

OCTOBER 2019



Academic Year 2019-20 No. 2

psc-cuny.org/retirees

PSC/RETIREE FALL CALENDAR:

MON. OCT. 7 CHAPTER MEETING



The robots aren't coming...but the tech workers are

Maybe you don't know much about what is happening in the world of developing Artificial Intelligence (AI), but after our next meeting your eyes and ears will be open to the problems and concerns of both the technology and the tech workers who make up this corner of the world. You will find the presentation easy to understand and will be aware of the challenges that we and younger generations are facing.

Meredith Whittaker, one of the organizers of the Worldwide Google Walkout last November and cofounder of the AI Now Institute, will speak about the social implications of AI. Meredith is a distinguished research scientist at NYU and a long-time worker at

Google, where she organized an effort to stop Google from a project named MAVEN (yes, maven!), which was using AI to weaponize drones. She has been busy testifying before Congress on problems such as facial recognition, privacy, security and discrimination. We are lucky to snatch her away from her extensive travel and speaking schedule. Among her useful activities is her connection with various networks of tech workers who are speaking out about unequal conditions in the industry and the projects they are working on.

As usual, we will meet in the 16th floor Union Hall of the **PSC at 61 Broadway** (near Wall St, of course) 1 – 3 PM. Come for light refreshments and for seeing and chatting with your (old) colleagues.

If you know **recently retired colleagues**, please ask them to join us, and if they are not yet members of the Retirees Chapter tell them to call the PSC and ask for a membership form to join the Retirees. Our new annual membership fees are \$85 for retired full-time workers and \$40 for those who retired from part-time work. ■

NOVEMBER AND DECEMBER CHAPTER MEETINGS. On **Monday, November 4**, we will take a critical look at U.S. labor (problems and possibilities). Josh Freeman (Graduate Center and Queens College), the author of *Behemoth: A History of the Factory and the Making of the Modern World*, will be one of our speakers. We've also invited two authors who have written on recent teacher strikes for *Jacobin* magazine to join him.

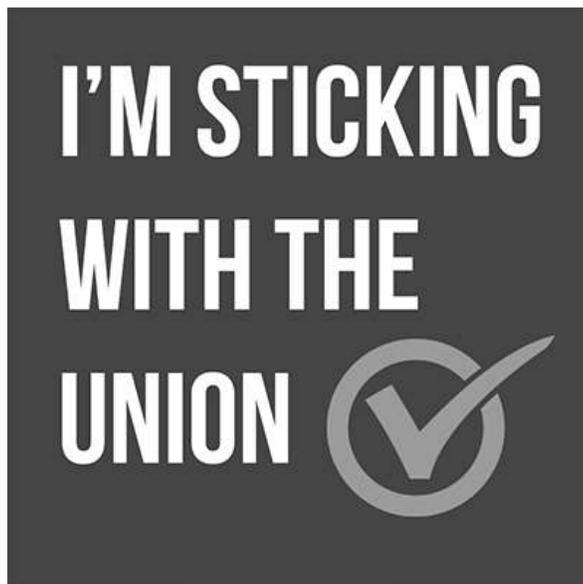
On **Monday, December 2**, the topic will be "good and welfare." Donna Costa, executive director of the PSC-CUNY Welfare Fund, and Patrick Smith, the communications director, will present the latest on Welfare Fund benefits and take questions. Our

own Connie Gemson will speak on “How to Be an Eldercare Advocate.”

THE MONTH THAT WAS STATE OF THE UNION(S)

-Marcia Newfield, retiree BMCC

At the September chapter meeting, PSC **President Barbara Bowen** and CUNY School of Labor and Urban Studies **Professor Stephanie Luce** gave their annual reports on the state of our union and of the overall union movement. Both reflected on the impact of the Supreme Court’s Janus decision on the health of unions. Union activism has defied Janus’ intention to deliver a death blow to public-sector union membership by outlawing automatic collection of agency fee and vigorously engaging in anti-union propaganda.



A surge of resistance has led many unions to renew and increase their membership, as well as their militancy. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, there were 20 major work stoppages in 2018, more than any year since 2007. The current General Motors strike is the largest and perhaps the most dramatic in decades. Barbara reported that the PSC has a 95% membership

rate among full-time faculty. More than half of the 12,000 teaching adjuncts at CUNY are PSC members.

