Clarion
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Indoor air quality is the most common health and safety problem at CUNY, and there are special problems in laboratory and studio space. Find out how to protect yourself.

IRAQ DEATHS
Two from CUNY die in Iraq
From City Tech & Queens College, both in the same month

ARBITRATION WIN
CUNY must pay adjunct for cancelled class
An arbitrator rules that adjuncts must be informed as soon as CUNY knows a class is cancelled. An adjunct who got the news only after he started teaching gets paid for the whole semester.

OUR BENEFITS
HEO & CLT professional development fund
The fund offers grants of up to $2,000 to develop professional skills and academic work. They’ve been used for a greenhouse management conference, a public speaking class, & research at the Library of Congress.

ANGER AND ACTION
CUNY OFFERS 1.5%, MEMBERS MOBILIZE
Above, PSC members raise signs before walking out of the November 29 Board of Trustees’ meeting, protesting the lack of a decent financial offer and management’s cancellation of contract negotiations the previous week. On December 1, CUNY finally made an initial financial offer of 1.5% over four years. Incensed union members are organizing a stepped-up contract campaign for the Spring semester.

HEALTH & SAFETY
Bad air in the labs
Indoor air quality is the most common health and safety problem at CUNY, and there are special problems in laboratory and studio space. Find out how to protect yourself.
Labor needs a voice on the Board of Trustees

It was my “privilege” to attend a meeting of CUNY’s Board of Trustees on November 29. Together with a host of PSC members, I held a poster calling for a collective bargaining “Contract Now!”

At one time the Board of Higher Education (the former name of CUNY’s Board of Trustees) had two members from the ranks of organized labor: Ben McLaurn of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and David Sullivan of the Building Service Employees Union. Today there are many representatives of organized labor who are deserving of being on the Board of Trustees.

CUNY’s current Trustees have failed to provide the conditions and well-being that faculty and staff need to carry out CUNY’s mission of education. Salaries, working conditions, lack of office space and the Welfare Fund – all are in need of positive correction. Adjuncts need proportionate equality in salaries and benefits, to remove the temptation of using them as “cheaper labor.”

The pressure on the Trustees must continue.

International solidarity

In Colombia, unionized university personnel and teachers, as well as students, face death threats and assassination. The PSC International Committee has regularly received information on this from our sister university union SINTRAUNICOL and the teachers’ union FECODER.

To help mitigate these abuses, we met with the General Consul and legal and cultural consuls of Colombia on December 1 in their New York office. We presented documentation of specific threats to named individuals and reports of the murders of others. We asked the consuls to make sure the government of President Uribe investigates these cases and provides effective protection for those still living.

In a mutually respectful and courteous interview, the consuls agreed to contact the Colombian Ministries of Education and of Justice to seek investigation by security and, should findings be substantive, to provide protection for the threatened unionists and students. They also agreed to let us know the outcome, to keep us informed of subsequent actions, and to meet with us in the future.

The committee also raised $1,185 in donations as a small defense fund for our sister-unionists menaced with death by AUC paramilitaries. If you wish to make a contribution, please send it to: Renate Bridenthal, Chair, International Committee, PSC, 25 West 43rd Street, New York, NY 10036.

Renate Bridenthal, Chair, PSC International Committee, and committee members Electa Arenal, Tony O’Brien and Peter Ranis

Thanks from Colombian educators

I send my most sincere gratitude to the PSC for your noble act of solidarity. It is a clear signal to us that we are not alone and we are not forgotten. It is an unmistakable sign of class solidarity. In Colombia, we say “acciones que hablan mas fuerte.”

I think our solidarity shows that the university is exactly that: universal. Our connections are easily forged because our identities unite us across barriers of distance and culture.

You can certainly tell the other teachers who participated that we will continue to resist and to struggle for a better world and a just society. That is our commitment, and we can’t do less, especially when voices of solidarity motivate us to do more.

Many thanks and fraternal and class greetings,

Carlos González
President, SINTRAUNICOL, Cali

Transit Benefit…finally

Good to read in the November Clarion about the extended process that was needed to put the CUNY Transit Benefit in place. It helps members better understand the work that our officers and the PSC staff do for us. This benefit should have been a “no brainer” for government to extend to all its employees.

We need to remember that the Transit Benefit is a win-win situation. We get a savings on commuting costs, up to $200 a year. Society gets more people using mass transit, and fewer people driving, polluting, and parking.

It’s always best not to think of it as “a benefit,” but more as a subsidy, to encourage a certain behavior. After seeing so many big real-estate developers get their subsidies, it is nice that we get one, too, even if small by comparison.

I therefore have my card, and I am waiting for the first deduction from my paycheck in early December, so I can use it. Thanks to the PSC for being persistent!

Paul Sheridan
Brooklyn College

Arthurine DeSola
Queensborough

Political energy

Re the September Clarion article, “New Activism Produces Growing Political Influence for PSC”:

Throughout the year, the members of the PSC’s Legislative Committee have worked tirelessly to promote our issues. Much of the growth in the union’s political strength has to do with Cecelia McCall, the PSC’s legislative director. A lot of other people contribute, of course, but she is the point person and her work has been outstanding. This is a woman who really understands the political process and is passionate about it.

This Spring we could encourage members to go on a lobbying trip to Albany! The first time I went I was very impressed; everyone is treated very fairly and equally. But what I like about the PSC process is that there is a lot of support and preparation. At first you go as an observer, and later they may ask if you’d like to speak to a certain issue – so you step into it gradually.

It’s easy to think that you can’t make a difference. But you can, when you are a part of a team of people who have done their home-work and have thought very carefully about how we can get to our goal.

The activists of the Legislative Committee are passionate about what they’re doing, and they make it easy to get involved.
When you talk to those who knew Segun Frederick Akintade, the first thing they mention is how friendly he was. “He was a guy who was just like sunshine,” said Russell Greimsman, chair of the computer systems program. “He would walk into class with a smile on face, and pretty soon everyone else is smiling, too.”

“He was one of nicest, funniest people I ever knew,” said fellow student Jaspreet Kaur. “Even if you don’t know him, if he saw that you looked sad he would start cracking jokes.”

Kaur and Akintade knew each other by nicknames. “Once he asked to borrow my notes,” said Kaur, “and a friend asked me, ‘Who was that? I said, ‘I don’t know, some guy from Guyana.’ Later he told me, ‘I’m not from Guyana!’ I said, ‘Well, your name is hard for me to pronounce, so I’m going to call you ‘Guyana.’” He said, ‘OK, then I’m going to call you Miss India!’”

But as she became his friend, Kaur said, she saw that he had a more serious side as well. “One day we were outside eating something at a stand, and I said, ‘It’s so hot, I have to go back inside.’ He said, ‘You’re very lucky you have air conditioning – we don’t have that back home.’ He said where he came from in Nigeria it’s very tough, very different.”

