

NOVEMBER 2019



Academic Year 2019-20 No. 3

psc-cuny.org/retirees.org

CHAPTER MEETING MONDAY, NOVEMBER 4

Resurgence of Labor? Is U.S. labor at an existential moment of resurgence?



Picket sign as Chicago teachers strike on 10/17/19

Speakers:

◆ **Michelle Chen** is a contributing writer at *The Nation* and *In These Times*, a contributing editor at *Dissent* and co-producer of the bi-weekly podcast "Belabored." She teaches courses on labor and media at the CUNY School of Labor and Urban Studies.

◆ Labor Historian and Distinguished Professor **Joshua Freeman** (Graduate Center

and Queens College) has published widely on labor and is the author of *Behemoth, Working-Class New York* and other works.

◆ Professor **Lois Weiner** (New Jersey City University) is the author of *The Future of Our Schools: Teachers Unions and Social Justice* and a regular contributor on labor and education to *Jacobin Magazine*.

Join new and old colleagues in the 16th floor Union Hall of the PSC at 61 Broadway (just below Wall and Rector Streets), 1-3 PM. Light refreshments will be served. ■

CHAPTER MEETING MONDAY, DECEMBER 2 Good and Welfare.

Donna Costa, executive director of the PSC-CUNY Welfare Fund, and **Patrick Smith**, its communications director, will present the latest on Welfare Fund benefits and take questions. **Connie Gemson**, a long-time advocate on issues of senior healthcare and a member of the chapter's executive committee, will speak on "How to Be an Eldercare Advocate."

SAVE THIS DATE: MONDAY, JANUARY 13 *The Imperial Presidency*



Our annual winter luncheon speaker will be Eric Alterman, distinguished professor

of English and journalism, Brooklyn College, and columnist for *The Nation*. He'll speak on the **Imperial Presidency**, the decades-long swing of federal power from the legislative to the executive branch and how this comes to a head with the current impeachment crisis.

The luncheon is January 13, 12:30 PM at the Graduate Center, 9th floor, 365 Fifth Ave. Reservation forms in the December Newsletter. ■

THE MONTH THAT WAS

OCTOBER CHAPTER MEETING: ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE -- A Question of Ethics and Power

-Bill Friedheim, retiree, BMCC

Meredith Whittaker did the impossible. In front of an audience of retirees, many of them proud, card-carrying technophobes, she explained in language, stunning in its simplicity and sophistication, a complex technological issue—AI (artificial intelligence). She fully engaged techies and technophobes for ninety minutes of talk and discussion on a topic that has huge, if not frightening, implications for our modern world.

Whittaker is a distinguished research scientist at New York University, co-founder and co-director of the AI Now Institute, and a core organizer of the "Google Walkouts." That protest, in November 2018, mobilized 20,000 Google employees worldwide in response to the way in which the company handled cases of sexual harassment and quickly expanded to address the ethics of Google's initiatives in artificial intelligence.

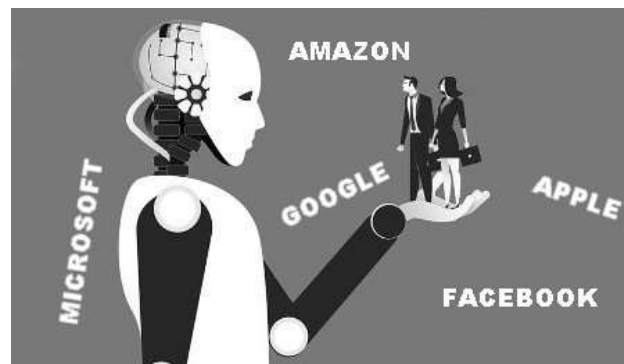
At Google, Whittaker was the founder of the Open Research group. She worked there for "13 years, five days" until she resigned, arguing that her work on AI ethics was no

longer compatible with the "direction in which Google was growing." As reported in *Wired*, the online and print monthly, she urged her fellow Google employees in a farewell message "to unionize, protect whistle-blowers, and insist on transparency around the technology they are building and how it will be used."

That farewell message was a subtext for her talk on AI at our October chapter meeting. Founded 64 years ago and initially underwritten by the U.S. military, AI gained little traction until ten years ago. What has changed in the last decade?

1. The absolutely massive accumulation of digital data.
2. An equally massive computer infrastructure that can integrate and manipulate that data for multiple uses.

That infrastructure represents a consolidation of power by five companies, which dominate the AI field worldwide – Amazon, Apple, Facebook, Google and Microsoft.



One of the most ubiquitous and questionable uses of AI is for worker surveillance and control, an Orwellian and modern version of "Taylorism." For example, Amazon wires its warehouse workers to track how fast they work and then calibrates the pace to that of the speediest worker. Collateral human damage results in nervous breakdowns, exhaustion, constant turnover and layoffs of those who cannot keep pace. When someone is terminated, there is no

human interface. AI issues the notice of dismissal.

Similarly, Uber and Lyft track drivers, using AI to “Taylorize” routes.

Whittaker provided multiple examples of questionable uses of AI:

- AI Affect Visualization: capturing facial expressions in job interviews and comparing them to the most “successful” workers. Goldman Sachs is one of the companies that makes extensive use of this AI technology.
- Criminal detection systems: Department stores use a video AI surveillance system to predict (often incorrectly) which customers are most likely to engage in theft. The Midas Detection Automated Review system, which purportedly identifies false unemployment claims, made 20,000 false fraud accusations in Michigan, resulting in many applicants losing UE benefits, suffering fines, having taxes garnished – all of which had to be fought in long and costly hearings by the accused.
- Tracking software sold to ICE: the software can trace physical movements and social media and email activity, among other data. To avoid detection and persecution, many immigrants avoid public and digital spaces.
- Amazon selling facial recognition technology to municipal police departments without first going through the approval process of city councils or other appropriate democratically elected government bodies.

Whittaker also noted that the AI industry has a larger carbon footprint than the airline industry.

Her presentation motivated forty minutes of spirited, informed discussion covering is-

sues across a wide spectrum from the role of the big five AI companies in universities to the National Security Agency (NSA) to even crypto currency in Puerto Rico – and more.



All is not dystopian doom and gloom. Throughout, Whittaker stressed that the question at issue was not the technology itself, but who controls it and for what purposes.

In response to a question about government regulation of AI, given the dismal political landscape in Washington, Whittaker reminded us of the possibilities and power of local government regulation.

From the floor came examples of (1) students at Johns Hopkins stopping the university’s AI contract with ICE and (2) Amazon warehouse workers in Minneapolis, led mainly by Somalian-American women, successfully organizing. Whittaker noted that just in the past week workers from Google, Facebook and Microsoft discussed strategy at an organizing symposium with Amazon warehouse workers and Uber and Lyft drivers. And of course there is the example of resistance in the belly of the beast: the “Google Walkout” led by, among others, our speaker.

Whittaker flagged the dangers of AI put to bad purposes, but what made her presentation special, is that she did so from the per-

spective of an organizer who believed in the power of mobilization and change. ■

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE ON THE MOVE

The Professional Staff Congress had a robust delegation march with the youth-led **Climate Strike on September 20** to demand that governments act rather than just talk at the UN Summit on Climate the following Monday, September 23. Retirees were well represented in the PSC delegation and others joined us at Battery park. Fridays for Futures and 350.org, along with the Peoples Climate Movement-NY, organized the coalition that marched from Foley Square to Battery Park, filling the park to overflowing. Greta Thunberg, who began skipping school on Fridays about 18 months ago to sit in front of the Swedish Parliament to demand action, addressed the crowd to thunderous applause.



The **PSC Environmental Justice Working Group (EJWG)** began the fall semester supporting the September 20 march to address the climate crisis. This academic year the EJWG will continue its efforts on pension divestment and the Green New Deal. The EJWG will also join NY Public Interest Research Group (NYPIRG) and the University Student Senate in a campaign to lower CUNY's carbon footprint.

This fall, the EJWG will meet at the PSC office on **Monday, November 18** and

Monday, December 16 at 5 PM. Email Eileen Moran at eileenmoran7@gmail.com if you're interested in working with the group. ■

TRUMP PUSHES PRIVATIZED COMPONENTS OF MEDICARE, or here we go again

-Dave Kotelchuck, retiree, Hunter College
Last month, Donald Trump issued an executive order purporting to “strengthen Medicare,” while in reality improving benefits for privatized Medicare Advantage (MA) enrollees at the expense of retirees with Fee-for-Service (FFS), or so-called traditional, benefits. He called it a move to prevent “socialist destruction” of Medicare. Michael Phelan, staff director for Social Security Works, called it “nothing more than a backdoor attempt to privatize Medicare—pushing more seniors into private Medicare Advantage plans run by for-profit insurance corporations.”

Currently about one-third of the 60 million Americans on Medicare are enrolled in Medicare Advantage plans. The President cannot change the Medicare law without Congressional authorization, but his executive order directs Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar to develop plans within the year to:

- **Adjust** “supplemental MA benefits to allow Medicare beneficiaries to share more directly in the savings from the program, including through cash or monetary rebates” (i.e., *lower costs for MA enrollees*); and
- **Identify** within 180 days “approaches to modify Medicare FFS payments to more closely reflect the prices paid for services in MA and the commercial insurance market, to encourage more robust price competition, and otherwise to inject market pricing into Medicare FFS reim-

bursement” (i.e., *raise costs for the remaining two-thirds of enrollees*).

(Full text of the order at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/executive-order-protecting-improving-medicare-nations-seniors/>)

In announcing the order publicly, Trump took time to denounce Medicare for All: “The Democrat (sic) health care proposals would put everyone into a single socialist government program.” (NYT, 10/4/19, p. A8). Azar, according to this article, said that Democrats’ health care plan is *too focused on reducing the ranks of the uninsured*. Duh! That’s what “Health Care is a Human Right” means – and that’s among the few issues on which virtually all Democrats agree. ■

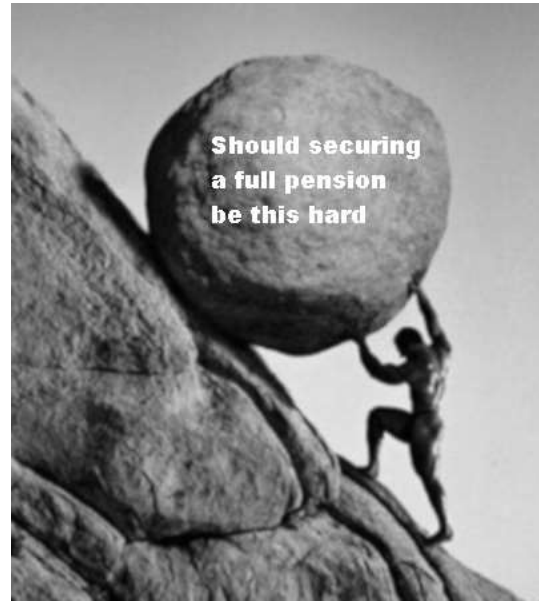
TRS TROUBLES DON'T END

*-Diane Menna, newly retired
Queens College*

I filed my paperwork for retirement in person with TRS on March 14, 2019 with a retirement date of April 8. TRS literature estimates that a retiree will receive “advance payments” within one to two months and “regular” retirement payments within three to five months. On May 31, I began receiving advance payments of approximately 27% of my full pension (according to an estimate from TRS itself).

After waiting five months, I attempted to contact TRS and continued to try for weeks and months. TRS is virtually unreachable. TRS provides no email contact, no one to contact by mail, and no individual handles your case. TRS has a phone number, but either the phone goes unanswered or a recorded message tells you to call back later with no voicemail option. You can email the Welfare Fund Retirement Benefits Counselor who contacts someone at TRS who may provide you with some information about the status of your case, but there is

still no way to contact anyone at TRS directly or get any information.



On October 2, after almost seven months without a regular pension payment and living off my savings account that was almost depleted, I finally reached someone at TRS who said I needed to fill out another form. I went down to TRS the following day but was told by another person that the form was not needed but that I would have to wait another two months for my money (eight months after my retirement date and nine months after I filed my paperwork). I asked if TRS could at least increase the amount of my “advance” given 27% was unreasonably minimal. She said she would ask but probably not. She also said that the finalized figure would not be provided until the payment arrives, at which time I could contest the figure, if necessary.

The PSC Pension Committee has been asked to look into this. As noted in previous newsletters, the Retirees Chapter has held meetings with both TRS and CUNY to get them to reconcile these issues for those who retired earlier. If you are newly retired and having difficulty getting your pension from TRS, write retirees@pscmail.org with “TRS” in the subject line. ■

NEWS OF NOTE



The following is a Statement of Purpose for the Task Force for Fair Admissions, which is being spearheaded by Larry Rushing, retiree, LaGuardia Community College.

CUNY colleges have become increasingly segregated. The senior college students are disproportionately white, while the community colleges are predominately composed of Black and Latino students.

To a considerable extent, the ethnic imbalances can be attributed to admissions policies. Like the specialized high schools in New York City, CUNY's senior colleges deny admission to students on the basis of standardized test scores. Ironically, our senior colleges continue this practice while many colleges nationwide are ending their use of standardized tests in admissions, especially the SAT. These colleges, which include the University of Chicago and Sarah Lawrence, are looking at a wide range of admissions criteria.

The students who are most visibly suffering from CUNY's test-dominated policies are students of African descent. Since 1999, when CUNY imposed standardized test cutoffs for admission to the senior colleges, CCNY, Hunter College, and Baruch College have experienced sharp reductions in the percentage of Black undergraduates.

There is a great deal of data to show that not only is a single test non indicative of fu-

ture performance, but that CUNY's admission policy has contributed to the on-going segregation of black and brown students.

This Task Force proposes a number of activities for a twofold purpose: 1) to bring an acute awareness of this crisis to the public by activating students, alumni and faculty and staff; and 2) to influence, if not alter, CUNY's policies. ■

WE NEED AN ENERGY PATH THAT IS CERTAIN TO WORK

Leonard Rodberg, retiree, Queens College, is a physicist who taught climate change and public policy at Queens College until his retirement in 2017. The following is an excerpt from a letter printed in the Albany Times Union on September 28 of this year.

I spent ten years teaching climate change and what to do about it. I told my students that, if we were to address the climate crisis effectively, we had to switch from fossil fuels—coal, oil, gas—to clean renewable energy, especially solar, wind, and water-power. I also explained that nuclear energy, though it was carbon-free, was too risky to play a role.

Since my retirement two years ago, I have had a chance to study this issue more intensively and to bring my earlier background in physics to bear on our energy choices. What I have learned is that I was wrong: the widely held idea that we should move toward reliance on 100% renewable energy is a dangerous delusion.

New York's recently-passed Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act requires that New York derive 70% of its electricity from renewable sources by 2030, have 100% carbon-free electricity by 2040, and by 2050 have no net greenhouse gas emissions from buildings, transportation, or manufacturing. No one has yet put forward a plan to accomplish this. The principal re-

renewable sources identified in the law, waterpower, wind, and solar, are clearly not up to the task.



Waterpower, which today accounts for 22% of New York's electricity, cannot grow; the state's major rivers have already been dammed. Wind is specified in the law to grow to where it could, optimistically, produce 14% of the state's electricity by 2030. At this time, the only wind turbines currently anywhere off the coast of the United States are the five 6-megawatt units recently constructed near Block Island, Rhode Island. The New York plan will require installation of about 1,000 turbines, each generating 9-13 megawatts, in the Atlantic Ocean by 2035, and the Governor is currently seeking contractors to build them. Assuming that this project will succeed, the new law requires that, by 2030, the remaining 34% must be generated by solar.

Is this possible? Today, solar plays a minor role, providing just 2% of the state's current electric output. That comes from some 122,000 solar facilities—solar cells on roofs and panels spreading across fields—installed over the last twenty years. By 2030, more than 2.5 million additional installations would be needed. And, because solar units produce less electricity in cloudy conditions and in winter, and none at night, some form of storage—large banks of batteries or other means of storing energy—would be needed as well. Even if the cost of solar facilities and storage were to continue

dropping, one hundred billion dollars or more would have to be raised. Daunting legal and political issues will arise as thousands of communities and millions of homeowners have to install and host these intrusive, often land-hungry facilities.

This is unlikely to happen in the next ten years. And it gets worse. Electric demand is going to increase as an ever-warming atmosphere leads to more use of air conditioners, large numbers of electric vehicles move onto the roads, and homes and businesses switch from oil and gas to electrically powered space and hot water heaters in response to local, state, and federal mandates.

In short, renewable sources alone cannot meet the 70% goal, much less the new law's future goals for completely carbon-free energy. However, we should recognize that the real climate goal is not to have energy sources that are renewable, but to have ones that are carbon-free. If "renewable" is redefined to include carbon-free nuclear energy and the Indian Point nuclear plant in Westchester County is kept open, more than 70% of the state's electricity will be carbon-free in 2030, and the 2040 goal will be within reach.

The only realistic way to do this is to replace the state's current oil- and gas-burning power plants with new, advanced nuclear facilities. Building just five new 1,000-megawatt nuclear units would meet the 2040 goal of 100% carbon-free electricity at current levels of demand. Dozens of startup companies are developing new types of reactors that can be built economically in factories, cannot melt down and, in some cases, will produce only small amounts of waste and even consume much of the existing nuclear waste as fuel. This path is far more practical, and much less costly, than attempting to install millions of

solar panels and thousands of wind turbines across the state.

If we take the threat of climate change seriously, we need to find a path that is certain to work and will reduce, and eventually eliminate, our dependence on fossil fuels. Building on over fifty years' experience with nuclear-generated electricity, we can construct such a path and ensure a livable future for coming generations.

For the sources and calculations underlying this essay, see

http://www.infoshare.org/main/Rodberg_&_Specter_-_Citations_and_Calculations.pdf

Editorial Note: If you are interesting in responding to Rodberg's analysis, please write to us at retirees@pscmail.org with ENERGY in the subject line. ■

READING "1619"

-John Hyland, retiree from LaGuardia Community College, reports on a recent discussion in the Retirees Social Problems reading group. Two reading groups meet at the PSC after chapter meetings. If you are interested in possibly forming another group please write to us at retirees@pscmail.org with "reading group" in the subject line.

1619 is the 400th anniversary of the first landing of enslaved Africans in North America at the English colony of Jamestown, Virginia. Let that sink in: 400 years. And where are we now?

The Social Problems reading group chose the essays in *The New York Times'* "The 1619 Project," first published in the August 14th Sunday Magazine, for discussion at our October 7th meeting. The essays present many facets of the complex experiences that have unfolded from that event, and that continue to be mightily present in the economics, politics and culture of the United States of America.



One of my major takeaways from our discussion was the way that colonialism, slavery, segregation and white supremacist racism generated the primary accumulation of capital that has fueled the growth of the American capitalist economy for 400 years. Along with descriptions of the violent theft of land and its resources from the people who already lived here, and the exploitation of working people, especially women, who have come here from all over the planet, settled, and who continue to come here under similar conditions, the essays present a more comprehensive and accurate story of our nation.

This more complete narrative does not negate the achievements of the "American" people, but it explains the problematic, contentious, and ongoing issues of our history. It challenges and relativizes the "American Dream" of freedom and equality for all, our myths of and obsessions with being "number one" and "great again." It presents the opportunity to reflect on and change the direction of our economic, political and cultural institutions and "ways of life" toward

actual, lived (rather than rhetorical) justice, inclusiveness, solidarity, and community.

A more complete American narrative opens the way toward "truth and reconciliation," reparations or restorative justice, beyond apologies for violent oppression to actions for structural and personal transformation. Such a change in self- and societal-understanding entails a disposition and motivation toward a society in which the full development of each and of all are mutually actualized.

The Social Problems Reading Group has paused its forward march through books to reflect on the implications of 1619 and on their connections to our previous readings (we have met ten times a year for 10 years). Many of these readings are clearly related: *The Empire of Cotton, I've Got the Light of Freedom, The Color of Law, Open Veins of Latin America, North American Indians, The New Jim Crow, When Affirmative Action Was White*, among others.

Is there a trunk of meaning of which these readings are branches? Can we bring these stories and ideas together into a coherent understanding that goes beyond academic interpretation to social movement and change?

We invite you to join us in a dialogue as we share our process through the newsletter. Write us at retirees@pscmail.org with "1619" in the subject line. ■

READERS WRITE

FLASHBACK TO THE SEVENTIES Movies that reflect NYC

*-Constance H. Gemson, retiree
LaGuardia Community College*

As a teacher at LaGuardia Community College, I always mentioned 1975 when the city seemed on the verge of bankruptcy.

That was the year when free CUNY colleges imposed a temporary tuition that became permanent. My students didn't know this buried history for the simple reasons that they weren't born yet and it has become invisible.

The films of the seventies captured New York City's richness and vibrancy and reflected the problems and possibilities of its diverse inhabitants. Yet the city's fiscal crisis and its consequences were never included as a theme.



The lead actors in the 1977 film *Annie Hall* were Diane Keaton as a ditsy cabaret singer from the Midwest and Woody Allen as her neurotic twice-divorced, Jewish Brooklyn-born partner. The cultural clash between these specific places and these two characters was both humorous and insightful. At the time, arguments between couples were played out in public and not in quick texts.

Saturday Night Fever released in 1977 featured a different Gotham. John Travolta's Tony Manero was the small-town celebrity in his provincial neighborhood. His daily grind was endless in a local hardware store. At nineteen, living at home with his working-class Italian family, his options were limited. But at the disco he sparkled, shone and

strutted when he danced. In this magic place, talented Puerto Rican dancers were taunted by their ethnic rivals. In an ambiguous but dramatic scene, Tony's friend either falls off a bridge or commits suicide by jumping in the unforgiving waters below. Although billed as a disco flick, the film conveys some of the realities of race, ethnicity and class.

Two 1978 films, *Girl Friends* and *An Unmarried Woman*, offered different insights into female lives. *Girl Friends* follows a struggling female photographer as she tries to chart her single life and struggles for a sense of autonomy. *Unmarried Woman* takes place in the more glamorous world of the Upper East Side. Here the heroine's divorce does not derail her and she is able to move from a short time of being single into a successful second marriage.

Although not without cultural and entertainment value, the films of this period avoid addressing a decisive turning point in the city's history. In a city known as a union town, bankers insisted on the imposition of tuition at CUNY, the layoff of thousands of public-sector workers and cuts to social services. New York became a kind of neo-liberal test case for measures that would be implemented across the country. And

the film industry made its contribution to historical amnesia. ■

FILM MEET-UP

Thursday, November 7, 2:30 PM

***Tokyo Story* (1953) at the Film Forum**

It's a beautiful film. If you don't know the director, Yasujiro Ozu, you will fall in love. For more information, write Liza Flanzraich at cinophile49@gmail.com. ■

BOOK

Teaching Toward Freedom: Supporting Voice and Silence in the English Classroom (2018, Routledge)

This book by Geraldine DeLuca, retiree from Brooklyn College, promotes teaching and learning that celebrate diversity and community through the systematic integration of traditionally "non-academic" voices and mindfulness-based, contemplative practices. By examining current scholarship and discussing novels and memoirs whose power is tied to freedom of expression, this book argues that teachers should allow students to use and explore the various rhetorical registers that they bring to the classroom. ■



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 available at <http://www.joshbrownnyc.com/ldw.htm>. The latest in the series, a caricature of Presidents Trump and Erdogan. To appreciate the subtext of the caricature, it is best viewed in color. They are standing in a pool of red (blood?). You can view it in its original color at:

<http://www.joshbrownnyc.com/ldw494.htm>