Our current contract demands reflect a shift from incremental gains to radical changes. The demand for \$7K per course for adjuncts plus raises for everyone seeks to crack austerity. We have engaged in a movement to make adjuncts’ work more visible through public grade-ins and time logs. “We all have a stake in change. As long as the floor is kept low, it keeps us all from rising,” Bowen said.

Although the PSC supported and lauds the election of a Democratic majority in the State Legislature and subsequent new rent laws, Bowen pointed out that as of yet there has been no breakthrough in State budget allocations for CUNY. The current artificial cap on spending growth maintains austerity. A new goal is to advance legislation to improve the ratio of full-time to part-time faculty at CUNY. The breakdown at CUNY is currently about 30% full-time faculty to 70% underpaid adjuncts.

Professor Luce pointed out that union density has decreased in the ten years since the recession. Job growth has been good, she said. But there have been few good new jobs. In NYC, 53% of the new jobs (81% in NYS) are in sectors that, on average, pay less than a living wage, are non-union, and offer no job security. While public-sector wages have grown since the recession, private-sector workers in NYC have seen a drop in average pay (inflation adjusted). Unionized workers are still more likely to earn a living wage than non-union workers.

She posited that we have to go beyond union organizing and rethink the purpose of work. We must promote job growth based on human need. “What are the kinds of jobs we need to sustain ourselves and care for

one another?" she asked. "Then let's work on making those jobs into good jobs." The Green New Deal, with its proposal for a federal jobs guarantee, is one way to do that. We need to collectivize the response to sustaining ourselves and be hyper-vigilant regarding international policies addressing the climate crisis. We need to use the crisis to attack root problems (BUY AMERICAN is not a policy that addresses a root problem). The 2019 State of the Unions Report, which Professor Luce co-authored with Dr. Ruth Milkman, is available at the School of Labor and Urban Studies website. (slu.cuny.edu) ■

UPCOMING EVENTS



The *Jazz in the Afternoon* series presents a concert to aid the Musicians' Emergency Relief Fund, run by Musicians Local 802, for musicians in crisis and times of economic need. The benefit will feature George Brandon's **Blue Unity Sextet**. George is a CUNY retiree and a long-time member of the American Federation of Musicians.

The concert will be held Thursday, October 10 from 5-7 PM at **322 W. 48th St. in the Club Room**. Donations can be made by check, cash or credit card. ■

FORUM ON ACADEMIC FREEDOM WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 23 4:30-6 PM, PSC UNION HALL

Joan Wallach Scott and Henry Reichman, long-term members of the AAUP Committee on Academic Freedom and Tenure, will explore the history of academic freedom and discuss how it has come under renewed attack. Each has recently published a book on the topic: Reichman, *The Future of Academic Freedom* and Scott, *Knowledge Power, and Academic Freedom*. Drawing on research for their books, they will discuss the effectiveness of various responses to recent attacks. Victoria Chevalier, Associate Professor at Medgar Evers College, will moderate.

For more information about this event and to find out how to join the Academic Freedom Committee, contact Steve Leberstein. sleberstein@gmail.com ■

QUOTABLE QUOTE

"A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death."

Martin Luther King, Jr.

NEWS OF NOTE

IRWIN POLISHOOK
1935 - 2019

-Irwin Yellowitz, retiree City College

Irwin Polishook died on September 15, 2019 after a long illness. We retirees share memories of the PSC that go back to the years when Irwin was President. He

served as First Vice President for Belle Zeller from the founding of the PSC in 1972 until 1976. In that year, Belle retired and Irwin was elected as President, an office he held until his own retirement in 2000. Over these years, he had a major influence on everything that happened in the union. I would like to remind us of the important contributions Irwin made during his career.



The fiscal crisis in New York City in the 1970s was a challenge to the very existence of the new PSC and of CUNY itself. There were demands from politicians that several colleges be closed, especially Hostos and John Jay. There were serious proposals to dismember CUNY by moving the so called four old senior colleges – Brooklyn, City, Hunter and Queens – into the State University of New York. There were persistent efforts by CUNY management to cut the number of faculty and staff as the budget situation grew more dire. There was the end of free tuition; and there was a two-week furlough for faculty and staff. Irwin worked with Belle Zeller to fight against all these efforts to attack CUNY. He never seemed to sleep, but was constantly lobbying politicians, encouraging support from the public, and gaining strong and vital aid from other unions in NYC, despite their

need to deal with their own serious problems. In the end, he was the central figure in the PSC in preventing the worst. There was no dismemberment, no colleges closed, and no mass layoffs of tenured faculty, although we did lose non-tenured faculty, staff, and a few departments, including one at City and one at Queens. We did suffer the furlough, but all the lost money was repaid with interest over a seven-year period. Unfortunately, free tuition ended, but the PSC did support help to students through the New York State Tuition Assistance Program. Finally, and of great import, Irwin was the major figure in ending the crisis at CUNY when New York State, in 1977, agreed to fund the senior colleges fully over a three-year period, and to increase monies for the community colleges. Irwin deserves credit for his work through all these difficult years to maintain the integrity of CUNY.