Akintade came to the US ten years ago from Lagos, shortly after his father died, and his family depended on the money he sent home. He was the main financial support for his mother, two brothers and two sisters, and was helping put his siblings through college in Nigeria. Besides a full-time course load at City Tech, he worked nights in the city. “He was definitely not afraid of challenges.”

Nato’s class on numerical methods involves some difficult assignments, and he said students often react with fear or apprehension. “(Segun)’s reaction was more, ‘Let me see what I can do,’” Nato said. “He was eager to confront those things – that’s just how it was.”

Akintade earned an AA degree in computer science from City Tech in 2003, and had begun the bachelor’s program in computer systems when he was called up in the fall of 2003.

WHAT HE THOUGHT

“He didn’t agree at all with the decision to go to war,” his friend Ayo Balogun told Clarion. Kaur agreed: “He told me, ‘They’re stupid to go to war.’ He didn’t believe you had to use violence to solve problems. You have to understand, the only reason he signed up was so he could afford college.” At the same time, said Kaur, “No one could doubt that once he was called up he would give it his all. He told me, ‘I’m not looking for any free ride.’”

Belinda G. Smith taught Akintade in a class on workplace psychology. “I was writing on the board with my back to the class,” she said. “He came up and said, ‘Professor, may I speak with you for a few moments?’ We went into the hall and he told me he had his orders, to go to Iraq. I remember the look of shock on his face – he was scared, but he was putting on a big brave front.”

“We went back inside and I told the class – and people just gasped. One student, her boyfriend had just come back from there, she was so traumatized that she started to cry and had to leave the class.”

Smith said she did not discuss the politics of the war with her class, but in talking with Clarion she did not hold back. Segun, she said bitterly, “will be remembered by the people who knew him, and forgotten completely by the Bush Administration. To know Segun as a person, to see what happened to him, and to know what this war is really about...You don’t want to say that someone died for nothing – but he deserved better.”

“When he enrolled in the National Guard,” said Smith, “he thought they would not send him to Iraq. But having been to war before, he was ready for it. He was definitely not afraid of challenges.”

When Akintade was back in Brooklyn this fall on a two-week leave, he asked the Army for an extension in order to marry his fiancée. He was turned down. “I remember him because he was a very smart classmate...The competition was very stiff.” Though Prevette tended to be quiet in class discussion, said Hacker, he did quite well and was attentive, says Laura: “Jim took care of everybody.”

In 2002 Vincent Prevette’s cancer went into remission, and stayed that way for the next two years. “Unfortunately, about a month before Jim died he was told his cancer had returned,” Kifaya said.

His views were influenced by those of his father, Vincent, who had been a vice president at Chase Manhattan. Jim and his father were “very, very close,” said Jim’s cousin Kathryn Kifaya.

His father had long used a wheelchair as the result of polio, and later developed cancer. “Jim was always around, helping take care of him,” recalled David Pelaez. Jim helped his father out around, and took on many responsibilities at home. It wasn’t just his father to whom he was attentive, says Laura: “Jim took care of everybody.”

Prevette had always liked history, and his sister said there was a history professor at Queens that he used to talk with in the halls. But in the end college didn’t hold his interest, and he often didn’t show up for class. “It just wasn’t for him – he just didn’t like the sitting down, waiting around,” said his friend and neighbor, David Pelaez, a Marine Corps reservist who is now a student at Queens. “He thought a lot about the Army, but he had to help take care of his father, who was ill for a long time. Finally he just decided to go for it.” Jim enlisted in August 2002.

“Jim was anything but quiet outside of class,” his sister Laura said. “With friends and family he would always be very loud, telling stories and laughing. Mom would always yell at us in the middle of the night because we’d stay up talking and she wouldn’t be able to sleep.” Though her brother was five years older, she told Clarion that “Jim was my best friend.”

Her brother owned a vast collection of movies, Laura said, and would recommend to her the ones he liked the best. “He left Paths of Glory in my room once with a note that said, ‘If this doesn’t make you cry, you have no soul.’ Kubrick’s Paths of Glory is widely thought of as anti-war, but Jim Prevette was not against the invasion of Iraq. ‘He supported President Bush not just because (Bush) was Jim’s hoss, but because he really believed in...what we are doing in the Middle East,’ Laura said. Jim told her he enlisted because he didn’t want to “watch other people defend his country on TV.”

FAMILY RESPONSIBILITIES

When a man in an Army uniform walked up to the front door on October 10, Jim’s father thought for an instant that it was his son. “He said, ‘Jim is home! Jim is home!’” a neighbor told the Daily News.

Instead, the soldier had come to tell him that his son was dead, killed when his vehicle crashed during a sandstorm in Hababaniyah, Iraq. Vincent Prevette died ten days later. 
The Yousry case and academic freedom

By PETER HOGNESS

In November, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) released a report on its investigation of how faculty member Mohamed Yousry lost his job at CUNY. The report is a major step in a process that could lead to a vote to censure CUNY at the Association’s annual meeting in June.

An adjunct lecturer at York College, Yousry was suspended and then dismissed after he was indicted in April 2002 along with Lynne Stewart, attorney for Sheik Omar Abdel Rahman, who was convicted in the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center. Stewart and her co-defendants were charged with violating anti-terrorism statutes by passing messages between the Sheik and members of a violent organization called the Islamic Group, notorious for its killing of tourists in Egypt. Yousry, who is also a doctoral candidate at NYU, worked as Stewart’s legal translator; he insists that he is innocent and acted only as a professional translator. His trial in Federal District Court in New York is now in progress.

An ad hoc investigating committee of the AAUP found that when Yousry was suspended from his teaching duties in April 2002, “that action was taken with no notice of the grounds for suspension pending a disciplinary hearing, nor was he consulted with faculty responsible for his teaching assignment “or with any representative faculty body.”

A lack of academic due process

However, as the AAUP report points out, Yousry has never been accused of a biased approach in the classroom. “By all accounts he was punctilious in presenting these issues with dispension and balance,” the investigation found. Despite its concern over the subject-matter of his courses, CUNY insists that it got rid of Yousry “because of the indictment, not because of the contents of his teaching, writing or research or his political views or affiliations.” Therefore, the administration insists, “there was no infringement of academic freedom.

The AAUP’s 1958 Procedural Standards in Faculty Dismissal Proceedings, which CUNY accepted 30 years ago, hold that the only grounds for suspension pending a disciplinary hearing is the threat of “immediate harm to the faculty member or others.” “Immediate harm” does not mean harm to a university’s public relations, said the chair of the AAUP investigation, Matthew Finkin. At a conference at CUNY on December 3 (see sidebar), Finkin said that CUNY was claiming “a right of preemptive capitalist” to possible public criticism. “We have learned through long and sorry experience that [in firing] a reviled instructor in the name of retaining the public’s confidence, an institution surrenders something far more precious — its freedom,” Finkin said.

