Since 1973, five CUNY colleges have paid part-time faculty less during the final week of the semester – despite the fact that this is generally the busiest time in the academic year. But starting this Fall, that will change: in an agreement with the PSC, the University said that adjuncts on all campuses must be paid the same for each week of work. Union activists had demanded an end to the unfair practice with tactics that ranged from petitions to picket lines to guerilla theater, in a “Campaign of Outrage” that was launched in 2007. “Our persistence paid off,” said Diane Menna, lead organizer of the campaign.
**Kudos for persistence on final week**

Congratulations to the union on winning full pay for the 15th week for all adjuncts, a much-deserved increase for our colleagues who deserve full-time funding. I thank our union leaders for being on the job all year and for doing a good job in the worst of times. I remember how poorly the previous group ran the PSC when times were better, when more could be expected but instead we kept losing ground for years, before and until the current leadership was voted in.

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**New PSC Executive Council takes office**

The newly elected PSC Executive Council met for the first time on June 5. Front Row: (l-r) Steve London, First VP; Lorraine Cohen, Community College Officer; Marcia Newfield, New PSC Executive Council takes office; Michael Fabricant, Treasurer; Felipe Pimentel, CC Officer; Jonathan Mele, VP, Senior Colleges; Michael Batson, PT Personnel Officer; Penny Lewis, CC Officer; Alex Vitale, SC Officer; Arthurine Desola, Secretary; Kathleen Barker, SC Officer. Back Row: Bill Friedheim, Retiree Officer, Steve Weisblatt, PT Personnel Officer; George Brandon, SC Officer; Michael Fabricant, Treasurer; Felipe Pimentel, CC Officer; Jonathan Buchbaum, SC Officer; Costas Panayotakis, University-Wide Officer. Not Present: Carl Lindskoog and Nikki McDaniel, University-Wide Officers; Diane Menna, SC Officer.
The Grinch starred at a Baruch protest.

It's not easy, and you have to stick with it. But if you engage wholeheartedly and persistently in a just cause, you can create the pressure that's needed to win.

In discussing what to do next, part-time faculty kept coming back to the obvious unfairness of the policy. “No matter how long this had been going on, we felt it was unacceptable,” said Menna. “It completely disregarded how hard we work when the semes- ter is coming to an end. It was just outrageous!”

With the full support and backing of the union’s leadership, they decided to organize a campaign for change—and dubbed it the “Campaign of Outrage.”

The campaign was launched in April 2007 as union activists gathered petition signatures from across the CUNY system. During finals week the following month, pickets were held on each of the five campuses, and petitions were presented to several college presidents.

Next came a series of smaller, out-of-the-box actions, as organizers looked for creative ways to make the issue hard to ignore. That summer, protesters showed up at “open house” functions at Bronx, Queensborough and Kingsborough Community Colleges, passing out flyers and speaking with prospective students about the 15th week issue. The actions contrasted the five colleges’ labor practices with the theme of excellence featured in CUNY’s subway and newspaper ads.

As holiday season came, the campaign moved into guerrilla theater. Shortly before Thanksgiv- ing, an activist dressed in a turkey suit attempted to present a stuffed turkey to the presidents of Baruch and BCC, both of whom had previ- ously refused to accept the PSC’s petitions. Volunteers distributed flyers headlined, “CUNY, don’t be a turkey!”

“It’s appalling to see Baruch refuse to give adjuncts even the few dollars they deserve for finals week,” the chairperson of the col- lege’s sociology department, Glenn Petersen, told the student paper The Ticker.

During finals week that December, the campaign returned to all five campuses. This time protest- ers suited up as “The Grinch Who Stole Christmas,” while leafleting students and faculty and passing out day-glo stickers that read “Outrage!”

“We showed college presidents that we were not going away,” said Menna. “As long as they continued to cheat us, we would continue to show up and speak out.”

“Full-time faculty and students were shocked at how far CUNY would go to pinch pennies at the expense of adjunct faculty,” recalled Carl Lind- skoog, a QCC teaching fellow.

By this summer, CUNY proved that the Baruch resolution, which passed in April 2007 as union activists gathered petition signatures from across the CUNY system.

The cost of doing the wrong thing, on the other hand, was growing. “As it became more and more public, it got harder to hold onto,” said Ferns. “No matter what you say about ‘past practice,’ it looked terrible, what they were doing to the adjuncts.”

By this summer, CUNY proved that the Baruch resolution, which passed in April 2007 as union activists gathered petition signatures from across the CUNY system.
Public higher ed imperiled across US

States slash spending as revenues fall short

By MICHELLE CHEN

As the economy sinks, state colleges and universities across the country are being buffeted by the budget axe from all angles, with plans to shrink programs, cap enrollment or slash staff. Yet the California University of New York (CUNY) system has not fared well in the tightening of public education purse strings.

“We’ve been on a several-decade trend of public higher education becoming more of a private good than a public good,” said Dan Hurley, director of state relations and policy analysis with the American Association of State Colleges and Universities. “And certainly that trend is being exacerbated rather dramatically in the face of a widening recession, utilizing measures like tuition hikes and cuts in programs and/or staff.

In New York, statewidewide budget cuts were moderated by some tax increases on the wealthy and federal stimulus funds. But still, the CUNY system’s overall budget was slashed, and some $900 million in state funding and $2 billion from state universities. The result has been that the State’s public colleges have been cut to the bone, with some campuses and programs facing the axe.

“We have to absorb the same budget cuts as the rest of the system’s staff, more than 46% of CUNY senior colleges’ operating budget,” said Nancy Shulock, director of the Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Policy at Sacramento State University. “We’re being cut to the bone.