In a positive vein, Irwin made many important changes for faculty and staff. He played a major role in every contract negotiation, and much of what we have in our current contract came from agreements that he helped develop.

In 1986, he led the way in reorganizing the Welfare Fund. It had been an independent body, and the union opposed some of its policies as being too limited to serve the entire faculty and staff. Irwin insisted that the Welfare Fund come under the control of the PSC. One of the first programs Irwin pushed for in the newly constituted Welfare Fund was a health plan for adjuncts.

In 1983, Irwin singlehandedly gained after-retirement health benefits for TIAA retirees. As the public Teachers' Retirement System became less attractive because new tiers had diminished benefits, CUNY personnel turned to the venerable nationwide TIAA retirement option, first made available within CUNY in 1968. However, until 1983, New York City did not provide after-retirement

health benefits to TIAA retirees. Irwin insisted that PSC members in TIAA had to be treated in the same way as those in TRS, where retirees received retirement health benefits. His demand to NYC officials for this change met strenuous opposition. It was a significant new financial obligation for NYC, but City officials also argued that they saw no reason to provide a benefit to a private retirement plan when the public TRS plan was available. If the CUNY instructional staff wanted after-retirement health benefits, they could join TRS. Irwin, in his careful but determined way, pointed to the problems with TRS, and he maintained that CUNY could not hire or retain quality faculty without equal access to after-retirement health benefits for those in the TIAA plan. Most of us active in the union at that time did not believe Irwin could win this one, but somehow he did. It was one of his greatest achievements, and to this day I do not know how he did it.

As with most leaders, Irwin's success rested on personality and character traits. He was informed and almost always was the most knowledgeable person in the room; he was patient and persistent, ready to compromise where necessary, but not to concede; he was careful and accurate, not prone to overstatement, and thus rarely forced to retreat; he could be bold when necessary, such as when he demanded that Governor Hugh Carey return an award the PSC had given him because his policies had turned against CUNY; and he never overvalued his importance, being modest about his achievements, and always wondering how he could do better.

There is much more to say about Irwin's activities, including making higher education a real concern of our national affiliate, the American Federation of Teachers; his leadership role for 25 years in the PSC's state affiliate, the New York State United Teachers; his insistence in 1981 that PSC

join the American Association of University Professors, which led CUNY to change the retrenchment guidelines of the 1970s and thereby to come off the AAUP censure list; his several decades of involvement with the Municipal Labor Committee, which is so important in working out various health and other benefits with NYC; and his constant realization that a leader always has to look back to make sure he is not walking alone. Irwin emphasized being in constant touch with other leaders in the PSC and with the members.

I know Irwin will be remembered for his crucial role in the founding and development of the PSC, and his advocacy of higher education unionism everywhere. I respect all he accomplished in a full and important life. ■

CUTTING SOCIAL SECURITY IS STILL ON THE AGENDA

-Michael Frank, retiree
LaGuardia Community College



Although there is currently a bill in Congress that calls for an increase in Social Security benefits, and the Democratic presidential hopefuls are tripping over each other to claim the progressive mantle, the powers that be have not dropped their decades-long agenda of cutting the most popular program in the U.S. This was made clear in an article by Jeff Sommer of the *New York Times*; "Social Security Is Staring at Its First Real Shortfall in Decades,"

(6/12/19),

The program is depicted as being in "a slow moving crisis." "Unless," Sommer writes, "a political solution is reached, Social Security's so-called trust funds are expected to be depleted within about 15 years...then: Benefit checks for retirees would be cut by about 20% across the board." Sommer laments that "the issue...is barely being talked about in Washington and at 2020 campaign events." Calling it "the third rail of American politics - an entitlement too dangerous to touch," he provides striking statistics to demonstrate why this is the case. According to a study by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, in 2017 nine percent of all retirees lived in poverty. In the absence of Social Security that figure would have jumped to 20%. In the same year 19% of African-American retirees lived in poverty. Without Social Security the figure would have been a staggering 52%. For Hispanic retirees the figures are nearly as high: 17% in poverty with social security and 46% without social security benefits.

In fact, there is a simple solution for future problems with the program: remove the cap on Social Security taxes. The current tax ceiling is \$132,900. Individuals earnings more than \$132,900 are not taxed on the income that exceeds this amount. Though eliminating the cap would secure the program for decades to come, this is not highlighted in mainstream media, perhaps because it would undermine the rationale for cutting the entitlement.

Looking at the history of attempts to whittle down Social Security, Jeff Sommer describes how David Stockman—Ronald Reagan's budget director who considered Social Security to be "closet socialism"—wanted to directly cut benefits for current retirees. Reagan, who was not without tactical sense, rejected Stockman's proposal,

and instead set up a bipartisan committee to study the question. Reagan eventually reached an agreement with Democratic Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill that there would be no immediate cuts for retirees but that benefits would be reduced "in more subtle ways using measures that are still being used, like gradually delaying the standard retirement age from 65 to 66, and eventually to 67." Social Security taxes were also increased. Interestingly, labor was also represented on the bipartisan committee in the form of AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland.



Cover of pamphlet produced by the PSC Safety Net Committee.

Sommer could have also cited the example of Bill Clinton and Republican Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, who had reached an agreement on cuts to both Social Security and Medicare. But this deal was scotched amidst the brouhaha surrounding Clinton's dalliance with Monica Lewinsky.

A more recent example of bipartisan coop-

eration was the so-called “Grand Bargain” brokered by Barack Obama and Republican Speaker of the House John Boehner, which would have also cut Social Security and Medicare. In this case the spoiler was the Freedom Caucus of the Republican Party, which objected to the deal for leaving too much of the programs intact.

At the conclusion of the article, Sommer considers how Social Security can be cut without politicians stepping on the third rail. The necessity for cuts is reiterated in a quote from a former Social Security trustee, Robert Reischauer: “We will need a combination of increased taxes and reduced benefits, undoubtedly ...” And John Cogan, a professor of public policy from Stanford proposes the time-tested method for implementing regressive measures; using the opportunity provided by a crisis.

In this scenario one can easily imagine Democrats and Republicans playing the roles of good cop/bad cop; Republicans call for deep cuts, Democrats for less severe cuts, the difference between them is split and a compromise is reached. The agreement can then be couched as a means of saving the program whereas in reality it would be a step toward dismantling it.

So what will it take to preserve and expand Social Security?

Thus far, the pressure of strong public support for this program has been enough to forestall attempts to eliminate it. George W. Bush, for example, was forced to withdraw his plan for converting Social Security funds into private investment accounts. But public opinion by itself has not been able to prevent measures to erode Social Security. This near-stalemate, in which neither side of has been able to fully impose its will on the other, has resulted in a protracted process stretching out over decades. In or-

der to remove cutting Social Security from the political agenda, a revitalized labor movement would have to take up the fight and launch a campaign to transform public opinion into public action. It was, after all, the labor upsurges of the 1930s that got us Social Security in the first place. ■

TECH WORKERS ON THE MOVE

-Joan Greenbaum, retiree
LaGuardia & Grad Center



Glamorous jobs with high pay, gourmet food and fun workplaces? Tech workers are often portrayed this way in the media. But more and more tech workers are contingent, just like the adjunct workforce at CUNY. At Google, for example, at least 50% of the workforce is made up of contract workers, who have decent pay compared to other American workers, but work long hours for the very slim chance of getting a full-time position at the “mother ship.” Many work for small start-up firms that run out of (or as they say—“burn through”) venture capital in under two years. And still others are freelance workers who often do the designs and graphics for the screens we see. Like other freelance workers, they may get a good gig for a short period of time, but then it’s on to job hunting again.

Last fall, when 20,000 Google workers went out for a several hour strike at the same time world-wide, it reminded people that tech workers, like the rest of us, have workplace concerns. That walk-out was called to oppose the forced and secret arbitration used for sexual harassment hearings (which the strike won!). Other issues are

being pushed by workers to the surface, including the key question of what the technologies they produce are used for.