DANGEROUS DOCTRINE

CUNY’s “role model” argument is a dangerous one, argues the AAUP report: “It is a malicious doctrine that gives free rein to the censoriousness of trustees, administrators, colleagues, and even the larger community.” Hypothetically, said Finkin, it would allow a college “to dismiss a young Richard Wagner from a music department, for surely a teacher who bilks his creditors and flees prosecution is a bad role model.” AAUP guidelines hold that a dismissal must instead be directly related “to the fitness of faculty members in their professional capacities as teachers or researchers.”

The AAUP report also spotlights the lack of procedural protections for CUNY’s adjunct faculty. Unlike full-time faculty, they have “no written policy governing when a suspension may be imposed.” When Yousry was suspended, the administration did not consult with faculty responsible for his teaching assignment “or with any representative faculty body.” Finally, “for adjunct faculty, no provision is made for notice or hearing to challenge the decision.”

CUNY maintains that “the right to due process applies only if there has been a deprivation of property or liberty interest.” Since Yousry was suspended with pay, CUNY argues that he had no due process rights. The AAUP report responds that “freedom to teach means little if one can be deprived arbitrarily of students to teach.”

In defense of its position, CUNY’s administration cites an arbitrator’s January 2004 ruling against a grievance that Yousry had filed under the union contract. The AAUP reports that notes that another arbitrator in a future case would be free to interpret the union contract differently. But mainly it emphasizes that “an institution may behave lawfully even as it departs from norms of academic acceptability....The two perspectives, legal and academic, are not necessarily identical.”

The bottom line for the AAUP investigators is that Yousry was both suspended and dismissed in an arbitrary manner. The charges against him are serious, they write, and if proven would mean he is unfit to teach — but “an indictment is not a conviction.” While an indictment could “legitimately be of concern to the indicted person’s institution,” it cannot justify arbitrary action.

Case discussed at UFS conference

The Yousry case held center stage at the December 3 CUNY Faculty Senate (UFS) conference, “Defining and Defending Academic Freedom.”

Matthew Finkin of the University of Illinois, chair of the AAUP committee that investigated Yousry’s dismissal, suggested in his remarks that two prior cases at CUNY might provide a guide for settling the issue without a censure vote.

DUE PROCESS

In a 1972 case at Queensborough Community College, three professors were suspended after they occupied the president’s office in an anti-war demonstration. When the AAUP asked the president to afford them a hearing, he replied that none was needed because he was there and saw what they did. After brief trials, the three were then dismissed. They were exonerated by a UFS hearing, but CUNY rejected the hearing report and was therefore censured. To lift the AAUP’s censure, the University later agreed to abide by due process rules in future disciplinary cases, as spelled out in the AAUP’s 1958 statement on procedure.

During mass layoffs in 1976, CUNY was censured for inadequate notice and lack of consultation with faculty. Censure was lifted by negotiating an adequate set of procedures for a financial emergency. In conference discussions, Stefan Bauman of the UFS Executive Committee pointed out that the UFS retribution guidelines, stated that their provisions should also be applied to part-time faculty, as far as possible. If CUNY agreed to extend the principles in these two cases to part-timers now, Finkin said, it “would do more than remove from the adjunct faculty the dispiriting risk of summary suspension or noticeless removal; it would signal the adjunct faculty that the University regards them as something more than instruments of instruction, education, and amenities disposable ‘at will.’”

Other conference speakers included Joan Scott, chair of the AAUP’s Committee A on Academic Freedom, and Robert O’Neil, chair of the AAUP’s Special Committee on Academic Freedom and National Security in a Time of Crisis. Carol Smith, emeritus professor at City College, narrated her visual presentation on the repression of political dissent at City in the 1930s and 1940s on exhibit at the Graduate Center from February 4 and Steve Leberstein, chair of the PSC’s Academic Freedom Committee, discussed resolutions of that era for today.

CUNY General Counsel Frederick Schaffer declined to attend the conference “because he said the University has nothing to do with academic freedom,” though UFS Chair Susan O’Malley told the meeting that Schaffer did discuss the case with the UFS a few days before.

— PH
In January 2003, a long-term CUNY adjunct began teaching the opening class of one of his two courses that semester. An hour into the class, he received word from the department that it had been cancelled.

This November, an arbitrator agreed with the PSC that CUNY had acted improperly and ordered the University to pay the adjunct the full amount he would have earned by teaching this class for the entire semester.

NAME WAS ON SCHEDULE

The decision was the result of a union grievance that charged CUNY with violating its contractual obligation to notify adjuncts whose classes are cancelled as soon as the appropriate college authorities know about the change.

During the arbitration hearing, the adjunct testified that he never received a phone call or a message on his answering machine about the cancellation. On the first day he was scheduled to teach, he checked the department course schedule for his room numbers and found his name next to each of the two classes he had been assigned. But at the start of the second course, another instructor spoke with him outside the room and said he thought he was supposed to teach that section.

The first adjunct pointed out that his own name was on the department schedule, and went inside to proceed with the class.

An hour after he started, he was asked to come and speak with the department chair. Because of low enrollment, he was informed, his class had been combined with another, and the instructor of the other section had been chosen to teach the combined class.

Management called witnesses from the department who testified that they had left the message on the adjunct’s answering machine but that he never responded. Under cross-examination by the union, the person who kept the department’s phone records was unable to prove that he had the correct telephone number.

The PSC cited a 1980 arbitration award in support of its argument. In the 1980 case, an adjunct’s class was cancelled and CUNY attempted to notify her by telephone. But she did not receive the message and began teaching the class before she was notified of the cancellation. The arbitrator in the 1980 case ruled that the adjunct must be paid for the course because CUNY “failed to send a wire, messenger or to place a note in her class to apprise [the adjunct] of the cancellation before she started teaching.”

Lack of notice is the issue

CUNY must inform ‘as soon as’ it knows

The arbitrator in the current case, Rosemary Townley, agreed with the union that the 1980 decision applied to the current grievance. She cited the 1980 decision in her own opinion: “After registration closes...the college has an affirmative obligation to communicate the consequences of [course cancellations] ‘as soon as’ they are known. That communication need not be instantaneous but ‘as soon as’ signifies diligence and attention to those affected. The fact that they are part-time employees...does not mean that the words ‘as soon as’ can take on a meaning other than what is normally understood.”

Townley also noted that immediately after the adjunct in the current case learned her class had been cancelled, he “attempted to mitigate his damages by seeking some course work. However it is clear that his opportunities were practically nil, given that the area colleges and universities had [already] begun the Spring semester.” For this reason, she ruled that the adjunct “should be made whole for the salary lost as a consequence of not being notified in a timely manner of the class cancellation.”

The adjunct says that the meaning of this ruling goes beyond his own case. “This decision sends a clear message to CUNY’s administrators that communication with and support for its long-serving adjuncts should be a priority – for the good of all parties involved, including our students,” he told Clarion.
1. WHERE EXACTLY DO CONTRACT NEGOTIATIONS STAND?

After continued and escalating pressure from organized PSC members, CUNY management finally came to the table with a financial offer. The union pushed for an offer because members are entitled to know whether management is serious about investing in us. As you can read on the facing page, the December 1 offer not only insults us, it also indicates no commitment to addressing our needs.