Nancy Shulock, director of the Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Policy at Sacramento State University, said the rising cost of attendance compounds other impacts of the recession. “The idea of raising tuitions and fees on university students when the economy is down is just backwards,” she said. “Families don’t have the money to pay even increasing tuition right now.”

“Going for small incremental changes – we have to do that,” said Dan Clawson, a union vice president.

“Those who can afford it cannot are left out,” said Dan Clawson, a union vice president.

“We’re where we are in California and across the country. Progressive income tax structure. Everyone to be educated and that is a public responsibility to get people educated.”

Community college connection

While community colleges struggle to absorb soaring demand for enrollment along with deep budget cuts, the Obama administration has proposed $12 billion in new community college funding over the next 10 years, with the goal of producing five million new graduates by 2020.

A competitive grant fund would distribute $9 billion to initiatives aimed at expanding access to college, improving degree completion rates, and connecting students to job training and development programs. Another $2.5 billion would back loans for the construction and renovation of campus facilities, and $500 million would go toward developing online tools for distance learning.

The initiative would be funded with savings from another proposal – to stop subsidizing private banks to make student loans and offer students direct federal loans instead.

The president of the California Federation of Teachers Community College Council, Carl Friedlander, was one of many who welcomed Obama’s proposal – but cautioned that it is not a cure-all. With California’s community colleges struggling to lose access to state funding this year alone, he noted, Obama’s $12 billion – spread out over a decade and across the entire country – is only a down payment on what is needed.

By MIKE MCDONALD
Unemployment, Tier 5 top PSC agenda

Prepared to push back on Paterson proposal

By PETER HOGNESS

Though Albany began the summer in turmoil, the PSC kept working on its two key legislative issues: support for adjunct unemployment insurance reform, and opposition to a modified pension tier for future members of CUNY pension systems.

As June began, the legislature entered a prolonged period of gridlock, with a dispute over control of the State Senate that took weeks to resolve. But the union used this time to continue organizing visits to lawmakers in their local district offices, urging the legislature to remove the unfair restrictions that limit part-time faculty from collecting unemployment insurance (UD).

UI REFORM

PSC activists met with State Senators Martin Malave Dilan, Bill Perkins and Diane Savino, and Assemblymembers Deborah Glick and José Peralta. Glick is chair of the Assembly’s committee on higher education, while Savino chairs the Senate’s committee on civil service.

The UI reform bill is a priority for the PSC’s statewide affiliate, New York State United Teachers (NYSUT). NYSUT and the PSC want part-time faculty to be treated similarly to other seasonal workers, such as those in the resort or construction industries.

After the State Senate finally resolved its internal struggle in July, it passed a limited number of bills and then adjourned. But UI reform may still get action this fall.

The New York State AFL-CIO is leading statewide efforts in support of broad UI reform, including the extension of maximum benefits. Because of New York’s high unemployment rate, a comprehensive UI reform package – including equity for adjuncts – could come to a vote this fall.

NEW PENSION TIER?

Governor Paterson has been seeking a new, inferior pension tier for public employees, dubbed Tier 5, since he issued his budget proposal in December of last year. Union opposition blocked the governor’s effort to push the measure through in the House in conjunction with this year’s state budget.

In June, however, two large unions of state employees, the Public Employees Federation (PEF) and the Civil Service Employees Association (CSEA) agreed to support creation of a Tier 5 for future employees, in return for protection against threatened layoffs. Key changes from current pension rules would include moving the minimum retirement age from 55 to 62 and requiring public workers to contribute 7% employee contributions, but without any change in the retirement age.

PRESSURE

Pension changes require legislative action – and Paterson is keeping up the pressure for Tier 5 changes that would affect other public employees, not just those who have reached a deal. Opposition to the measure from other public-sector unions, including NYSUT and the PSC, has been fierce. The legislation took no action on any Tier 5 legislation before it adjourned for the summer, but such legislation could be considered this fall. “How can everything fall into place [just] because they had three of the 48 bargaining units?,” the chair of the Assembly’s labor committee, Peter Abbate, said to The New York Times.

“Neither the PSC nor NYSUT was involved in the talks that led to this agreement,” said PSC President Barbara Bowen. “The PSC is strongly opposed to a pension reduction in principle and in practice.”

Any changes would not affect current members of New York’s public pension systems, whether working or retired, since those are protected against retroactive changes by a provision of the State Constitution. But imposing inferior pension terms would damage City University of New York, Bowen argued.

“Given the working conditions at CUNY, the University already has to compete hard to attract the best new talent,” she wrote in a letter to members on July 16. “Relegating future employees to a lower pension tier would make recruitment even harder.”

For CUNY adjuncts who have not yet joined a pension system, the push for a Tier 5 is a reminder to sign up right away. If an inferior pension tier is approved, those who sign up after it takes effect would receive the reduced benefits.

Those who support the proposed pension cutbacks often cite the state’s financial problems – but Bowen called this a false argument: “A lower pension tier would not add one penny to this year’s budget because money it generates is not realized for years.” More fundamentally, Bowen said, “New York State’s budget crisis was not caused by overspending on pensions or education. It was caused by 30 years of tax policy that reduced the top tax rate by half and deprived the state of income.”

ATTACK ON BENEFITS

The PSC Delegate Assembly strongly opposed creation of a Tier 5 in a resolution adopted on June 22. The Tier 5 proposal comes out of a broader anti-union agenda.

“The call for a reduction in the pension benefits of public employees is part of a larger attempt – that predates the current recession – to redistribute the wealth generated by working people by attacking the benefits of public employees and promoting the idea that none but the very rich are entitled to a secure retirement,” the DA stated.

