

MARCH 2020



Academic Year 2019-20 No. 6

[psc-cuny.org/retirees.org](http://psc-cuny.org/retirees.org)

## CHAPTER MEETING MONDAY, MARCH 2, 1-3PM

**Alan Feigenberg**, recently retired professor from the CCNY School of Architecture, will lead a presentation on organizing for sustainability in our physical environments in this era of climate crisis and global warming. Alan has extensive architectural knowledge as well as deep seated interest in sustainable design. He will help spark us in thinking about our city and its future.

**1 - 3 PM, PSC Union Hall**, 61 Broadway, 16th floor. Light refreshments as usual.

## APRIL CHAPTER MEETING MONDAY, APRIL 6, 1-3PM

At our April meeting, our speaker will be **Dania Rajendra**, the national director of Athena. In a front-page article on November 26, the *New York Times* reported on Athena, a new coalition that “comprises three dozen grass-roots groups involved in issues like digital surveillance, antitrust and working conditions in warehouses. The goal is to encourage and unify the resistance to Amazon that is now beginning to form.”

Dania, its national director, is a familiar face to many of us, having worked at the PSC first as associate editor of *Clarion* and later as communications coordinator.

Speakers at the **June luncheon** will celebrate the centennial of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment prohibiting the states and federal government from denying the right to vote to U.S. citizens on the basis of sex. We'll have full details of the June luncheon in our April newsletter. ■

## THEATER PARTY SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 29, 2 PM



Come join us for a trip to the theater.

**Connie Gemson**, a PSC executive committee retiree, is pleased to have her play, *A Cigarette Girl in the South Bronx*, produced by the Working Theater of New York, at Gural 502 W 53<sup>rd</sup> St @ 10<sup>th</sup> Ave. We will attend the matinee on February 29.

Connie's play will be included in a six-session series called *Best of Theaterworks*. She was enrolled in the Working Theater's free playwriting class for PSC members in 2018 and is delighted that her play will be produced off-Broadway.

Tickets for seniors are \$25. Call the box office at 866-811-4111 and say you're calling about the Working Theater in NYC. The website is [www.workingtheater.org](http://www.workingtheater.org). ■

## THE MONTH THAT WAS



### Adolph Reed Jr. Speaks about Building Social Movements

-Joan Greenbaum, retiree LaGuardia CC

February's speaker gave us a rapid paced analysis of mobilization efforts that he has been involved in in South Carolina over a long period of time. **Adolph Reed Jr**, emeritus professor of political science at the University of Pennsylvania, began good humoredly by telling us that political science can only be used to predict elections past, not future ones. He mixed theory and his own practice with the stark observation that elections (particularly the American once-every-four-years version) do *not* lend themselves to mobilizing people for social and economic change. Reed has been organizing on-the-ground before, during and after elections for many years, particularly through his activities with the Debs, Jones, Douglass Institute with which he has been affiliated for the past two decades.

Reed is a noted author and speaker on issues of race and economic inequality in America. He grew up in New Orleans and has spent a considerable amount of time in the South. He sprinkled his talk about the need for free higher education and health care with homilies that make people sit up and listen, such as "politicians can't be bought but they can be rented-- again and again." He told us about his meetings in Orangeburg, South Carolina with more than 50 Black community leaders, as well as his work in Greenville, SC with six White

leaders of a CWA local (including Trump supporters). In these groups, as in others, when Medicare for All is explained and discussed people ask great questions such as "Why isn't this on the ballot already?"

Reed is an engaged Bernie supporter. But his work in South Carolina is not about Bernie. The Debs, Jones, Douglass Institute is non-partisan—but it clearly resonates with Bernie's policies. He questions the value of door knocking by supporters only *before* an election as too short-term to bring about real change. Reed's door knocking about issues usually leads to long discussions in living rooms—something he encourages all of us to do in order to bring about change. Americans now stand, he fears, with a Republican Party that is "a militaristic class party on the cusp of total power?" Before the spirited question-and-answer period he also discussed the urgent need to fight for funding for free higher education. He said, "private universities (and some public colleges) are becoming research and development institutes for industry with finishing schools attached." Frightening reminders from an energetic never-say-die activist for us to take-away and continue our own education and actions. ■

### BAD FAITH

- Steve Leberstein, retiree CCNY

Book Launch: Andrew Feffer, *Bad Faith: Teachers, Liberals, and the Origins of McCarthyism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019)



At a book launch event for *Bad Faith*, the author asked, "Are we at risk again of another McCarthyite attack on political dissent and freedom of assembly and speech?" Andy Feffer thinks so and explains why based on his research into the infamous investigation and purge of City College faculty and staff in 1940-41, known as the Rapp-Coudert Committee, a joint NYS legislative named for its 2 chairs. By the end of 1942, about 50 faculty and staff at City College alone had lost their jobs.