Initial offers are typically low, but they sometimes point to an acceptable final package. That’s not the case here: CUNY management’s offer demands concessions, fails to keep pace with inflation, and suggests no willingness at this point to provide adequate Welfare Fund support.

We have told management that we reject their offer. We were angry that the December 17 session was cancelled by management, because the union was ready to go back to the table and make progress. Intensive bargaining is planned for January, with three sessions scheduled each week.

2. HAS THE PSC PUT A FINANCIAL PROPOSAL ON THE TABLE?

Yes. In an effort to move negotiations forward, the union negotiating team brought a financial proposal to the table on October 18. We proposed a framework that could lead to a fair and expedited settlement: use the contract already approved for SUNY faculty and staff as a framework for our salary increases, and add to it the additional money we need for the Welfare Fund and other improvements in working conditions.

The SUNY settlement with United University Professions included salary increases and other advances for a total of about 15% over four years, including longevity enhancements and an increase in the “downstate differential” for the higher cost of living in the metropolitan area. Additional Welfare Fund contributions were also in the package.

3. WHY hasn’t the contract been settled by now?

Because CUNY management has made settlement impossible, their economic offer is not serious and many of their proposals are deeply regressive.

Management knows that the union cannot agree to undermine the people we represent — removing department chairs from the union, for instance, or sabotaging job security for professional faculty. In addition, we have made it clear from the start that we must fix the Welfare Fund in this contract — and management’s offer includes no indication so far that they have understood that need. The PSC is ready to settle the contract, but management will have to revise its regressive proposals and come forward with a serious financial offer.

4. WHAT ARE THE UNION’S MAIN ISSUES IN THIS ROUND OF NEGOTIATIONS?

Based on meetings with members and the collective bargaining survey, the PSC identified three priorities. First, we must continue the forward momentum on salaries we made in the last contract, when a decade of salary erosion began to be reversed. Second, we must close the gap in funding for the Welfare Fund.

Third, we must move forward in our professional lives by making structural changes to correct inequities and enhance our working conditions.

In the last contract, we made breakthroughs with research time for junior faculty, paid office hours for adjuncts and other provisions. This contract, too, must do more than maintain the status quo.

Ultimately, the PSC contract is about the quality of public higher education in New York City: the Chancellor’s office can talk all it wants about a renaissance at CUNY, but if it imposes substandard salaries, conditions and benefits on the faculty and staff, the students’ education will suffer.

5. IS MANAGEMENT’S LOW-BALL OFFER JUST A NEGOTIATING TACTIC?

That’s always possible, but even if you read an initial offer as a signpost, one post this points in the wrong direction. First, it makes only one gesture toward the union’s economic proposal, and that is to offer a four-year contract. At this point, however, the economic “offer” for the fourth year is zero.

Second, it fails to include even a placeholder for an amount of increased annual contributions to the Welfare Fund, an essential element for the PSC.

Third, it points overall to the austerity settlement reached by the City with some municipal unions — a settlement the PSC has said is unacceptable for us. And fourth, management said that even this miserable offer will not be improved unless we agree to their major demands. This last is a crucial point, because CUNY’s stated agenda is to exact concessions from us as the price of salary increases.

Although we are willing to engage in give-and-take on reasonable demands and to bargain in good faith, we are not willing to give away essential protections or to undermine our working conditions. Conditions at CUNY are already hard enough; there is no room for retreat.

6. WHO DETERMINES WHAT ECONOMIC PACKAGE MANAGEMENT OFFERS?

Ultimately, the CUNY Board of Trustees — but, by law, their offer must be authorized by the City and the State, which fund CUNY. Immediately, then, our contract is in the realm of politics and not just labor/management negotiations.

While New York State has settled most of its public-employee contracts in this round, New York City still has many public-employee contracts unresolved. Some unions, with different needs and strategies from ours, have accepted what we see as an “austerity contract” advocated by the Mayor — one with minimal raises and serious concessions.

Other municipal unions have, like the PSC, rejected it. The unions representing police and firefighters declared an impasse in their negotiations and are involved in a process of “binding arbitration,” in which an appointed panel decides on the settlement. The teachers’ union, UFT, reports that negotiations are deadlocked, and may also seek arbitration.

One question the PSC faces is whether Mayor Bloomberg, who has been explicit about his agenda of labor austerity for City unions, will be open to authorizing an appropriate settlement for PSC members, who are primarily on the State payroll.

7. SHOULD WE ASK FOR AN IMPASS AND ARBITRATION?

We are considering every option, and working closely with our legal counsel. But so far, the PSC has not sought to turn the collective bargaining process over to a third party. For us, as for the teachers’ union, the State labor law mandates “non-binding” rather than binding arbitration; the result would be a recommendation with strong ethical and political force, but not a legal requirement.

Arbitration also removes the process from direct interaction between labor and management; in addition, it puts the whole contract, not just the new demands, on the table for recommendations by the arbitrators. We will continue to assess our legal options as we move forward, but for now we believe that we are in a strong position to fight for what we need through collective bargaining and the strength of the membership.

The contract campaign will intensify in the coming weeks, as we build the public case for investment in CUNY faculty and staff, and as we continue to press our issues at the bargaining table. The editorial on page 11 focuses on the campaign, but the essential thing is that this contract will be won by us; we will win the contract we are willing to fight for.

Prepared by Barbara Bowen, PSC president, with Clarion staff.
CUNY offers 1.5% – over 4 years

Members mobilize for better deal

By DAINA RA JENDRA and PETER HOGNESS

In contract talks on December 1, CUNY management made a financial offer – and union members reacted with shock and anger. The administration proposed a four-year agreement with only one guaranteed salary increase, a 1.5% hike in the second year, and a one-time $400 cash payment. The offer does not include any new money for the PSC/CUNY Welfare Fund (WF). Union negotiators say that even as a starting point for bargaining, CUNY’s proposal is unacceptable.

Management’s proposal calls for an increase of 0% the first year, 1.5% the second year, 1% the third year – but only if union members pay for it through unspecified “productivity increases” – and 0% in the fourth and final year. The $400 lump sum, pro-rated for part-timers, would be paid at the start, but would not become part of base pay.

WELFARE FUND IGNORED

In recent municipal labor agreements, the term “productivity increases” has meant a variety of union concessions, from pay cuts for new employees to longer work hours.

The December 1 offer does not include any increase in CUNY’s contributions to the Welfare Fund. Yet unless management commits more money, the WF will use up its reserve sometime in mid-2006 and will not have enough money for current benefits.

Members have already shelled out an increased share of rising health care costs, but CUNY’s contributions have lagged behind the amount needed to maintain benefits.

When management laid out its proposal, “there was an audible gasp in the room” from union members and negotiators, said PSC President Barbara Bowen. “Even as an initial offer, that amount is demeaning. Further, it signals a staggering disregard for the future of the Welfare Fund.” The PSC bargaining team told Vice Chancellor Brenda Malone that the offer was “outrageous.”