While efforts to create a Tier 5 have so far been unsuccessful, renewed attempts can be expected in the fall – and the PSC has vowed to fight hard against it. “Working together with NYSUT, we will continue to oppose any diminution of pension benefits for future faculty and staff at CUNY,” Bowen said.

The union’s leadership asked PSC members who are willing to take action against attacks on public pensions to contact the union, or to work with the PSC (stonge@pscmail.org). “Our strongest defense against this concession is your engagement and support,” Bowen said.

Council restores Bloomberg’s cuts

But also OKs tuition hike

By PETER HOGNESS

After weeks of negotiations, New York’s mayor and City Council reached agreement on the City budget on June 19. A grassroots lobbying effort by PSC members helped defeat broad cuts in CUNY funding proposed by Mayor Bloomberg. The budget does not, however, include the money needed to fund CUNY’s budget without the tuition increase proposed by Chancellor Goldstein.

CUNY community college tuition will go up by $350 per year as of next semester.

“Measured by what is happening to higher educational systems in California, New Jersey and elsewhere [see facing page], CUNY community colleges are in a relatively good situation,” said PSC First Vice President Steve London. “But this year’s budget will impose new burdens on our students.”

The Council restored $21.4 million out of $25 million in proposed cuts to CUNY’s budget.

“Funding increases for CUNY’s Black Male Empowerment Initiative and tuition increases, in negotiations yet to be concluded with DC37. Thus, this money cannot be touched for current expenses,” London said.

This leaves just a $7 million net increase over last year’s base budget of $37.5 million in City aid. It is enough to cover increased costs for mandatory needs (including contractual raises) but not to fund new investments. “In terms of this year’s budget process, it represents a success,” said London, “but it is far from meeting CUNY’s needs.”

Most funding for CUNY community colleges comes from the City, but the State provides a certain amount of support per full-time-equivalent student (FTE). While the State budget adopted last spring provides $15 million more in State community college aid, almost all of the increase is due to increased student enrollment, which will create increased demands on the system.

Students pay the cost of funding shortfalls.

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Students pay the cost of funding shortfalls.
Inside the Antarctic icebox

By JOHN TARLETON

With concerns about global warming and our planet’s future heating up, a Queens College geology professor is searching for answers in the ancient world of the coldest place on Earth – Antarctica.

Last fall, Stephen Pekar led a team of 17 that spent a month on the sea ice between East Antarctica and Ross Island. The team, which included two Queens College students and a Harlem middle school teacher, investigated sediments below the sea floor from earlier epochs, seeking a deeper understanding of the climate change in Antarctica tens of millions of years ago when Earth was a much warmer place.

LOOKING BACK

“Antarctica is ground zero for past climate change,” Pekar said. “The change has been and will be bigger there. Studying this climate period is a look back at our future.”

Until 34 million years ago, Antarctica enjoyed a cool climate with alpine forest and mountain streams. Then temperatures began to drop and giant ice sheets gradually spread down from the inland plateaus. By 14 million years ago, the entire continent was locked in an icy grip that endures to this day. For Pekar, solving the mystery of why such a dramatic climate change happened is a “holy grail” of Antarctica climatology and has drawn him to the frozen continent three times.

Pekar’s team worked on the ice 18 kilometers offshore. Surrounded on three sides by white-capped mountains and volcanoes, they planted flags in the ground every 100 meters to mark the stations and volcanoes, they planted flags in the ground every 100 meters to mark the three sides by white-capped mountains and volcanoes, they planted flags in the ground every 100 meters to mark the three sides by white-capped mountains and volcanoes, they planted flags in the ground every 100 meters to mark the infield plateaus. By 14 million years ago, the entire continent was locked in an icy grip that endures to this day. For Pekar, solving the mystery of why such a dramatic climate change happened is a “holy grail” of Antarctica climatology and has drawn him to the frozen continent three times.

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Pekar said the local record shows that climate change is a non-linear process, and he notes that the climate-related phenomena we have seen so far (increased droughts, floods, heat waves, more powerful hurricanes, melting ice caps, and the waxing and waning of sea ice) could be a harbinger of more dramatic changes to come during this century.

“We have unplugged the refrigerator and left the door open,” Pekar said. “We could move into a major change abruptly.”

According to leading NASA climatologist James Hansen, the planet will be set on an irreversible path toward an “ice-free state” if the world is not able to reverse the trend of increasing greenhouse gas emissions.

For Pekar, opening this public window to his Antarctica research was another part of his work as a climate scientist: pushing back the ignorance of global warming that was promoted under the Bush administration.

A recent study by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press and the American Association for the Advancement of Science found a widespread lack of accurate knowledge about climate change. Only about half of the US public believes that climate change is caused by human activities, while 11% doesn’t believe in global warming at all. The study’s parallel survey of the scientific community found that only 5% of US scientists speak “often” with reporters.

Speaking out

Pekar said he has learned over the years to become a better public speaker. By honing concise soundbites, he has found he can argue effectively against climate change deniers, who often claim to be experts but have not been published on the subject in peer-reviewed journals.

“I encourage all scientists working in environmental science who have the energy to share their expertise,” Pekar said. Unless scientists engage with the broader public, he added, “it is the pseudo-experts who will dominate the airwaves.”

Pekar will head south again in January to drill for sediments off the coast of East Antarctica. The work will focus on the climate change that took place about 25 to 45 million years ago, during the transition from the Eocene to the Oligocene epochs. As for his students, they both said the journey to Antarctica further inspired them to pursue their own research interests.

A day in the life

Working in the world’s most inhospitable climate isn’t easy even if you are a hardy, determined scientist like Andrea Balbas, a 36-year-old geology major who will graduate from Queens College in December.