Feffer, a professor of history at Union College in Schenectady, spoke to a packed audience at Tamiment Library's new facility at NYU's Bobst Library on February 12. When the committee opened its public hearing in December 1940, its chair, Paul Windels, long-time advisor to Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, he began by attacking the N.Y. College Teachers Union (AFT Local 537), along with the NY Teachers Union (AFT Local 5), by demanding that they turn over their membership lists. Union lawyers objected but the unions had to comply. The investigators went down the lists, trying to identify activists named by their colleagues.

The Committee condemned the faculty for acting in "bad faith" and charged that they were indoctrinating their students rather than educating them. Indeed, there was much student activism at Brooklyn and City Colleges, but investigators found no evidence that the faculty needed to arouse students, although union faculty organized to improve their own condition and to rid the colleges of their Tammany Hall politicization, especially by ridding City and Brooklyn Colleges of their notorious presidents, Frederick Robinson and William Boylan.

Since investigators found no hard evidence that suspect faculty were actually Communist Party members responsible for student activism, they chose instead to ask suspects if they were members, then make the Board of Trustees require that they respond to the question or face prosecution for "conduct unbecoming."

The faculty who answered the questions also named their colleagues, who were then dismissed when they refused to answer if they were Communist Party members. Morris Schappes, a City College English instructor, didn't name names during his testimony (except for two dead party members and a well-known organizer) and was subsequently convicted of perjury and sentenced to jail.

The Committee suspended its investigation in 1941 following the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. When the U.S. declared war on Germany and Japan, the Soviet Union became an ally of the U.S.

Tracking down Communists became inopportune, for a time, but the Committee had already compiled a list of over 700 suspects interviewed without the right to counsel or the chance to refute allegations. Windels and his cohorts had achieved a major objective, gaining the Board of Higher Education's cooperation. The Board also abandoned parts of its Democratization Plan of 1938, which had represented gains for the union in expanding faculty rights. Windels celebrated having already changed the culture of the public colleges by instilling the instinct of self-censorship and self-policing in the academic community, "that amorphous section of the public referred to under the collective heading 'liberals' and 'intellectuals,'" as he put it in his report to the State Legislature.

The Board of Education continued to bring those named to disciplinary hearings in 1942, by which time about 50, including City's first and only black teacher, Max Yergan, and a number of other staff, were dismissed. By 1946, the right had begun to organize to attack labor rights and other advances won as part of the New Deal, and NY State passed the Feinberg Law in 1948, forbidding public schools and colleges to hire Communists, a law not struck down until 1967.

For Feffer, the threat we face now is that of a resurgence of rabid anti-Communism under a

new name, in part by liberals fearful of the rise of socialism. He reminds us in his superb new book about the high stakes in the political attack on educators today. He warns that we are at risk for yet another resurgence of reaction like that sorry time at the center of which our former colleagues and their progressive unions were stifled, and our political culture deformed. Feffer's warnings succeeded. A spirited discussion followed his riveting presentation. ■

## NEWS OF NOTE



-Bill Friedheim, retiree, BMCC

“When will New York stop starving CUNY?”

This is the headline for a PSC advocacy fact sheet calling on the State Legislature to fund a shortfall of **\$232.6 million** in Governor Andrew Cuomo's Executive Budget for CUNY.

In a state with the greatest extremes in wealth and poverty in the nation, there's the grotesque reality that an additional \$232.6 million would constitute a major victory, but barely bring CUNY's operating budget above austerity levels. (The PSC advocacy fact sheet and breakdown of CUNY's immediate needs is available at <https://tinyurl.com/CUNYbudget>)

As a New York Yankee hall of famer and wit Yogi Berra once said, “It's déjà vu all over again.”

It's been the same story of serial underfunding of CUNY by every governor from Cuomo

senior (Mario) in the eighties and nineties to Cuomo junior (Andrew) three decades later.

I would argue that for more than a century, CUNY (and its predecessor institutions) was the crown jewel of Gotham. In 1847, its founding institution, the Free Academy (later becoming CCNY) opened with the mission of providing a *free*, comprehensive education to the “children of the whole people.”

