we can to press for a fair settlement that would make a strike unnecessary. As we continue to work for a settlement, however, I felt it was important to communicate directly with you.

As a Principal Investigator on a grant administered through the Research Foundation, you are no doubt concerned about the potential for disruption of your work in the event of a strike at the RF central office. The RF employees, and the union, take that concern seriously. We have not entered into discussion of a strike lightly. But after a year of negotiations and advocacy that has produced only below-inflation salary offers—at a time when the RF is flush with funds—we feel we have no alternative. The PSC has represented the employees at the RF central office for more than 30 years; this is the first time we have taken a vote there to authorize a strike.

Nearly ten months after the expiration of the contract, RF president Richard Rothbard and his representatives continue to insist that the employees accept a decrease in the real-dollar value of their salaries and an increase in the cost of their health insurance. At the time the employees took the strike authorization vote, the RF's offer was for increases of only 2 percent, 2.25 percent and 2.25 percent in a three-year contract—an offer that falls below the rate of inflation and thus would have the effect of *decreasing* their income.

We have seen below-inflation offers before, and RF workers even accepted a significant increase in the cost of their health insurance in the previous round of bargaining. What makes the RF's current stance unacceptable—even inexplicable—is that RF management has never claimed the Foundation lacks the money to offer more. According to the RF's 2008 annual report, the Foundation took in \$344 million in grants last year. The RF website features the announcement that it has received \$23 million in federal stimulus money so far this year.

The RF Board of Directors recently awarded a 44% raise to RF president Richard Rothbard, an increase of \$78,000. That amount alone would be nearly enough to cover a 2% increase in one year of the contract for every single RF employee at the central office. The RF spends approximately half a million dollars a year on an anti-union law firm, Nixon Peabody. Just one year of the money the Foundation spends on the anti-union lawyer would be enough to give every central office employee a 4% salary increase for three years.

The Research Foundation is making the wrong choice about how to spend the money it receives for administering grants. When a portion of grant funds is deducted by the RF, I don't think the recipients of the grants expect the Foundation to spend that money on union-busting lawyers and insulting contracts. There is enough money in the RF budget—*without any increase in grant overheads*—to pay for a fair contract for the central office employees. Refusing to do so shows disrespect for the staff, betrays the values the Foundation claims to espouse, and sends the wrong message to potential funding sources.

This dispute is not about employees who expect to get rich by working for the Research Foundation; it's about maintaining a livable income for work they are proud to do. For 11 months, the RF workers have tried everything short of a strike to produce a reasonable offer. They have negotiated, signed petitions, worn buttons, held rallies, sent letters and even engaged in a one-hour walkout. But nothing has worked. Unless the RF raises its offer to an acceptable level, they feel they have no alternative but to strike. (The courts have decided that the RF is a private employer, unlike CUNY. Therefore its employees are not covered by the Taylor Law and have the legal right to strike.)

I believe there is still a chance that a strike can be avoided. As president of the PSC, I am doing everything in my power to reach a settlement that would eliminate the need for a strike. The RF employees have no desire to disrupt your grant work, and would be thrilled to reach a settlement without making that necessary.

Your voice, as a Principal Investigator, could be critical in bringing about a fair settlement. Please call RF president Richard Rothbard at 212-417-8507 and urge him to reach a reasonable settlement with the central office employees. Urge him to drop the Foundation's punitive stance toward its staff and treat employees in a way that comports with the mission of the Foundation. Tell him how important a quick, fair settlement is to your research and the reputation of the Research Foundation as an affiliate of CUNY.

I understand this is a difficult issue, and I thank you for your patience. Please don't hesitate to contact me with any questions or concerns you may have.

Yours sincerely,

Barbara Bowen