Balbas and other members of the New Harbor Offshore Expedition lived in pairs in unheated tents floating on eight-foot thick sea ice over Antarctica’s McMurdo Sound. They obtained the fresh water they needed by taking a chainsaw to a nearby iceberg and then heating the ice back at camp. There were no showers.

When nature called, the crew used a makeshift outhouse that consisted of a tent placed over a hole that they dug into (but not through) the ice. Late spring temperatures hovered between -15 and +10 Fahrenheit, and the threat of being hit by sudden storms was always present.

“There’s a constant danger in Antarctica,” said Balbas, who is working this summer at NASA’s Goddard Space Center in Maryland.

Sub-zero humor

The crew’s day started at 6 am with coffee and a chocolate donut provided by a teammate from Montana Tech singing, “Ain’t nothin’ in the world like a big-eyed girl to make me act so funny! make me spend my moneys!”

“It was hilarious,” Balbas recalled.

A breakfast of pancakes and sausage would follow in the galley tent where communal meals were prepared by a cook flown in for the expedition. The crew would then head out to take seismic readings of the ocean floor beneath them.

Recording 30 to 35 readings in a single day, the crew would head out to Balbas. After a dinner of stew and a filet of salmon, an exhausted Balbas would return to her tent and her down sleeping bag (rated for use down to minus 50 degrees Fahrenheit). It was late spring in Antarctica, and the temperatures in the tent’s interior were too low for Balbas to have no problem passing out.

To persevere in Antarctica, Balbas said, “you are constantly trying to stay warm. You need more food, more fuel and more sleep.”

PSC PEOPLE
Enforcing contract rights

By JOHN TABLETON

After five years as a financial aid counselor at College of Staten Island, Zoraida Hernandez was hired as an academic counselor at Brooklyn College. When she moved from one job to the other, she arranged for a week off in between, to spend time with her ailing father.

But on Hernandez’s first day in her new position, she was told that she had been stripped of all of her seniority: management said that her one-week hiatus constituted a “break in service.” Her vacation days were reduced from 20 to zero, she lost several weeks in accumulated sick time, and was stripped of several years’ credit that would have counted toward her retirement.

“I was shocked,” said Hernandez, who had previously utilized all of her vacation and sick time while recovering from knee surgery. “They said, ‘you can’t do any-thing about it,’ that it wasn’t their fault. That’s when I called the union.”

With help from a PSC grievance counselor, Hernandez filed a complaint. It led to a settlement that restored her sick and vacation time, as well as one of the four years that counted toward her retirement.

TEAM EFFORT

Today, six years later, Hernandez comes into the PSC’s Central Office once a week to work as a HEO grievance counselor, helping to carry out one of the union’s most important functions: making sure that contract rights are fully enforced.

“The union’s grievance operation combines an expert and professional staff with members trained in grievance representation,” said PSC First VP Steve London. “When a grievance must be filed, we fight tooth-and-nail to enforce our members’ rights.”

“You’ve got to have perseverance to do this work,” says Debra Bergen, the PSC’s Director of Contract Administration. “It’s very rewarding when we can get someone their job back, or get an unfair performance evaluation reversed.”

Bergen leads a team of three full-time staff in the union’s Department of Contract Administration, which coordinates the work of about two dozen rank-and-file grievance counselors like Hernandez. Grievance counselors for HEOs, CLTs and adjuncts work out of the PSC office, as do some grievance counselors for full-time faculty. Most full-time faculty grievance counselors serve on their own campus, as the grievance officer for their local union chapter.

“Contract enforcement is the real guts of the union,” says Howard Prince, a retired BMCC professor of social science who started doing grievance counseling in 1975. “If you can’t enforce the contract, it’s not worth the paper it’s written on.”

According to PSC Coordinator of Contract Administration Albert Muñoz, the PSC Director of Legal Affairs Peter Zwiebach. “It is the setting where a wronged employee, with the aid of the union, can stand as an equal to a billion dollar institution and demonstrate that her or his grievance needs to be redressed.” Arbitration hearings usually last one full day and cost about $1,690 to $2,200, with each side shouldering half the expense.

Zwiebach works closely with legal assistant Donna Williams-DeVose, whose duties include maintaining a union database of past arbitration decisions. “It allows us to see at a glance any similar cases going on at other CUNY campuses,” she told Clari-son, “as well as when we have prevailed in past cases and when we have not.”

In addition to handling almost all of the PSC’s arbitration hearings and disciplinary issues, Zwiebach also represents the PSC in lawsuits, and in proceedings before state and federal labor boards. PSC-initiated lawsuits have led to some important victories for members’ rights in recent years – for example, a settlement guaranteeing the right of certain HEO-series employees to be paid for working overtime as specified under the Fair Labor Standards Act.

Albert Muñoz

As coordinator of contract administration, Albert Muñoz makes sure that PSC members benefit from the hard-earned rights that they have won through collective bargaining. His responsibilities include handling grievances, as well as member education.

Albert’s labor movement experience began at CUNY. While a student at Hunter College, he interned at 1199. He then became an organizer for the NY Hotel and Motel Trades Council and was original-ly hired at the PSC as an organizer in 2007.

Donna Williams-DeVose

Legal assistant Donna Williams-DeVose maintains the union’s arbitration database and screens calls regarding disciplinary matters. She helps members prepare their paperwork in advance of meetings with Zwiebach and others working on contract enforcement.

Peter Zwiebach

As the PSC’s director of legal affairs, Peter Zwiebach’s contract enforcement responsibilities include handling grievances, attending disciplinary hearings and arguing matters before the Public Employment Relations Board (PERB).