For example, are so called “smart cities” really to make life better for people or are they primarily money makers for collecting information about everyone and everything in them? Is facial recognition actually useful for safety, or is it also something that can amplify existing problems like racial profiling and the rounding up of immigrants. And speaking of immigration, what type of technology is ICE ordering for both border patrol and surveilling detention centers? Workers across companies and geographic locations are asking these questions. They are forming alliances where they can share stories about workplace problems and concerns. This summer, I spoke with two such groups here in New York, DSA Tech Alliance, part of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), and the Tech Worker Coalition, a broad based group of community and labor activists. Overwork, stress, job insecurity and difficulty finding work were among the major issues that they raised. As one person put it, “I feel like I am automating myself out of a job.” Tech workers are, in fact, the first group of workers who can actually put themselves out of work by writing code and algorithms to do what they now do.

What is happening to tech workers has happened to workers in other occupations.

The changes that they are confronting are ways that management makes work more routine, more controllable and, of course, lower in labor costs. Workers are brought into line by three main management actions: simplification, standardization and specialization, the same ones that transformed craft workers into assembly line operatives back 100 years ago. Simplifying the work of software engineers, for example, can be brought about by adapting algorithms from other software programs, and standardization happens when whole routines or programs are made to be re-used from a library of already written code. Tech workers are also finding that their work is becoming specialized—workers are asked to do the same thing over and over again. This all results in it tech workers feeling more alienated from their work.

Will tech workers organize into unions? This is a question being batted around in meetings and workplaces. Some think that organizing into existing unions will help them get more power in their work. Others lean toward more informal coalitions like the Taxi Workers Alliance and groups like Make the Road, which can build solidarity while protecting workers, particularly those in contingent positions. It is an interesting time and a key question, as the results of tech work—everything we use on a daily basis from this newsletter that you may be reading online to the banking that you do—just about everything, will be affected by the ways that tech workers increase their collective actions.

[NOTE: The October 7 chapter meeting will address many of the issues discussed in this article. See page 1 for details.]■

READERS WRITE



Lynda Caspe

I retired in 2013 from CUNY. I taught two subjects at two different schools while teaching there. I taught English at New York City Tech from 1975 and I taught Art from 1978 to 2013 at BMCC. Aside from my teaching, I create painting and sculpture and I write poetry. I have published poetry in various magazines over the years. Recently I had an illustrated poetry book published by John LeBow, a small books publisher based in New Hampshire. The book was acquired by the Drawings and Prints Department of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Museum of Modern Art Library (Artist's Books Collection), University of Chicago (Special Collections), University of Iowa Library (Rare Book Collection), University of Delaware (Special Collections), Poet's House, Columbia University, and the Library of Congress. The book is called, *Buses Don't Go There.* It was published in 2015.

Patrick J Suraci

A Dream Life was published by Archway Publishing and is available on Amazon, at Barnes & Noble and Walmart, and via the publisher. On October 12, it will be in the Rainbow Book Festival at the Gay Community Center on West 13th St.

Suraci is a retiree from John Jay College of Criminal Justice and Baruch College, and

has published works such as "Male Sexual Armor: Erotic Fantasies and Sexual Realities of the Cop on the Beat and the Man in the Street," which was based on his dissertation.

Gabriel Motola

They Bore Witness, a book of essays on those writers who endured the Holocaust, is now available at the National Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC. The book includes a major essay on Primo Levi, as well as an interview with Levi that Motola conducted in Levi's home in Turin. The interview was subsequently published in *The Paris Review*.

Frances Webb

A Short Joy for Alma Hedman, a novel independently published in 2018 (Strategic Book Publishing and Rights Co.), is a story of two cultures, embodied in Alma, an ex-nun, and Carmelo, a newly arrived young man from Puerto Rico. It tells an '80s-era story about language and obsession. Available on Amazon and at book stores online.

The following is an excerpt from a review written by *Paige Lovitt* for *Reader Views*: "A *Short Joy for Alma Hedman* tells an interesting story that will be especially appreciated by people who work with ESL students." ■

PRESIDENTIAL CONTEST: WORST POTUS? 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>. Josh will contribute a monthly political illustration to our newsletter – some from the Life During Wartime series and some not. This particular illustration is not from the series. It is entitled “Presidential Contest/Worst POTUS ?” Whom do you think was the worst POTUS?



Editor’s note: The *Turning the Page* collective welcomes your suggestions for articles, photos, issues, films, music and humor that could be included, as well as your own book and event announcements. Please send to: retirees@pscmail.org with “newsletter” in the subject line.