OFFER LATE

CUNY’s financial offer was not only low, but late. On October 18, management negotiators promised to make an economic proposal “within the next couple of [bargaining] sessions.” But no offer was made in any of the three meetings held in November, and management abruptly cancelled a session scheduled just before Thanksgiving.

More than 200 union members came to the CUNY Board of Trustees’ meeting on November 29 to demand a workable financial offer. Only about half were allowed inside the public meeting, so about 50 watched in a separate room over closed-circuit TV, while a similar number marched outside for the duration of the two-hour session.

When the topic turned to CUNY’s budget, three-quarters of the audience took purple “Contract Now!” signs out of their briefcases and backpacks and held them high. Trustees shifted uncomfortably in their seats. After several minutes of silent protest, members stood and began a loud chant: “Make an offer! Contract now!” A minute later they turned toward the door and walked out, chanting as they left.

The protesters descended the last five floors of Baruch’s Vertical Campus on the escalators, chanting and answering students’ questions on the way down to the picket line outside.

“I have two kids, and medical and dental benefits are very important,” said Xiaoping Yen, professor of English at LaGuardia. “So I want to see increases to the Welfare Fund.” Many members cited the WF as a top priority.

Members also described how their working conditions have a direct impact on their ability to teach and serve students. “I’m from BMCC, and in the Science Department we have one small room for almost 100 adjuncts,” said Emmanuel Pizana. “We sit on top of each other.”

After management made its money offer on December 1, concerns ran high among CUNY faculty and staff. At the bargaining session on December 17, about 100 PSC members showed up to observe negotiations. But for the second time in a month, management decided not to show up.

Vice Chancellor Brenda Malone told the PSC that CUNY would not attend if there were more than five or six union observers present.

“Binding arbitration, and it has done

CUNY’s economic offer, and union members signed a petition objecting to management’s failure to show up and negotiate.

MEMBER ACTION

After a couple of hours of energetic protest, five union members delivered the letters and the petition to Vice Chancellors Jay Hershenson and Allan Dobrin. When the vice chancellors said that they valued the PSC’s partnership with the PSC on legislative issues, a union member responded, “one and a half percent is not what you offer to a partner.”

With management taking a hard-line stance, the PSC is organizing a stepped-up contract campaign for next semester.

First steps include formation of a Contract Action Network with representatives from each campus to increase the reach of local organizing and create a structure for rapid, university-wide response. The bargaining team is now writing up immediate updates on each negotiation session (PSC members who want to receive these should talk to their chapter chair.) Other plans in formation include a publicity campaign and community outreach.

EXCLUSION PROTESTED

The members who came to witness negotiations on the 17th protested the exclusion. “We have a tight picket line outside CUNY’s headquarters on 80th Street helping warm up a cold winter morning, with members carrying signs that read, “A Great Contract = A Great University.”

“I came this morning hoping to observe a serious, productive negotiating session,” said Ann Davison of Queens College, “Instead, we are left outside to wonder why the session would be cancelled on such flimsy grounds.” Davison and others wrote letters on the spot to Chancellor Goldstein objecting to CUNY’s economic offer, and union members signed a petition objecting to management’s failure to show up and negotiate.

CUNY’s financial offer was not only low, but late. On October 18, management negotiators promised to make an economic proposal “within the next couple of (bargaining) sessions.” But no offer was made in any of the three meetings held in November, and management abruptly cancelled a session scheduled just before Thanksgiving.

More than 200 union members came to the CUNY Board of Trustees’ meeting on November 29 to demand a workable financial offer. Only about half were allowed inside the public meeting, so about 50 watched in a separate room over closed-circuit TV, while a similar number marched outside for the duration of the two-hour session.

When the topic turned to CUNY’s budget, three-quarters of the audience took purple “Contract Now!” signs out of their briefcases and backpacks and held them high. Trustees shifted uncomfortably in their seats. After several minutes of silent protest, members stood and began a loud chant: “Make an offer! Contract now!” A minute later they turned toward the door and walked out, chanting as they left.

The protesters descended the last five floors of Baruch’s Vertical Campus on the escalators, chanting and answering students’ questions on the way down to the picket line outside.

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“Binding arbitration, and it has done
What do you think of CUNY’s financial offer?

_Clarion’s_ Roving Reporter asks PSC members

**CARL WILLIAMS**
SEEK Counseling Coordinator and Instructor
John Jay
I think their offer is ridiculous. It’s insulting.

Taking into account all the increases that workers in New York have faced since the last contract – the subway’s gone up, gas prices have risen, rent controls have been lifted – to offer such a ridiculous pay increase shows disrespect for the employees of the University.

**LORNA PORTER**
Director of Health Services (HEO)
John Jay
There’s no cost of living increase! How can anybody keep up with living their life? I know this is just a first offer, though. I hope the negotiations can move forward and make some real progress.

The Welfare Fund also needs to be addressed as a separate issue. Proper health benefits for faculty and staff are absolutely crucial for maintaining longevity and continuity among those who are teaching and assisting students. They need experienced people who will remain capable and well.

**DAN PATANELLA**
Adjunct Professor of Psychology
John Jay
Wow. That’s low. And there are so many other things that people need, in addition to just my raise.

For instance, I could really use another office hour. Right now it’s one hour per week for every two courses. But the courses I teach – Statistics, Child Development, Experimental Psych – are all quite difficult, and the students need help outside class. I can’t just say, “Okay, the hour is up, that’s it.” I do a lot more than I’m paid for. I end up volunteering my time.

**BLANCHE WIESEN COOK**
Distinguished Professor of History
John Jay
This is an insulting and degrading offer. Among the many outrages is the appalling disregard for the health and well-being of our faculty and staff, reflected in the refusal to provide the Welfare Fund with the resources it needs. This is part of a national effort to degrade and really destroy both public higher education and unions. This represents a ripping apart of the social contract – a war against unionism, against working people, against adequate funding for public higher education. It is unacceptable.

By KRISTIN LAWLER

The PSC budget explained

By JOHN HYLAND
PSC Treasurer

The PSC budget for the current fiscal year was approved by the union’s Delegate Assembly on October 28, 2004. The following report describes the budget process, highlights the main categories of spending, and presents several important issues for this year. Careful management of the PSC’s financial resources helps us to accomplish the union’s goals: advancing services to members and building the power of the union.

In drafting the PSC budget, we review the previous year’s income and expenses; incorporate changes based on leases, contracts and shifts in membership composition; analyze likely developments in income and expenses for the coming year; and finally, decide on prudent projections of fixed and discretionary aspects of our finances. This initial work is shared by the treasurer; key staff members including Deborah Bell, Faye Alladin and Diana Rosato; and the eight PSC members on the union’s Finance Committee.

The Finance Committee presents a proposed budget to the Executive Council for its review. Once approved by the EC, the budget goes to the Delegate Assembly for discussion and a final vote.