Before joining the PSC in 2007, Peter was an attorney at the labor law firm of Gladstein Reif & Meginness, where he represented several public-sector unions. He also worked as an organizer for Local 628 of the American Federation of Musicians. Peter is a graduate of Duke Law School.
Stella D’Oro workers fight for jobs

Support grows for saving Bronx bakery

By SARAH SECUNDA

Stella D’Oro workers ended their 11-month strike last July 7 after winning a sweeping judgment from the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). The NLRB ruled that the union’s efforts to keep the company from closing its plant in the Bronx had engaged in unlawful labor practices and ordered the strikers rehired, with back pay, under the terms of their old contract. But the Bronx bakery workers now find themselves racing to save their jobs after Brynwood, a Greenwich-based private equity firm, announced plans to close the cookie factory on October 31.

The NLRB ordered back pay, reinstatement and monetary damages for the workers. The workers’ union has filed a charge with the labor board alleging that Brynwood is illegally closing the plant to force the workers to vote to sell the union. “Under the law, you can’t keep an employer in business if it wants to go completely out of business,” said Louie Nikolaidis, the union’s attorney. “But they’re not allowed to move production to avoid the union.”

New associate editor at Clarion

By CLARION STAFF

Clarion has a new associate editor. John Tarleton. He previously worked for eight years as an editor and general coordinator for The Independent, a New York-based alternative newspaper that has won scores of journalism awards for its coverage of community struggles.

Tarleton graduated from the University of Missouri School of Journalism in 1989 and subsequently worked as a reporter for Iowa’s Ottumwa Courier. Dissatisfied with the narrow constraints of corporate journalism, he left the Courier and spent 10 years writing and traveling across the US and in Latin America. His website webtraveler.org predated the blogging revolution by a decade and featured a mix of reporting on grassroots political activism, stories of daily life and profiles of the unique people he met along the way.

Award-winning writer and experienced editor

It was a lesson, he said, in the power of collective action—one that he applied in his participation in the historic 1999 Seattle demonstrations at the meeting of the World Trade Organization. Tarleton soon began working with Indymedia, a decentralized worldwide network of independent journalists that was born during the Seattle protests.

In 2001 Tarleton joined the New York City chapter of Indymedia and went on to work on its fledgling newspaper, The Independent. He has served as a writer, editor and volunteer coordinator. He established the paper’s community reporting workshops, in which he trained hundreds of aspir- ing citizen journalists.

As an editor, Tarleton helped build The Independent to a publica- tion with a readership of more than 40,000. His own articles have twice won the New York Community Media Alliance’s award for best feature writing. He has also served as student opposition to military recruiting in Bushwick and once in a profile case. He currently lives on the streets of New York.

“John is a thorough reporter, a skilled writer and an experienced coordinator,” says Clarion editor Pat Arnow. “He’s also a master of the practical details required to put out a print publication with high stan- dards and tight deadlines. We’re fortunate to have him on our team.”

The effort to block a sale to Lance worked for eight years as an editor and general coordinator for The Independent, a New York-based alternative newspaper that has won scores of journalism awards for its coverage of community struggles.

The NLRB found that the company had acted illegally by unilaterally implementing its own contract terms two weeks after the strike began. In addition to immediate reinstatement of the strikers, the NLRB ordered the company to pay the workers back wages dating to May 6, when the company had rejected an offer by the strikers to return to work under the terms of their old contract.

Local 50, Brynwood claimed it could not operate Stella D’Oro profitably without steep concessions from the workforce but refused to provide the union with the financial information necessary to document that claim.

“Back Pay”

The NLRB found that the company’s refusal to provide those financial records represented a failure to bargain in good faith. The union said that, contrary to Brynwood’s unsubstantiated claim, the company was not running at a loss. The problem, attorney Nikolaidis said July 9 on Democracy Now, is that private equity companies like Brynwood promise their investors very high profits, on the order of 30 to 35%.

“That is an unreasonable rate of return for most companies,” Nikolaidis said. “So, it is profitable, it’s just not as profitable as they would like.”

The labor board also found that the company had acted ille- gally by unilaterally implementing its own contract terms two weeks after the strike began. In addition to immediate reinstatement of the strikers, the NLRB ordered the company to pay the workers back wages dating to May 6, when the company had rejected an offer by the strikers to return to work under the terms of their old contract.

ANNIVERSARY

Local 50 has petitioned the NLRB to seek an injunction that would keep the factory open while the board investigates the union’s charges. “The company’s decision to close came immediately after they got an unfavorable decision,” said Nikolaidis. “We’re saying that’s a retaliation for the protected con- cered activities of the workers.”

The Post reported that Senators Schumer and Gillibrand support the union’s request for an injunction. If Local 50 is granted, it would buy more time to force Brynwood to accept an offer from an owner who was considering staying in the Bronx. Nikolaidis said the union is also exploring whether it can secure financial backing for an employee buy- out, though he acknowledged that this would be difficult.

As the Stella D’Oro workers struggle to find a way to save the factory, the Solidarity Committee is expanding its outreach to area unions. As Clarion went to press, plans were announced for a rally at the plant at noon on August 15, the one-year an- niversary of the start of the strike. “Persistence and solidarity—among workers and their community supporters—have taken us this far,” Landau said, “and it is only by ex- panding that grassroots support that we can ultimately win this battle.”

For more information and further updates, see stelladorostrike.com.
By JOHN TARLETON

As City revenues continued to fall, the Municipal Labor Committee (MLC) agreed in early June to a two-year package of $400 million in health care savings. Most of the savings come from funding alloccation changes proposed by City unions; less than 10% ($30 million) will come from benefit reductions affecting union members in HIP or Senior Care.