At no cost to its students, CCNY and its predecessors enriched lives, expanded horizons, provided skills, created paths for social mobility and graduated hundreds of thousands of the “children of the whole people” -- the majority of whom came from either poor, working class, immigrant and/or minority families. In the process, the city became richer, with a more skilled workforce, a larger tax base (generated by social mobility) and a broadly educated citizenry.

But after 129 years, free tuition was ended in 1976 during the height of the NYC Fiscal Crisis. In the ensuing 46 years, it has been a struggle to sustain CUNY's founding vision, as public funding in real dollars has dramatically diminished and tuition steadily increased. The Free Academy of 1847 has morphed into an austerity university.

**The first order of business** is to fight like hell for the **\$232.6 million** advocated by the PSC and a coalition of student and community groups for the 2020-21 CUNY budget. The PSC has orchestrated a campaign that includes lobbying in Albany, visits to legislator's offices in their home districts, a robust social media effort, rallies, flying squads and participation in a revenue coalition (calling for new, progressive taxes). To find out more and to see how you can plug into the revenue coalition, go to <https://makebillionairespay.info/>



**The second order of business** is to think big. To re-imagine CUNY. To build a coalition of students, faculty, staff, alumni and the communities that the University serves. To develop and implement a **New Deal for CUNY** that would craft and then advocate and organize for legislation that would mandate funding for CUNY's operating and capital needs. To advocate for a change in the NYS tax structure to raise revenue from corporations and the wealthiest New Yorkers for the public goods and services New Yorkers deserve and need.

The second order of business is a multi-year commitment to secure the billions of dollars that CUNY needs to educate and nourish the "children of the whole people" and in the process enrich the city writ large.

Student, community and alumni groups as well as the PSC are exploring the possibilities of a legislative CUNY New Deal that would restore free tuition, expand full-time faculty and staff, enhance affirmative action, dramatically increase mental health and academic advisors, redress adjunct inequality and invest billions in a capital budget to address CUNY's deteriorating physical facilities.

The **New Deal for CUNY** needs troops, energy and ideas. PSC leadership has taken the initiative, but there needs to be energy, ideas and organizing muscle at the chapter level.

With this in mind, the Retirees' Chapter is putting together a budget committee to mobilize on the first order of business (the advocacy and organizing for the additional

**\$232.6 million** in the 2020-21 budget) and the second (re-imagining CUNY over the long haul).

Join the chapter's budget committee. Re-imagine CUNY! Think of possible allies, contacts and resources to widen the circle of the immediate and longer-term campaigns. You can sign up by sending an email to [retirees@pscmail.org](mailto:retirees@pscmail.org) with the subject head "Budget Committee." ■

### **CALLING ALL FRIENDS OF CUNY.**

And if you are not game to join the budget committee, please remember that we are forming a group called **Friends of CUNY**, an umbrella organization of student, grassroots, community and CUNY Alumni. We're not asking for you to give money but for you to help us *get* the money. You don't have to go to Albany or City Hall (though it would be great if you could). You can help from home by telephoning, emailing, etc. but above all, by recruiting other faculty and staff in your alumni associations to join. We would not have to ask for your help if CUNY would provide lists of alumni, but it won't. This is an appeal to you to join and encourage your fellow alumni to do the same.

Over the next few months, we need to augment our numbers so that we can increase and maintain *pressure on the politicians who will be deciding how much money CUNY will be allocated.*

To paraphrase, it may be time to ask not what the union can do for you, but what you can do for the union and the University. **Join Friends of CUNY** and the effort at the CUNY Rising Alliance [www.cunyrisingalliance.org/cuny-alumni](http://www.cunyrisingalliance.org/cuny-alumni) ■



Dave Kotelchuck, retiree Hunter College

On April 1 of this year, nearly 700,000 Americans will be thrown off the federal Food Stamps program based on changes in regulations enacted last year by the Trump Administration. An estimated 200,000 of them are New York State residents. A number of state governments are expected to challenge these changes in court, but the deadline remains and states and food-bank programs are preparing for the worst. [The Food Stamp program, officially called SNAP (the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), is federally funded but administered by the states.]