The budget for September 2004 through August 2005 includes a total projected income of $10,388,000, and total projected expenses of $10,483,000. There is thus a projected deficit of $85,000, which can be responsibly drawn from the union’s resources. Over the years, the PSC has built up a reserve fund of $5.1 million, which exceeds the amount recommended by financial professionals.

The union’s income comes from three main sources: 1) member dues and “fair share” fees from non-members: $8,547,000; 2) reimbursements from the New York State United Teachers (NY-SUT) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT): $1,379,000; 3) investments, rent, services: $472,000.

**UNION EXPENDITURES**

The union’s expenditures fall into five main categories: 1) dues to affiliates – organizations to which the PSC belongs, principally the state-wide NY-SUT and the national AFT: $5,015,000; 2) union operations (space, equipment, services – the infrastructure of our activity): $1,184,000; 3) personnel and related items (human resources – staff, re- signed time, stipends): $3,253,000; 4) mobilization and outreach (contract, budget and advocacy campaigns): $826,000; 5) contract enforcement and related costs (grievance, arbitration and legal expenses): $190,000. In addition, there is a small “contingencies” line of $15,000 for unforeseen expenses.

These categories should be considered together, since they often overlap. For example, union staff members’ time and the PSC’s office space are constantly used for both mobilization and contract enforcement work – but staff salaries are counted under “personnel” and office rent is part of “operations.”

A more detailed list of budget categories and amounts for each is available at http://psc.cuny.org/PSCBudget04-05.pdf, or from your chapter delegates or the union office.

The Finance Committee has developed an explicit Investment Policy Statement (IPS) for the investment of reserve funds and is using the Vanguard Group to implement it. The IPS is a conservative policy and was reviewed by outside financial experts before being approved.

The PSC’s daily financial operations are carried out by Faye Alladin, Coordinator of Financial Services, and monitored in a monthly review by an independent accountant and in an annual audit by a different independent accountant.

This year the PSC is addressing an issue with important financial ramifications – negotiation of the lease for our office space. The current lease expires in October 2006; we can either negotiate a new lease in the same building or move to another location. In order to make the best decision, we first need to define our options. We have therefore engaged a real estate broker team, consulted with the Executive Council and the Delegate Assembly to identify priorities in evaluating potential space, and hired an architectural firm to define our space needs and help us figure out how to meet them. The EC and DA receive periodic reports on the progress of this project. Cost and location convenience for members will be two key factors in the decision.

**RESERVE FUND STRONG**

Overall, assessments by the elected leadership, the Finance Committee and outside accountants all indicate that the PSC is in sound financial condition. The reserve fund is strong and deficits have been minimized, while members are provided with services and opportunities to take action. The projected deficit is the combined result of several factors. Membership has grown in the last five years, bringing resources and energy to the union but also demands for more services. Increases in dues charged by our affiliates have been absorbed in the PSC budget without passing them on to members through a dues increase. Costs for operations, equipment, materials and personnel have all increased. Since our dues are paid on a percent basis, reaching a new contract settlement with retroactive pay increases will also mean increased dues/fees income – but the union will receive these funds only after a contract settlement is achieved and faculty and staff have been paid.

The bottom line is that the PSC is financially stable and our funds are being put to good use – defending and promoting members’ economic, political and academic interests. These are hard times for public professional workers, and we aim to maximize the effectiveness of our relatively modest resources.

**STEPHANIE HERMAN**
Assistant Professor of Sociology
John Jay
It’s like a joke. You can’t just say you want to make a place a premier research university and expect it to just happen.

I don’t understand it – they want to go back to the 50s, to a time when CUNY was a university you could brag about. But how can they attract top faculty with financial packages like that? My niece makes more money teaching in a private school in Manhattan than the faculty here make.

By KRISTIN LAWLER
A grant that can help you grow

HEO/CLT professional development

Trustees of the HEO/CLT Professional Development Fund reviewed proposals with help from PSC staff.

Diversity and inclusion activities. The activities funded by these grants have been as diverse as the responsibilities that HEOs and CLTs shoulder within City University.

Dominican dissertations

SARAH APONTE, HE Associate
Dominican Studies Institute Library
City College

I used the money for research at the Library of Congress. I went down to Washington last January, to search their records of PhD dissertations dealing with Dominican-related issues. I want to do an annotated bibliography, as a book project.

It was fascinating. On this trip, I often found information in the printed records that was not online. I stayed in a nearby hotel, so I could go early and stay late. I spent three days there, all paid for by the grant. I'm the only Dominican librarian I know of who's dealing with Dominican issues. When students come to the library, now I am better able to help them because I know more about the records on those dissertations than I did before.

I do recommend the grant. Whether we work as administrators or researchers...we should use whatever resources we have.

Greenhouse management

DAVID CAHN, Senior CLT
Department of Biological Sciences
Lehman College

I manage the research and teaching greenhouses at Lehman, which serve the needs of a few hundred undergraduates per year, plus professors and graduate students in the Plant Sciences PhD program. I belong to an organization called the Association of Education and Research Greenhouses in the U.S. Our annual conference was held at UC Santa Cruz, and the grant enabled me fly there, register, pay for my conference attendance, and quickly.

By JENNIFER LEE, Assistant Coordinator, College Now
Baruch College

I took a public speaking course called “Speaking Without Fear” at the School of Continuing and Professional Studies at NYU.

In my job, I make presentations to various colleagues in the education world and I also do recruitment pitches out in the public schools. This course increased my ability to reach people effectively in large groups. Actually, I was surprised at how simple it was to apply – very simple and quick.

Conference attendance

MICHELE FORSTEN, HE Officer
Office of Communications
City Tech

I attended the annual conference of the National Lesbian and Gay Journalists Association, held here in New York. The conference had a professional development component – editing and deadline-writing workshops, and management training led by New York Times employees. The workshops helped hone my skills, and I made some useful contacts.

The grant money also enabled me to attend the Association’s awards ceremony four months later in Los Angeles. As a breast cancer survivor, I had won an award for a series of articles I wrote on the lack of support services for lesbians with cancer in New York City, which resulted in the formation of a lesbian cancer support consortium. Body image issues and the effects of cancer on intimate relationships are two of the many concerns a lesbian might not feel comfortable discussing in a straight support group. Also, lesbians often have the added stress of whether they should “come out” to their doctors.

To be able to be in L.A. to accept the award was a terrific “up” and I got to meet journalists from all over the country. In my job I pitch stories to reporters and deal with a lot of rejection. Winning this award was a validation of my work and a boost to my confidence. I would definitely recommend this grant. If people can think of something pertinent to their job and that helps them grow as human beings, they should apply.

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Conference, classes, research and puppets

DEBORAH HERTZBERG, CLT
Theater Department
Brooklyn College

I attended the O'Neill Puppetry Conference at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Company in Waterford, CT. There I worked with Kathy Mullen and Michael Frith, who worked as puppeteers with Jim Henson, on a puppetry TV project for land mine awareness for the children of Afghanistan.

They used traditional Afghan folklore to teach children how to recognize land mines and avoid them. We

City covers cost of Medicare Part B

Thanks to union action

If you are a CUNY retiree who is 65 or older, you're entitled to a full reimbursement of your Medicare Part B premium payments.

This is the third year that New York City is reimbursing municipal workers for 100% of the premium, after years of only partial payment. Winning back this benefit was the work of New York City unions, including the PSC.

Medicare Part B is the portion of Medicare that covers doctors’ visits, outpatient care and other services not covered by Medicare Part A, which covers hospitalization. In most cases, the premium is deducted from your Social Security check.

100% COVERAGE

Reimbursement is not automatic, but you only have to sign up for it once. You can do so if you are retired and will be 65 or older during this calendar year: just send a copy of your Medicare Part B monthly premium bill to the same Social Security number to the same post office.

The return to 100% reimbursement was won through “old-fashioned politicking” by the New York City labor movement, said Irwin Yellin, chair of the PSC Retirees Chapter. Municipal unions first won the reimbursement at the bargaining table in 1966, but a succession of mayors pledged poverty and paid only a portion of the premium. In 2001, the City paid about 70%, which was then $384.

By 2006, Yellin said, “It had been an issue that was out there for a very long time. The reimbursement meant more and more to people, especially lower-paid city workers, as the premium was going up steadily.

The argument that the City couldn’t afford it didn’t wash anymore.”

New York City unions, including the PSC, the UFT and AFSCME District Council 37, helped mobilize retirees and other members to send postcards, meet with City Council members and testify before the Council on the issue. In 2001 the City Council passed a measure reinstating the full reimbursement and overrode Mayor Giuliani’s veto of the bill. But Giuliani sued to block implementation, and the measure remained tied up in court. In 2002, union efforts finally bore fruit, when newly elected Mayor Bloomberg said he would drop the suit.

To sign up to receive your refund, send a copy of your Medicare card to: NYC Health Benefits Program, 40 Rector Street, 3rd floor, New York, NY 10006. (Be sure to send a copy, not the original.) If your spouse or domestic partner is eligible for coverage, send a copy to your partner. You can get forms from the PSC, the UFT and AFSCME, or by calling Linda Silfin at 212-354-1252.

The selection committee is working to respond to applicants as quickly as possible.
An agenda for better air quality

By ELEN STEINBERG
Vice-Chair, GL Chapter

Laboratory animals such as rodents are entitled to live in a temperature- and light-controlled environment, free from dirt, mold and air pollutants. But CUNY often fails to provide such amenities to its instructional staff – even though the contract requires it to do so. There is something wrong with an institution that provides for the protection of rodents, but not does not guarantee a safe working environment for humans.

Problems with indoor air quality (IAQ) are the most common health and safety problem at CUNY, and conditions in lab and studio spaces are among the worst. Labs in CCNY’s deteriorating Marshak building have an inadequate number of fume hoods and those that exist are often broken. People have been carried out of labs on stretchers after they fainted from the fumes.

We need adequate fresh air in laboratories where there are enclosed ventilation systems, irrespective of the cost of heating and cooling that air. A level of air circulation that is adequate for offices may be unsafe for laboratories and studios where hazardous reagents are used. Laboratory air should be under slightly negative pressure so that pollutants released in laboratory space do not seep into the rest of the building.

CUNY needs adequate numbers of appropriate and functioning fume hoods, biosafety cabinets and proper exhaust systems. Students should not have to work in open spaces, release chemicals in laboratories, and breathe dander and microorganisms into the lab environment.

CCNY is not alone. The east wing labs at Hunter School of Health Sciences have inadequate fume hoods and exhaust systems. At John Jay, inadequate fume hoods have been a long-running problem. One was officially listed as in good working order – even though it did have a fan for a motor!

In response to union pressure there is now at least one working fume hood per lab, but further measures are still needed. There have been problems with fume hoods and lab ventilation at Bronx Community College.

Such problems are not limited to science labs. Many CUNY colleges have unsafe conditions in art and theater studios where paints are used, including inadequate exhaust systems and a lack of fume hoods, respiratory equipment or cabinets for flammable materials.

In general, there are no federal, state or city laws to effectively regulate indoor air quality. There is no federal or state workplace safety regulations regarding working fume hoods and for storage and disposal of chemicals in laboratories. But these regulations do not go far enough.

CUNY must live up to its obligation under the contract to provide “a place of employment which is free from recognized hazards.” The University must guarantee a habitable temperature, regular cleaning of ventilation systems, and removal of chemical fumes, mold and dirt in laboratories and other facilities.

Reluctant to pay

Why is little or nothing being done to correct these problems? One reason is that colleges are often reluctant to spend money to fix non-visible problems, and most IAQ issues are non-visible.

Not that individual CUNY colleges pay for their own heating and ventilation costs out of college budgets, there will be new pressures to cut back on ventilation. But an unsafe working environment is bad for employee and student health – it also leads to increased absences and decreased productivity.

We have a right to breathe clean air at work. To make sure that right is respected, what do we need?

PROFESSIONAL STAFF CONGRESS/CUNY NOTICE OF NOMINATIONS AND ELECTIONS – SPRING 2005

Election Rules

You are entitled to the official PSC bulletin. Write-in votes are permitted. A write-in vote shall be valid if the intent of the voter is clear (written, printed, typed names are acceptable). A write-in candidate must meet the same eligibility requirements as a regular candidate in order to be a write-in candidate to be considered valid, and must receive at least ten percent (10%) of the total votes cast to be elected. Write-in candidates are elected as alternatives to the office or elections committee. Write-in candidates shall be notified of election results.

Campaigning: Candidates may mail literature at their own expense, either directly or through the PSC mailing house, Johnson & Hayward, 100 Rte. 46 East, at Totem Ave., cliffs, N.J. 07011-8000. At the request of the candidate and at cost, the PSC will provide Johnson & Hayward with home-addressed labels of the membership, or will provide candidates with college-addressed labels of the membership. Candidates must notify the PSC five business days in advance of the mailing to allow sufficient time for the ordering of labels.

Election Tally: Each candidate, or a representative of the candidate, is entitled to watch the counting of the ballots.

PSC-CUNY WELFARE FUND ADVISORY COUNCIL

At each of the colleges listed below, voters will elect the Advisory Council in accordance with the above schedule and rules, and the by-laws of the PSC/CUNY Welfare Fund.

Clarin | January 2005
THE CONTRACT FIGHT

The union strikes back

By BARBARA BOWEN
PSC President

I didn’t know it before, we know it now; getting a fair contract – given management’s agenda and the larger anti-public, anti-institutional political culture around us – is going to take a fight. But what I’ve heard and seen since December 1, when we got management’s untenable offer, convinces me that it’s a fight we can win: in all my communications with members, not one person has suggested that we give up and accept a minimal contract.

Even mentioning that as a possibility may seem offensive, but it’s important to articulate what’s not being said. No one has asked the union negotiating team to accept the offer on the table now – nor to agree to the regressive demands that go with it. We all want a contract; we want to recoup the lost ground in salary over the past two years, we want restoration of dental benefits, we want to move forward in our professional lives. But if we want to agree to a settlement that humiliates us.

The scandalous 1.5% offer on the table has galvanized us not because we are naive about the difference between initial and final offers, but precisely because we understand what an initial offer means. In the unspoken code of collective bargaining, management’s initial offer is an announcement of the direction in which they want to go. An offer of 1.5% announces no commitment to competitive salaries, restored benefits or improved working conditions.

MANAGEMENT’S AGENDA

At least as angering as the financial proposal is the top-down agenda that goes with it. The reason we haven’t settled this contract is that we cannot and we will not agree to what’s on the table right now; an unserious financial offer and a set of demands that would destroy what little ability we at CUNY have to build a decent professional life. Remember what management is asking for: eliminating salary step increases; removing department chairs from the union; undermining job security; reducing annual leave; ending Travia leave; weakening due process protections. There is almost nothing in their agenda that moves CUNY forward, unless by “forward” you mean toward undermining job security; reducing annual leave and no relief on workload. The absurdity of agreeing to 15% increases at SUNY and offering one-tenth of that at CUNY should be obvious.

But the austerity that’s proposed is not just for labor. To undermine and underpay the workers in the public sector – whether in the public university, the fire department, the parks or the public schools – is ultimately to attack the people whose lives depend on the services the public sector offers. We are rhetorically sophisticated enough to recognize that when the City demotes the “unions” for seeking “more than the City can afford to pay,” it is really announcing political priorities. What the City can afford to pay with other unions that are challenging the City in legal proceedings (see page 7). The argument is clear enough: this is the moment to invest in CUNY, not to starve it. The most meaningful investment, especially at a university, is in the people who do the work. The claims of a CUNY renaissance ring hollow if the hundreds of newly hired faculty begin to look elsewhere when they receive a degrading salary offer; no paid parental leave and no relief on workload. The absurdity of agreeing to 15% increases at SUNY and offering one-tenth of that at CUNY should be obvious.

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Clarion | January 2005

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Social Security shell game

By DEAN BAKER

The battle for Social Security's survival is under way. In a key maneuver recently, N. Gregory Mankiw, George W. Bush's chief economic adviser, explicitly floated the idea of cutting benefits, a necessary but unmentioned part of the White House's privatization plan. More details will be presented to the public in the weeks ahead, but the outlines of the Bush plan are already clear, having been laid out by his 2001 Social Security Commission. As Mankiw suggested, the Bush plan would require a large reduction in the benefits provided by the existing system. A worker who is 20 today would see a cut of approximately one-third in his or her retirement benefit, although workers would theoretically more than recoup this loss by investing a portion of their Social Security taxes in a private account.

The President's main pitch is that these accounts will yield higher returns than Social Security does. The pitch also includes rhetoric about the accounts being "your money," and giving every worker a stake in the "ownership society." These claims are mostly bad math, faulty logic and deception.

Advocates of private accounts assume that the stock market will give the same returns in the future as it has in the past, even though the ratios of stock prices to actual corporate earnings are above historical averages and the Social Security trustees project that profits will grow at about half the rate they did in the past. None of the proponents of privatization have yet passed the "no economist left behind test," which asks them to show the set of dividends yields and stock price increases that add up to the stock returns they assume in their analysis.

PRIVATE ACCOUNTS

Private accounts also have high administrative costs. According to Bush's Social Security Commission, private accounts will cost about ten times as much to administer as in the current system if they're handled through a single government-managed system. If Wall Street gets its hands on this money, with everyone going to his or her local bank or brokerage house — as is the case with the privatized systems in England and Chile — the costs could be 30 times as high as the cost of our Social Security system. When the administrative costs are combined with real numbers on stock returns, the individual accounts will provide no better returns on average than the government bonds currently held by the Social Security trust fund. The accounts just add risk — individuals may invest poorly or retire during a market downturn, leaving them with much less money than they'd have under the current system.

The faulty logic is telling workers that the dollars in their accounts are "your money." When money is genuinely "your money," you do what you want with it. And restrictions on existing private retirement accounts have consistently been relaxed to allow withdrawals for education, starting a business or other purposes. These are legitimate uses of workers' money, but not the way to secure money for retirement. The only way to preserve money for retirement is for the government to require that it stay in the account — but then it is not really "your money."

Under Bush's plan, workers will even be able to pass their private accounts on to their children, which raises the same problem. If the account will be there to support a worker's retirement, then the money can't also be passed down to children. While a small number of wealthy people may be in a position of not needing their accounts, creating this opt-out option will add further to the administrative costs for everyone — reducing benefits by another 5 to 10%, according to an extensive body of research.

Of course, the only reason anyone is even talking about cutting benefits and privatizing the program is that the right wing has managed to convince the public that Social Security is on its last legs. For more than two decades they have spread stories about the baby boomers bankrupting the system and multitrillion-dollar debts left to our children and grandchildren. In reality the program can pay all scheduled benefits long past the boomers' retirement. According to the Social Security trustees' report, it can pay full benefits through the year 2042 with no changes whatsoever. The nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office puts the date at 2052.

ECOOMIC SECURITY

And even after those dates, Social Security will always be able to pay a higher benefit (adjusted for inflation) than retirees receive today. Those scary multitrillion-dollar debts translate into a deficit equal to 0.7% of future income — presented in very precise form in the Social Security trustees report for those who care to look.

Social Security is the country's most important and successful social program. It provides a large measure of economic security to the whole country, uniting the interests of the poor and the middle class. The program not only keeps tens of millions of retirees out of poverty; it also provides disability and survivors' insurance to almost the entire working population. More children receive benefits from Social Security than from the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families program (the revamped welfare program). Social Security is also extremely efficient and has a minimal amount of fraud and abuse.

HUGELY POPULAR

It's a hugely popular program. Close to 90% of the public regularly affirms that we spend either too little or the right amount on Social Security. While polls also show majority support for private accounts, that's only when the question is asked. Would you like a private account? When the real-world question, Would you like a private account if it means a cut in your Social Security benefits? is asked, substantial majorities say no. Bush's Social Security plans are grounds for a decisive battle early in the Administration's second term. The public is overwhelmingly on our side; they just need to know the truth.

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15-MINUTE ACTIVIST

The surest way to build the power needed to win a good contract is to create a union-wide conversation about negotiations. Take 15 minutes at the start of the semester to begin that conversation with one colleague. Sometimes the hardest thing to do is to talk directly about the contract with the people with whom we work most closely, but that’s an essential first step in a real campaign. Listen to the issues your colleague raises, and make sure she knows what she can do to join the campaign. There are many ways to volunteer, and the Contract Campaign at www.asc-cuny.org/contractcampaign.htm. Plan to attend your first union chapter meeting of the Spring semester, and invite your colleague to join you.