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PSC President Barbara Bowen, who sits on the MLC’s steering committee, told Clarion City unions worked together to preserve the affordability of health insurance and to stave off the layoffs of the endangered workers. An additional $250 million in technical/structural changes added up to a “win-win” proposal, said Morgan, who sits on the MLC’s technical committee. The MLC had advanced these proposals before, but did not secure the City’s agreement until June. The changes include coordinat- ing benefits with other insurance carriers and incorporating a large number of non-metro New York City hospitals in a participating network to avoid excess charges and reduce premiums. The adjust- ments also involve a legal change of filing status for Blue Cross in order to properly address New York State insurance premium taxes, a shift that will save the City nearly $50 million per year.

A SMALL STEP

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City unions reach health care deal

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Support for CUNY is key for PSC-backed candidates

By STEVE LONDON
PSC First Vice President

Tuesday, September 15, is the date for this year’s New York City primary elections. Almost all victorious primary candidates for City Council and citywide offices will likely win the general election in November. They will hold office for the next four years, making decisions on CUNY’s operating and capital budgets.

That is why dozens of PSC members and staff have worked hard this summer to provide members with the union’s best assessment of the candidates running for office. The PSC Executive Council made its endorsement decisions on July 16, following the Legislative Committee candidates interviews, recommendations and discussions in the Delegate Assembly.

The PSC has had an active endorsement policy since 2006. While the union works through its state and affiliates (NYSUT and AFT) on decisions about which candidates to support for state and national office, in local elections the PSC makes its own candidate endorsements.

LOCAL RACES

The union has emphasized City Council races during local primaries, and our work in these elections has introduced the issue of adequate funding for CUNY into City Council politics at a grassroots level. This direct involvement with candidates has been an important factor in reversing declining City council politics at a grassroots level. This direct involvement with candidates has been an important factor in reversing declining City support for CUNY’s community colleges.

Every year, when Mayor Bloomberg (and Giuliani before him) has proposed cuts to CUNY’s operating budget, the PSC has urged the Council to restore those cuts – and Council members have generally been very responsive. According to the Fiscal Policy Institute, New York City funding for CUNY, when adjusted for inflation and the number of full-time equivalent students, rose by more than 30% between fiscal years 2001 and 2009.

It’s important that we increase our involvement in local elections. It’s important for our members to vote – especially in primary elections where turnout is generally low.

The PSC’s endorsements are based on the candidates’ records. The union examines their positions on policies affecting CUNY’s funding, our students’ education and working conditions of PSC members, as well as general public policies (e.g., tax policies), and also evaluates the strength of the candidate’s campaign. There are persuasive arguments for the choices the union has made.

NEW WEBSITE

This year the union is doing something new. The PSC’s Political Action Committee has created a web page with a range of information about this year’s candidates (www.psc-politicalaction.org). Members will be able to read the responsibilities of all candidates who returned the PSC’s issue questionnaire, whether or not they were endorsed.

In addition to the PSC’s own endorsements, the website also indicates which candidates are supported by the Central Labor Council (CLC) and the Working Families Party (WFP). The PSC formally participates in the CLC endorsement process and, while the PSC is not part of the WFP, many members are interested in their endorsements. This site will be useful not only to PSC members but also to other interested voters. Because it includes information on candidates’ stands on the issues, the site can also be used, appropriately, with students.

In this election cycle, the union is building relationships not only with current leaders but with the next generation of leaders as well.

The complete list of PSC-endorsed candidates is to the right. The union has endorsed many incumbents who have been long-time friends. Below, I briefly highlight some of the new Council candidates who are receiving our support – community leaders who will have a growing impact on New York City’s future.

JAMES VAN BRAMER, Council District 18 (Brooklyn). Van Bramer has fought for more resources for public education. An impressive community organizer, Van Bramer will be a strong advocate for CUNY and a friend of the PSC if he is elected.

DANIEL GARODNICK, Council District 8 (Manhattan). A lifelong labor activist, Garodnick has been active in the movement for CUNY funding. He is a strong labor and CUNY supporter.

For public advocate, the PSC has decided to support Bill de Blasio, who has built a broad coalition in support of his candidacy. De Blasio has a clear strategic vision for economic development of the city and CUNY’s place in that development. He has also been a good friend of CUNY and of the PSC in the past. He has been outspoken in defending the rights of CUNY students on public assistance and worked to restore their right to have time in college study count toward workfare requirements.

As you decide how you will cast your vote in September, I hope you will give the PSC endorsements serious consideration. Take a look for yourself – go to www.psc-politicalaction.org and examine the answers from those candidates who responded to the PSC questionnaire.

And make sure to vote in the primary election on Tuesday, September 15.
WASHINGTON has been to build upon and, in hospital and doctor’s office. This would provide 20% average) and elimination of the complex dominated by private insurance companies, and a trillion dollars (over 10 years) to fund the original concept of the “public option” was running for the Senate. John Conyers’ HR 676, the single-payer Medicare for all bill now in Congress, has been endorsed by 558 union organizations, including 39 state labor federations and 20 international or national unions. The PSC and the American Federation of Teachers both back a single-payer approach to health care reform has yet to receive serious consideration within the Beltway (see sidebar). Under single-payer advocates stood up in congressional hearing rooms demanding to be heard and got themselves arrested (see photo), not one supporter of a single-payer plan had been invited to speak at any of the numerous hearings on health reform issues.

PUBLIC OPTION

Many health care activists and numerous individuals, organized in a lobbying group called Health Care for America Now (HCAN), have been supporting the inclusion of a “public option” in whatever reform bill comes out of Congress. Many members of HCAN ultimately favor a single-payer plan and think that the costly failings of private insurance will, in the long run, lead to greater public support for a government-sponsored plan. Indeed, the original concept of the “public option” would have allowed very wide enrollment and presented a real challenge to the private insurance industry. But it is now clear that any “public option” that might actually be included in the final legislation will be a pale shadow of that expansive concept, open to relatively few people and operating with little or no financial backing from the government. So what has Congress come up with? As of this writing, the Senate Finance Committee, the most conservative of the congressional committees, has yet to produce a bill, but Ted Kennedy’s Senate committee, the Health, Education, Labor and Pension (HELP) Committee, along with three House committees, have produced draft legislation. They follow the expected pattern, with some details added:

**DRAFT LEGISLATION**

- Employer-based insurance plans would continue as they are now, but they would have to meet some conditions. For instance, they could not contain annual or lifetime limits on coverage, thus incorporating catastrophic insurance and undoubtedly raising their cost. Otherwise there would be little change, except that now employees would be required to accept coverage, if they could afford it. (They would be allowed to skip employer-based insurance and access the “exchange,” where subsidies are available, only if the employer-based plan’s premium is more than 12% of their income.)
- Individuals would be required to buy insurance through an “exchange” if their employer didn’t provide it. Subsidies would be available for individuals and families up to 400% of the poverty line (those for whom coverage was still deemed unaffordable would get a “hardship exemption” – that is, they could remain uninsured). The legislation does not impose any pricing limitations on private insurers or specify what insurance will cost. To get an idea of what such a policy might cost, we can look at Massachusetts, where this type of program is now in effect. For a family of four with income above $86,356, the least expensive plan would cost $9,800 per year with a $3,500 deductible; that is, this family would have to spend $13,300 before the insurance would provide any coverage, and they would still face 20% co-insurance charges when they access care.
- A new public insurance plan would be created, but it would be severely constrained. Only those who are uninsured and do not receive insurance from their employer could access it. Further, it would have to operate under the same financial rules as private insurers: it would have to survive on the premiums it collects, and it would not receive any federal subsidy. At July’s APL-CIO health care rally in Washington, CUNY retiree and PSC member Gloria Waldman told a camera crew: “We need a public option where everyone can have health care, everyone is taken care of.” The bills now in Congress fall far short of that goal.

**STILL COSTLY**

The most striking failing of these plans is their lack of any significant means of controlling costs. As the director of the Congressional Budget Office, responsible for the economic “scoring” of these plans, stated (in the arcane jargon that permeates Washington), “In the legislation that has been reported, we do not see the sort of fundamental changes that would be necessary to reduce the trajectory of federal health spending by, say, 20%.” In other words, the problems of rising costs and declining benefits that face all of us trying to get coverage are seriously addressed.

As of this writing, it is too early to know if any bill will pass. As Clrion went to press, a bloc of liberal House Democrats voted to vote against any bill with the “public option” watered down even further, blasting a compromise with conservative Democrats in the House Commerce Committee. However, it is clear that, no matter what emerges from Washington this year, it will not go nearly far enough to solve the problems of declining access and rising cost that beset our health care system. Costs will continue to climb, growing numbers of people will be uninsured and underinsured, and individuals and families across the country will suffer from lack of access to the health care they need. The struggle for real health care reform will go on.

Leonard Rodberg is a professor of urban studies at Queens College and a member of the PSC Health Care Reform Committee.

Tiny steps for single-payer

After months of being completely shut out of the legislative discussion, single-payer advocates in Congress made some small gains in July. At the end of the month, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi agreed to allow a vote in the full House on a single-payer plan before the end of the year. With just 86 supporters of HR 676, there is little suspense about the outcome – but the vote provides an opportunity to gain a bit more public attention for this alternative. In mid-July, the House Education and Labor Committee approved an amendment from Rep. Dennis Kucinich to its health reform bill, which would let states request a federal waiver allowing them to establish statewide single-payer plans. Some commentators hailed this as significant, pointing out that single-payer health care first came to Canada at the provincial level before it was adopted nationwide. The California Legislature has twice passed single-payer bills, but only seen vetoed by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger. But Kucinich’s amendment is sure to meet fierce opposition from the private insurance industry, and it remains to be seen if it will survive in the final House bill, much less in the Senate.

By LEONARD RODBERG

Queens College

**Will we get health care reform?**

President Obama has proclaimed this the Year of Health Care Reform. From the summits at the White House to nearly daily hearings of five separate congressional committees, activity on health care reform has been at the center of the nation’s domestic agenda. While the president has deferred to Congress on the details of the reform plan, its proposed structure has been clear from the beginning. It would be modeled on the plan Massachusetts implemented three years ago which has substantially reduced the number of residents without insurance (but has not reduced the number having problems paying their medical bills).

The ingredients of these plans are: (1) an employer and individual mandate, requiring that employers provide insurance or pay a fee to the government and requiring that individuals purchase health insurance or pay a penalty; (2) a health insurance “exchange” that would offer a range of insurance options to those without insurance; (3) subsidies for low- and moderate-income individuals and families buying insurance through the exchange; (4) a requirement that private insurers take anyone who applies, with no exclusions for pre-existing conditions and no excessive premiums; (5) a “public option,” a public insurance plan that would offer an alternative to private insurance; and (6) expansion of Medicaid for more coverage of very low-income Americans.

**SINGLE PAYER**

The general theme of the discussion in Washington has been to build upward, in fact, to protect the existing private insurance industry. In recent years, it has been losing customers as more and more employers have found that the costs of insurance are too expensive. The plans being developed in Congress amount, in effect, to a bailout of the private insurance industry. However, accomplishing this bailout requires Congress to spend at least a trillion dollars (over 10 years) to fund the subsidies necessary to permit the uninsured to purchase insurance plans they can afford. This has not been an easy task and, as of this writing, it has not been solved. Finding places to cut within the existing system (particularly the public programs, Medicare and Medicaid) has been difficult, and Congress never likes to raise taxes, even for the worthy task of expanding insurance coverage.