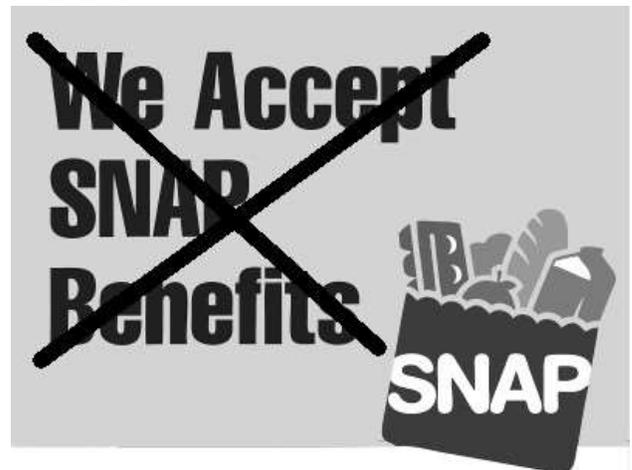
Changes made in the federal program in 2019 *allowed* states to require able-bodied recipients 18 through 49 years to work at least 20 hours per week, under penalty of their being cut off from benefits after three months. Fourteen states have adopted these work requirements, most of them in the South and Central U.S. But most states have not, based on waivers granted them over the years to allow those with high unemployment or other needs to effectively access their programs. As of April 1, states will no longer be able to waive these work requirements; they will become *mandatory*.

Before a gaggle of millionaires and others at the recent World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, President Trump bragged about these cuts: "Millions and millions of people don't need food stamps anymore. They have jobs. They're doing really well." (*NY Times*, 1/25/20) The idea of pushing people out of

social welfare programs and into the labor market got a big boost from Bill Clinton's "ending welfare as we know it." The result: Three decades of downward pressure on wages.

Those most affected by the Trump cuts: Single men and women 18-49 who can't find jobs, who are caring for elderly or disabled family members and/or who are disabled themselves (but not on Social Security Disability). As noted by one local consultant in the *Times* article cited above, "People may not work because they lack educational qualifications and transportation to surrounding towns with more employment. They may also face discrimination in the hiring process because of the color of their skin or their gender."

About three million of the 34 million on SNAP nationwide in FY2019 are able-bodied and without children -- and of these about two million work. The remaining one million are the targets of these Trump cuts, and of these the Social Security Administration estimates a revised 688,000 will lose their food stamp benefits.



In this war against the needy, attacks are also being carried out on other fronts: The Administration, not content with cuts in SNAP, has tasked the Department of Homeland Security with reviewing all applications for legal permanent residence in the U.S. (green cards) to make sure that none are approved for persons who may become a "public charge," as evidenced by, among other things, having

applied for or been approved for food-stamp benefits! (*Washington Post*, 8/12/19) ■



-Bonnie Nelson, retiree, John Jay

In 2019, for the first time in over a century, major voting rights reforms became law in New York State. Collectively, these changes have the potential to improve New York State's voter participation rate, which is currently an abysmal 44<sup>th</sup> in the country.

Changes already in place:

- **Early Voting.** Starting with this past November's election, New Yorkers now have 9 days of early voting (including two weekends!). In most NY counties, voters can cast their ballots at any Early Voting Center in the county. So far, in New York City, voters are assigned to an EV site based on election district, but the NYC Board of Elections is being pressured to enact open borough-wide Voting Centers, as well.
- **Consolidation of Primary Dates.** Until this year, New York had two primaries—one in June for U.S. Congress and one in September for New York State offices. These have now been combined into one June primary. (The presidential primary is a separate date: April 28 this year.)
- **Changed date for party enrollment.** In New York, voters must be enrolled in a political party in order to vote in that party's primary elections. The date to change

one's party affiliation, or for unaffiliated voters to enroll in a party, was February 14 in order to vote in the April presidential primary or the June primary. (Previously, changes had to be made eleven months before the primary!) *If you are not registered at all*, the last day to register to be able to vote in the presidential primary is April 3.

- **Registration Portability.** Registered voters who move within New York State will now be able to vote in their new election district without re-registering. This reform depends on accurate information being received from the post office and then properly processed by the local board of elections, so it's wise to check on one's registration well before Election Day (see below).
- **Pre-registration of 16- and 17-year-olds.** As of January 1, 2020, 16- and 17-year-olds may fill out a voter registration form and then the Board of Elections will automatically enroll them as voters once they turn 18.

