

# Bernie

— 2016 —

December 10, 2015

The Honorable Andrew M. Cuomo  
Governor of New York State  
NYS State Capitol Building  
Albany, NY 12224

Dear Governor Cuomo:

As a New York City native, I grew up with a sense of the importance of the City University of New York, which has offered thousands of New Yorkers a chance they would never otherwise have had for a college education. Now, as a United States Senator and a candidate for national office, I have come to appreciate that CUNY's importance goes far beyond New York City. For people across the country, especially working people and people of color, CUNY represents hope for economic and racial justice. Its history of free tuition and open access make it a preeminent example of what public higher education in this country could be.

In a highly competitive global economy, we need the best-educated workforce in the world. Public investment in higher education should be a priority. As a college degree becomes increasingly important for economic security in our vastly unequal society, CUNY has historically represented the possibility that a college education of the highest quality could be accessible to all. It should continue to represent that possibility.

That is why I am troubled by New York State's refusal so far to invest in a fair contract for the University's faculty and staff. I have read the growing national coverage of the struggle by the Professional Staff Congress for a new contract, and I am concerned that a precious national resource is being threatened. Without investment of New York State funds, it will be impossible to reach a fair contract. And without a new contract, academic quality will suffer. It has begun to suffer already.

I call on you to make the necessary investment in salaries and working conditions for the employees represented by the Professional Staff Congress, so that CUNY will be in a position to retain the outstanding faculty that has always been its hallmark. CUNY faculty and staff have not had a raise in half a decade. As salaries fall far below competitive levels and the cost of living rises, CUNY's academic departments have found it increasingly difficult to recruit the best new faculty. Current professors and academic staff have begun to look for—and accept—jobs at better-paying universities. The result is a loss in the quality of education. Students lose access to the professors and advisors they deserve. The promise that CUNY has always represented is being broken.

That promise has special meaning because of the population CUNY serves. Among CUNY undergraduates, 77% are people of color; 42% are members of the first generation in their families to attend college; 37% are immigrants; and 54% come from families with annual incomes of less than \$30,000. Failure to invest in the contract for CUNY faculty and staff means failure to invest in the future of New York's poorest communities.

The contract with CUNY employees cannot be resolved without public funding from New York State. It is unrealistic to expect the University, already severely underfunded, to carve into its existing budget to cover the cost of even modest raises for 25,000 faculty and professional staff. The need to do so has already injured the quality of education, as CUNY colleges have been forced to absorb 3 or 4 percent budget cuts this year to pay for anticipated contract costs. Colleges have had to cut course offerings and reduce student services. That is unfair to New York's students and unfair to our country's future.

New York State can afford to do better. During the early years of your administration, New York was emerging from a recession, and your administration made decisions to impose economic austerity. There is no justification for austerity now.

New York State under your watch has made no progress on restoring CUNY funding to its pre-recession levels, despite the state's vigorous economic recovery. State funding for CUNY, on a per-student, real-dollar basis, is still 14 percent below its 2008 level—and a staggering 35 percent below its level in 1990. New York State's economic resurgence is to be celebrated; the best way to ensure that recovery continues and the economy grows fairly is to invest in the current generation of public college students.

I have learned as I have traveled across the country that few subjects are of greater concern to the American people than college education. The current moment presents an opportunity to be a national leader among governors by making a significant investment in public higher education. In New York, that investment should begin with a commitment of funds to support a new contract for the faculty and staff of CUNY. Seize that moment. Show New Yorkers that your concern for working people and people of color includes a commitment to their ability to achieve a college education. Provide the necessary funding for a contract for the employees represented by the Professional Staff Congress—hardworking people who have chosen to work at CUNY because they believe in the dream it represents. I guarantee you that your action will reverberate far beyond New York State. It will be applauded by Americans everywhere who want to see a progressive, productive future.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Bernie Sanders", written in a cursive style.

Bernie Sanders  
U.S. Senator