From the beginning, a single-payer plan – a Medicare for All program in which government would provide insurance for everyone – has been declared “off the table” in Washington. A single-payer plan would cover everyone and, according to numerous analyses, would do so without the country having to spend any more on health care than it does today. Medicare currently provides comprehensive coverage for those over 65 and has low administrative costs and high popularity ratings among both patients and doctors. Compared with today’s system that is dominated by private insurance companies, a single-payer plan would undoubtedly cost significantly lower costs, mainly through reduced overhead (projected at 3%, versus today’s 20% average) and elimination of the complex billing systems now required in every hospital and doctor’s office. This would provide more than enough savings to cover the uninsured and reduce the growing epidemic of “underinsurance” that leads to more than a million “medical bankruptcies” every year. Polls show that two-thirds of Americans and 59% of US doctors would support such a plan. Barack Obama declared his support for a single-payer plan back in 2003 when he was running for the Senate. John Conyers’ HR 676, the single-payer Medicare for All bill now in Congress, has been endorsed by 558 union organizations, including 39 state labor federations and 20 international or national unions. The PSC and the American Federation of Teachers both back a single-payer solution.

But despite activists’ efforts, the single-payer approach to health care reform has yet to receive serious consideration within the Beltway (see sidebar). Under single-payer advocates stood up in congressional hearing rooms demanding to be heard and got themselves arrested (see photo), not one supporter of a single-payer plan had been invited to speak at any of the numerous hearings on health reform issues.

**On May 12, US Capitol police arrested doctors and nurses who demonstrated at a Senate Finance Committee hearing, targeting Congress’s refusal to discuss a Canadian-style single-payer plan.**
This article is adapted from Race & Recession, a report from the Applied Research Center, publisher of ColorLines magazine. Full text of the report is at arc.org/recession.

The country is facing an economic crisis and many are experiencing unprecedented instability. Individual Americans of all races are facing dire situations – losing their jobs, homes and security. Communities of color are affected disproportionately; here, the crisis is intensified.

The emergency now upon communities of color is the result of historic and current inequities, policies and practices that block black, Latino, Asian and American Indian people from opportunity and stability, and now plagues more families into despair. Few Gains for Workers

These disparities pose a threat to the health of our national economy. In contrast to our collective ideals of fairness and opportunity, in the real world the terms are rigged against people of color. The outcomes are not random and reflect a pattern that is both merited and racial. Communities of color have less access to the political representation, economic opportunity and health care that others enjoy.

Yet this inequality itself has not been evenly distributed. Income inequality between whites and people of color has increased as general stratification grew over the past decade. While it is widely noted that growing inequality is a sign of an unhealthy economy, less often acknowledged is the color of inequality. As wages of all workers grew only marginally and then remained static, Latino and black real median family incomes actually fell 2.2% and 1%, respectively, between 2000 and 2007. The decline was the first in a business cycle of this length since World War II.

Stratification

Indeed, this country’s growing economic stratification cannot be fully understood without accounting for persistent racial inequality. The Applied Research Center compared levels of overall income inequality in the 50 states and the District of Columbia to racial demographic data and found a significant relationship between income inequality and percentage of people of color per state.

Income inequality, Kentucky and Ohio, had low concentrations of people of color. Just four states buck the trend with low income inequality yet high concentrations of people of color.

This state analysis reveals that overall rates of income inequality in the United States are inextricably linked to growing and persistent rates of racial inequality. To address the growing divide – the same stratification that we now know pushed the economy into decline by diminishing real incomes and increasing family debt – requires eradicating racial inequities that pull people of color to the bottom.

CUMULATIVE EFFECTS

Income and wealth inequality is racialized in the United States because the cumulative and compounding effects of past and present policies generate deep racial disparities. The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 – the GI Bill – provides a clear example of the way that racial inequality accumulates over time. Signed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the bill aimed to give every returning World War II veteran the opportunity to further his education, borrow money for a house or business, or receive a well-paying job. Yet veterans of color were blocked from buying homes during these post-war years by restrictive racial covenants that denied them access to mortgages. As home ownership grew exponentially, the economic gap between white and nonwhite households widened, and the ripple effects are still felt today.

Across the nation, people of color continue to face housing discrimination that builds upon that of the past, are relegated to precarious and low-wage jobs and regularly confront persistent barriers to opportunity. People of color have less accumulated wealth than whites and therefore less to fall back on in hard economic times. Yet the safety net for all poor people has been diminished, leaving many families without the support they need to survive.

Action Needed

These failures of public policy need to be addressed immediately as federal, state and local governments implement job creation and economic recovery programs with funds from the Stimulus Bill. The persistent reality of these disparities means that without explicit attention to inequity, racial divisions will remain, or even grow. Discussing efforts to revitalize the job market, former US Secretary of Labor Robert Reich stated: “If construction jobs go mainly to white males who already dominate the construction trades, many people who need jobs the most – women, minorities, and the poor and long-term unemployed – will be shut out.”

Racial inequality stands in the way of opportunity for communities of color and a healthy economy for all Americans. We need only the political will to adopt the many solutions available. These policies will have to tackle both the institutional and historical roots of racial inequality that created an unequal playing field for people of color and the compounding effect of the multiple institutions that affect these communities. The crisis facing communities of color requires both immediate relief and long-term, structural repairs that create fertile ground for our most precious American Dream: liberty and justice for all.

Economic gaps are growing wider.