Changes in progress:

- **Online Voter Registration** is set to begin statewide in 2021. New York City already has a system ready to go if the NYS legislature passes enabling legislation.
- **Automatic Voter Registration.** A bill to allow citizens to be automatically registered to vote when they interact with many state agencies (e.g., DMV, CUNY, SUNY, Dept. of Health) was passed in the last legislative session but withdrawn at the last minute for technical corrections. A new AVR bill has already passed the NYS Senate.
- **Same Day Voter Registration.** An amendment to the NYS Constitution is required in order to allow voters to register and then vote on the same day. Amendments must be passed by the legislature twice before being placed on the ballot in a general election, but the process has begun with a positive vote of the legislature in 2019.

- **Vote by Mail.** Currently in New York, in order to vote by mail, you must provide an acceptable excuse for not being able to get to the polls on Election Day. A constitutional amendment to provide for “no excuse” mail voting also passed the legislature in 2019.
- **Voting Rights for People on Parole.** Right now in New York, incarcerated people are disenfranchised by law, as are people who have been released from prison into the community but are on parole. Governor Cuomo has restored voting rights to parolees by executive order, but this needs to be codified into law so it cannot be reversed at the whim of this or a future governor.

In addition, New York City voters approved a Charter amendment last November to provide for **Ranked-Choice Voting** in primaries and special elections for NYC offices beginning in 2021. Voters will be able to rank up to five candidates in order of preference. If no candidate gets a majority of first-choice votes, then the candidate with the fewest number of first-choice votes is eliminated and that candidate’s votes are redistributed according to their voters’ second choice—continuing until one candidate has a majority. When this takes effect, New York City will be, by far, the most populous jurisdiction to implement Ranked-Choice Voting in the United States.

Of course, none of these voting reforms will affect you if you are not actually registered to vote. To check your voting status in New York, visit the NYS Board of Elections Voter Lookup site at <https://voterlookup.elections.ny.gov/> ■

### **Small Steps to End Plastic Pollution**

-Cecelia McCall, retiree Baruch

As of March 1 this year, single-use plastic bags are banned and retailers will charge five-cents for paper bags. This ban is soon to be followed by one on Polystyrene (Styrofoam) items and

plastic bottles. Also, by executive order of Mayor de Blasio, NYC will no longer purchase single-use plastic water or soda bottles and will restrict the sale of them on city-owned property – parks, beaches, sidewalks and buildings. Street vendors may not be allowed to sell them.



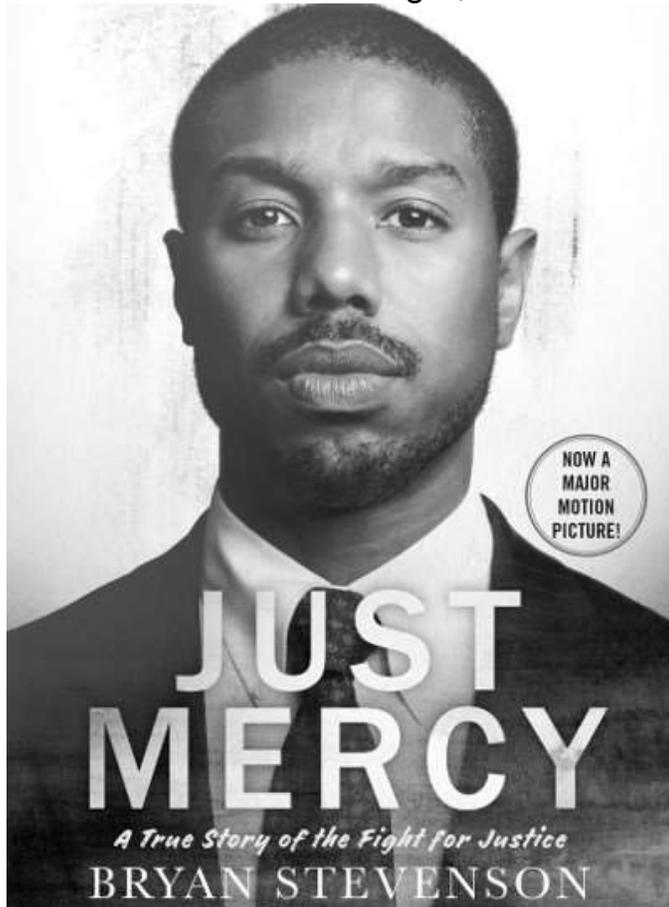
These changes will not have too much of an impact on you, if like me, you have been carrying your own reusable water bottle and reusable shopping bag. But they may decrease some street litter and the amount of plastic that ends up in rivers and oceans. As well, there may be a decrease in the amount of refuse that has to be recycled. According to several articles in *Politico* by Sally Goldenberg and Danielle Muoio, New York’s recycling program is a failure. Only 18% of residential waste is recycled and recycling does not exist in NYCHA housing where garbage bins overflow with cans and bottles. Under the dark of night, commercial waste haulers collect and mix together bottles, cardboard and cans initially separated by residents. They then haul it out of state to Ohio or South Carolina or to the Dunn Landfill site in Rensselaer, New York, that is close to a public school and ball field. Methane, a greenhouse gas more potent than carbon dioxide, is emitted from the dumpsite

and inhaled by the children at the school and people using the ball field.

Plastic is a by-product of ethylene, a gas derived from the burning of fossil fuels – petroleum, natural gas and coal. Each of us resolving to use fewer disposable plastic items will strike a blow against both the plastics and the fossil fuel industries and help decrease plastic pollution. ■

## ABOUT US NEW FILM

-Joel Berger, retiree COSI



A few years ago, one of the book groups of the Retiree Chapter read **Just Mercy** by Bryan Stevenson. Immersing the reader in the efforts of Stevenson's Equal Justice Initiative to combat the legacies of slavery which placed innocent men on death row, the book aroused feelings of anger and outrage. It was a sober reminder of what happens in the United States to the poor and people of color.

Now, a powerful film based on the book, vividly conveys the indignities Black Americans suffer and the injustice of the justice system. Starring Michael B. Jordan as Bryan Stevenson and Jaimie Foxx as Johnny D McMillian, *Just Mercy*, combines the elements of courtroom drama, crusading investigation, and prison life into well-paced drama. The performances are realistic and nuanced, with the cinematography capturing the essence of the rural south. The background musical score blends perfectly with the narrative. The film is engrossing as it immerses the audience in its narrative.

It also raises significant social issues as it implicitly examines the death penalty, and the inability of the poor to receive competent legal representation. Bryan Stevenson has done heroic work in freeing the innocent who were corruptly convicted. This a film that must be seen. ■

## NEW BOOK ACTIVIST ODYSSEY

*Inside Protest Movements, Some of Which Worked* by **Sylvia Hart Wright**

Sylvia Wright's new memoir called *Activist Odyssey* will be of interest to many in our generation. It was published in December under the title, *Rough Flavors*, but is now being reissued as *Activist Odyssey*. Sylvia is a retiree from City College.

A blurb from *Kirkus Review* tells us: "This account elegantly captures the zeitgeist of mid-20th-century America."

## Environmental Justice Working Group (EJWG)

Thanks to all of you who have already signed the petition to divest our TRS pensions from fossil fuels and to have a fossil free alternative fund for those of us in TIAA. The petitions are at [www.pscuny.org/DivestCUNY](http://www.pscuny.org/DivestCUNY).

This spring we are working with CUNY's University Student Senate. They voted overwhelmingly on January 26 to encourage CUNY to divest its funds as well as expand its efforts for greener campuses, including dramatically reducing the use of plastic water bottles and single-use plastic bags or utensils in food services on campus.

**April 22 is the 50 Anniversary of Earth Day**, so stay tuned for more information on all the activities that environmental, labor and community groups will sponsor as we organize to address climate crises.

The next meeting of the PSC Environmental Justice Working Group is Monday, February 24 at 5:30 PM at the PSC. All are welcome. ■

**Turning the Page** is put together by Joan Greenbaum, Mike Frank, Dave Kotelchuck and our intrepid Retiree Chapter Chair Bill Friedheim. We welcome more story ideas,

articles, graphics and your letters. Write to us at [retirees@pscmail.org](mailto:retirees@pscmail.org) with "Newsletter" in the subject line. ■

The **Alliance for Retired Americans (ARA)** is the retiree organization of the AFL-CIO. PSC retirees are members of the NYS chapter of ARA. For more information on the NYS chapter go to: [www.nystate.retiredamericans.org/](http://www.nystate.retiredamericans.org/). ■

**LIFE DURING WARTIME.** Josh Brown, the retired director of the American Social History Project at the Graduate Center, produced a series of weekly political illustrations, beginning in 2003 with the war in Iraq, called Life During Wartime. The entire collection, 2003-2019, is online at: [www.joshbrownny.com/ldw.htm](http://www.joshbrownny.com/ldw.htm).

His latest appears below:

