

# Clarion

NEWSPAPER OF THE PROFESSIONAL STAFF CONGRESS / CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK



MAY 2022



## AMAZON From CSI to organizing

A CUNY grad  
speaks about  
education &  
activism.

PAGE 2



Patrick Dodson

## A STEP FORWARD

# PSC WINS STATE FUNDING BOOST

The PSC, along with its community and legislative allies, won a \$220 million increase in state funding for CUNY in the recent state budget agreement. This funding will help support students, faculty and staff, but the union is fighting for more. **PAGES 6-7**

### POLITICS City budget fight time

Mayor Eric Adams is taking a fiscally conservative approach to the city budget, but PSC activists are fighting to ensure CUNY isn't left behind. **PAGE 3**

### FACULTY Turmoil over SPS dean

School of Professional Studies Interim Dean Silva-Puras is a shoo-in as the new dean, but many SPS faculty members say he's not fit for the top job. **PAGE 4**



### SAFETY Mold grows in Brooklyn

Members at the Brooklyn Educational Opportunity Center are upset over what they claim is an unsafe workplace and unresponsive management. **PAGE 5**

### RETIREES CUNY payroll hurts retirees

CUNY mismanagement of payroll data is a long-standing problem for pensions. Hundreds of retired adjuncts are getting pinched. The union is fighting. **PAGE 9**

# CSI grad makes Amazon union history

By ARI PAUL

When Karen Ponce chose to study sociology at the College of Staten Island (CSI), she could never have dreamed that her coursework would one day inspire her to take stands that would make her sought after by the international media. In April, Ponce rallied with her fellow Amazon Labor Union (ALU) members who had won a National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) vote recognizing them as a union at one of Amazon's Staten Island warehouses. It was a historic first for workers at the notoriously anti-union company. Ponce currently serves as ALU's interim secretary.

Ponce met her "mentor," Jay Arena, an associate professor of sociology, when she was an undergraduate at CSI. In Arena's class, Ponce said she was exposed to ideas she hadn't encountered before college. She and her classmates debated whether or not the "American dream" was an attainable goal or an out-of-reach ideal. She read books by Frances Fox Piven, the distinguished professor emerita of political science at the Graduate Center, who has written internationally renowned works on poor peoples' movements and the disruptive power they can exercise.

"My mind was definitely opened in so many ways," Ponce told *Clarion*. "We learn about rich people and politicians, but for the first time I learned about gaining power from the bottom up."

## STUDENT ACTIVIST

In an interview with *Clarion*, Arena said that Ponce was active against federal detention of undocumented immigrants and had a clear vision for social justice.

"[In my classes] we always emphasize linking your knowledge with action. I keep in touch with many of our graduates. I have my students do a learning-by-doing activity, where they have to participate in a protest," said Arena.

"She was one of my best students," Arena said, adding that when it came to activism, "she really embraced it."

When she was still a CSI student, Arena brought her to a PSC meeting, Ponce recalled. She was inspired by adjuncts talking about their strategies for organizing to win higher wages. The PSC meeting left a lasting impression on her.

Ponce graduated from CSI in 2021 and immediately landed a job at a Staten Island Amazon warehouse. She applied because the warehouse advertised wages above minimum wage. Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos is the second richest person, in the world and Amazon has come under scrutiny for its unforgiving work environments and intense hostility toward unionization. When Ponce started, the Amazon Labor Union campaign was already underway.

"All I saw was Amazon's propaganda in the building," Ponce recalled. She had known about the

## From the classroom to the shop floor



Karen Ponce stands in front of the Staten Island warehouse, where she and her coworkers successfully unionized.

unionization campaign, but she felt overwhelmed by Amazon's anti-union propaganda. Then, she had a phone conversation with Arena.

When he heard that Ponce had taken a job at Amazon, Arena wanted to know if she was working with union activists.

"I knew [Ponce] was working at Amazon and I thought that this [organizing effort] was a great opportunity to apply that knowledge that she got at CSI," said Arena.

He asked Ponce about the unionization, and Ponce responded that she didn't think the union would "stand a chance" against such a big, anti-union company. Arena countered that it was her responsibility to engage in the social issues around her.

"That woke me up," Ponce said. "I thought, 'He's right.' I was only listening to Amazon."

## ORGANIZING

Ponce immediately got in contact with ALU activists and became involved with union organizing. She told *Clarion* that seeing successful

union organizing by Starbucks workers led her to think that winning a NLRB vote at the warehouse was no longer impossible.

"Hey, that could be us," she thought to herself.

CUNY has a history with Amazon. In the winter of 2018–2019, PSC members at LaGuardia Community College and the CUNY School of

Law joined with other community groups and labor unions to protest a proposal that offered the company massive state subsidies to build an Amazon headquarters in Long Island City, Queens. The plan, which included a partnership with CUNY and was championed by then-Governor Andrew Cuomo, was scuttled because of community and labor



Amazon workers rally in support of forming a union.

protests against the huge public giveaway to the company, which has an appalling labor rights record.

## CUNY PROGRAM

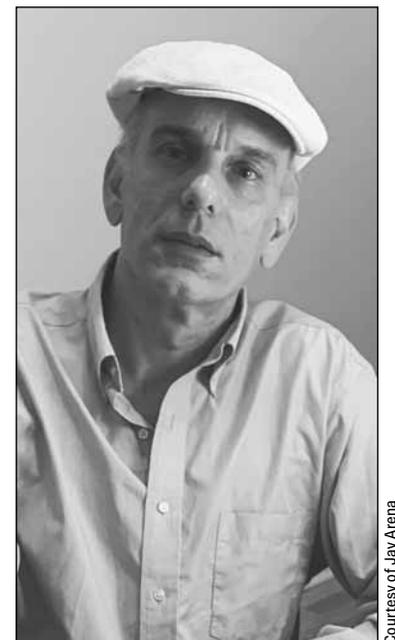
This past March, CUNY announced a new educational partnership where "Amazon's Career Choice program will provide an annual benefit to cover tuition and select fees for all qualifying hourly employees accepted into participating CUNY schools."

But Ponce, who dreams of returning to CUNY to pursue a master's degree in social work, regards the latest tuition assistance plan for Amazon workers as company propaganda. She said she was saddened to see this program linked to CUNY, because there are other financial aid and assistance programs like TAP, SEEK and FAFSA.

"Amazon is doing this to show off. They're not the only option. If anything, we would hope that CUNY would be free. Now, CUNY is looking like they're a business," said Ponce.

The PSC applauded ALU's victory in a statement saying, "Amazon is the country's second largest employer after Walmart, and, like Walmart, has engaged in egregious anti-union campaigns, firing workers and spending millions to fight against those asserting their right to collective representation. We thank the ALU for showing us all what grassroots solidarity can accomplish. We are hopeful that the ALU's historic win will mark a turning point in the multiyear efforts by

Continued on page 5



Jay Arena, associate professor of sociology at CSI

## Clarion MAY 2022

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# Pressing city to fund CUNY

By ARI PAUL

Mayor Eric Adams's executive budget proposal calls for across-the-board 3% cuts to almost all city agencies. Because CUNY's community colleges receive the lion's share of their funding from the city, PSC is pressing its allies on the New York City Council to advocate to reverse these cuts and increase the city's investment in CUNY.

City Council Speaker Adrienne Adams and Finance Committee Chair Justin Brannan announced a preliminary budget response with a commitment to a program dubbed the CUNY Reconnect Initiative, which, according to the council's official budget statement, includes an additional "\$23 million to fund a program that focuses on bringing the 700,000 working-age New Yorkers who left CUNY with some college credits but no degree...back into the system to earn a credential that helps them advance their careers."

The City Council Committee on Higher Education Chair Eric Dinowitz said the inclusion of CUNY funding in the Council's budget response "proves our commitment to moving our city in the right direction, especially with the funding of initiatives that enhance and improve the educational experience."

## SHIFTING FOCUS

With the finalization of the state budget, the PSC's political focus has shifted toward the city budget. A final city budget must be reached by the end of June. Union activists are campaigning for the city to follow the state's lead and invest more in CUNY.

Heather James, an assistant professor of political science at Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC) and a member of the PSC's Legislative Committee, told *Clarion* that CUNY is included in the mayor's across-the-board 3% cut for city agencies. During the pandemic, according to James, community colleges lost full-time faculty, and the proposed cuts, she said, would leave the system with fewer full-time professors than before the pandemic.

"We really highlighted the need to exempt us from the cuts. We have been functioning in an austerity budget and we are providing a city service when vulnerable communities are coming back from COVID," James said. "We only have a couple of full-time political scientists to begin with [at BMCC]. We're just going to hire contingent faculty instead. That's definitely something that is concerning to us."

Sharon Utakis, the PSC vice president of community colleges, said, "The city plays a very important role in funding CUNY's community colleges, which have struggled throughout the pandemic. Community college enrollments have fallen sharply, which leaves our colleges millions of dollars short in tuition revenue because of our per-student funding model. We need the mayor's budget to ensure baseline funding

## Community college money at stake



Heather James, an assistant professor of political science at Borough of Manhattan Community College, is working on union efforts to press for more city funding for CUNY.

and to fulfill CUNY's 2023 budget request for an additional \$103 million in support for CUNY.

"CUNY community colleges need this in order to hire new full-time faculty (and convert adjunct lines to full-time), and to invest in mental health services, student academic support and childcare centers. Student academic support includes programs such as CLIP (the CUNY Language Immersion Program) and CUNY Start, for students who have English-language or developmental needs, and opportunity programs like College Discovery," said Utakis.

## 'ASAP FOR ALL'

In testimony to the New York City Council Committee on Higher Education, PSC President James Davis suggested that the budget "move toward 'ASAP for All,' with an increased investment of \$20 million," noting that, "ASAP provides comprehensive student support and advising (ideally at a ratio of 150 students to one advisor), career services, tuition assistance, free MetroCards and free textbooks. It has been widely touted and serves as a model that community colleges seek to emulate across the country.

## Progressives call for city investments.

ASAP's three-year graduation rate is more than double that of non-ASAP associate degree students at CUNY's community colleges and a

CUNY analysis found that the program narrows existing graduation gaps for Black and Hispanic males. A move toward 'ASAP for All' would provide many more students with access to advising and the wraparound support they need to graduate. The city should baseline this increase in funding and dramatically expand this program."

Davis added that the city's funding for senior colleges should increase from \$53 million to \$60 million. "City funding for senior colleges has not increased since 2019. The money could fund programmatic expenses for important services, such as mental health counselors and academic advisors," he said.

In a separate letter to Mayor Adams, Davis urged the city to "ensure a baseline of \$1.2 billion and fulfill CUNY's budget request of an additional \$103 million in support of CUNY."

At the Committee on Higher Education hearing, Dinowitz noted that he was "disappointed" in the city's proposed budget cut to CUNY.

"I want [to] ensure that the city and CUNY are taking [their] rightful position to ease the current economic and social pains for [CUNY] students," added Dinowitz.

Remysell Salas, an adjunct lecturer in ethnic and race studies at BMCC and campaign director of CUNY Rising Alliance, told the Council committee, "We should not even be thinking about cutting any kind of funding to community colleges."

## CHANCELLOR POSITION

CUNY Chancellor Félix V. Matos Rodríguez also told council members that he hoped the final budget would reverse cuts to CUNY.

"This reduction is especially challenging given the additional stress community colleges are facing and the unprecedented impact COVID has had on community college enrollment," said Matos Rodríguez. "While CUNY is not unique in facing these challenges, and we are taking targeted steps to reverse this trend, decreased CUNY community college enrollment has led to a \$113 million decrease in tuition revenue since fiscal year 2019."

The CUNY chancellor added, "We request restoration of \$2 million for

remediation programs, \$3 million for Citizenship Now! (which provides citizenship and immigration legal services in 39 city council districts throughout the five boroughs), \$1 million for food insecurity programs and \$600,000 for childcare. Restoring these funds will assist our students who have been greatly impacted by the pandemic."

Generally, progressive city lawmakers voiced disappointment at the mayor's proposed budget. The "cuts would roll back some sanitation services and cut funding for schools, among other things. Adams also eliminated 3,200 vacant positions for this year. The City Department of Correction were exempted from the cuts," Gothamist reported.

## LAWMAKER DISSENT

NYC Finance Committee Chair Brannan was quoted saying, "The dissonance of budget cuts amid the reality of a robust recovery is hard to wrap our heads around and difficult for this council to explain to our constituents.... Moreover, unintended austerity will jeopardize the progress of our recovery."

For his part, Mayor Adams did briefly mention CUNY in his budget presentation in April.

"If we want to tackle high unemployment in communities of color, we must actively create opportunity. That means educating our youth for the jobs for the future and providing direct on-ramps to those jobs," Adams said. "That's why our executive budget includes \$5 million in fiscal year 2023 to help the City University of New York train students for the most in-demand skills and connect them to good jobs at companies that are hiring. They will partner with some of the largest employers in our fastest-growing sectors – including life sciences, green jobs, tech and advanced manufacturing."

The PSC saw the mayor's comments as a starting point, but activists are pressing for full funding of CUNY in the city budget. Adequate funding would not only help students get the jobs they desire, but it would help them to discover a wide range of academic options leading to intellectual and creative growth. There is hope among PSC activists that Mayor Adams, a CUNY graduate, might understand both the City Council's and the union's position that CUNY needs more city funding, not less.



Remysell Salas, campaign director of CUNY Rising Alliance, defends funding for two-year colleges.



NYC Council Committee on Higher Education Chair Eric Dinowitz is among the lawmakers calling for more funding.

# SPS faculty & staff vs. interim dean

By ARI PAUL

The interim dean of the CUNY School of Professional Studies (SPS), Jorge Silva-Puras, is widely seen as a candidate for the school's permanent dean position, but many full-time faculty members and staff at the school are criticizing his leadership.

An April 11 letter signed by 93% of the full-time faculty at SPS blasted Silva-Puras's time as interim dean, arguing that he has communicated poorly with faculty, failed to fill top positions, and has been moving too quickly to develop the new CUNY Online initiative. The letter, which does not mention Silva-Puras by name, is addressed to the search committee for the full-time dean and has been distributed to the CUNY Board of Trustees, sources said. It was also sent to PSC officials and CUNY Chancellor Félix V. Matos Rodríguez.

"He's very incommunicado, very isolationist," said one academic director who spoke to *Clarion* on the condition of anonymity. "We feel completely iced out."

## DELAYED HIRINGS

The CUNY Board of Trustees appointed Silva-Puras as the interim dean of SPS in May 2021 and he began the job a few months later in August 2021. He previously served as vice president for academic affairs and provost at Sagrado Corazón University in San Juan, Puerto Rico. A CUNY statement said Silvas-Puras had "spent seven years, from 2013 to 2020, as an adjunct professor and distinguished lecturer at CUNY's Hostos Community College, offering lessons in entrepreneurship and business management."

At the time of his appointment as interim dean, Chancellor Matos Rodríguez said that "the many facets of Mr. Silva-Puras's résumé make him an exceptional choice to lead the school forward."

But the SPS faculty letter paints a far different picture.

"Most significantly, he has indicated resistance to approve searches for faculty hires that are urgently needed to replace outgoing academic directors. No fewer than five academic directors plan to retire or step away from their roles within the next two semesters," the letter said, adding that Silvas-Puras had also "blocked other essential hires."

The letter went on, "As a result of the interim dean's delays, it is possible that 18 of our degree and certificate programs will lack appropriately vetted and qualified directors for part or all of the 2022-2023 academic year. We believe the result of such an outcome would be calamitous, not only for our students, but for the faculty who teach in the programs and the staff who support them."

The letter also stated that Silva-Puras had "failed to regularly communicate or engage with many members of the SPS community,"

## Union members say he is unfit for the job



The CUNY School of Professional Studies is located on West 31st Street in Manhattan.

citing a lack of regular meetings and a "vague response to specific questions regarding pressing matters." In one example, the letter said, "[an] academic director learned only after the fact that the interim dean met with one of his adjunct faculty members to discuss marketing efforts for his program."

Another major gripe among the faculty members at SPS is that Silva-Puras "has moved with alacrity – and even, some of us feel, excessive haste – to appoint a number of other staff, including personnel to help direct CUNY Online, which will be an 'in-house OPM' (online program manager) housed within SPS to serve CUNY." The letter went on

to say the "rapid launch of this initiative, with little input from the SPS community members involved in its operation, is troubling."

The faculty argue that this program would redirect resources away from SPS students, citing that the program's new production and recording studio would remain inaccessible to the large adjunct faculty workforce at SPS who don't live in New York City.

## STAFF STATEMENT

Concurrent to the faculty letter, an April 28 statement signed by "concerned employees" of SPS (the majority of whom are in higher education officer titles) said Silva-Puras had "displayed attitudes, values and behaviors that reflect ineffective and uninspiring leadership," citing "instances of speaking disrespectfully and dismissively to staff, marginalizing students, misrepresenting college programs, implementing new initiatives without

apparent regard for their negative impact on existing college operations and showing a persistent disinterest in the employees and programs that have led CUNY SPS to its national prominence."

The statement noted that the interim dean's style of leadership has led to low morale among staff and that "many employees are either

looking for other jobs" in part "because of consequential decisions he is making about the college."

## GOVERNANCE ISSUES

This is not the first time faculty leaders have raised concerns about SPS administration. In March 2018, *Clarion* reported that the school "released a draft of a new govern-

nance structure that alarmed union leaders and faculty activists" because the "proposed governance freedom...would limit academic freedom, would not permit an independent faculty voice and would not be in compliance with the PSC collective bargaining agreement."

In September 2019, *Clarion* reported that it had taken years of PSC rank-and-file activism to force the SPS administration to agree "to the PSC's demand to test four recently installed water fountains located in a building with a history of poor water quality."

## CUNY RESPONSE

A CUNY spokesperson responded to the accusations saying, "Over the last three years, CUNY has conducted 11 successful searches for presidents and deans, bringing a highly diverse pool of talented and experienced administrators from across New York and the nation to lead our colleges and schools. In accordance with the University's Guidelines for Presidential Searches, all search committees include a variety of campus stakeholders, including faculty. Confidentiality is required and essential to a successful search."

The faculty letter ended forcefully, saying that Silva-Puras is not the "right leader for CUNY SPS." It continued saying that his "appointment as dean might very well threaten the proven quality and viability of our school's academic programs, our school's student-centered, inclusive and collegial culture and our steadfast commitment to equity, of which we are all rightly proud."

## Solidarity with SEIU 32BJ



PSC President James Davis (center) rallies in solidarity with door attendants represented by SEIU 32BJ. Workers' authorized strike was averted after a contract settlement was reached between the union and the Realty Advisory Board.

# Mold issues at BEOC building

By SHOMIAL AHMAD

Mold was everywhere – at least 30 square feet of it – in the inspected Legal Aid offices at 111 Livingston in Downtown Brooklyn. The building also houses the Brooklyn Educational Opportunity Center (BEOC), where PSC members have complained about mold and air quality issues for years.

“We have a very dismissive administration. Whatever you say, they are going to dismiss,” said Darron Henry, the PSC chapter chair at BEOC. Henry, who has been at the center for two decades, said the chapter has brought up concerns about mold in vents, on chairs, and on keyboards and the administration’s typical response has been denial.

“We’re going to say, ‘It’s mold,’ and they’re going to say, ‘It’s not mold,’” Henry said.

## MOLD IN OFFICES

The BEOC administration will claim the mold is from leftover food or dirt from plants, members told *Clarion*. Nonetheless, “They’ll clean it, and they’ll clean it quickly,” Henry said. But how they cleaned it, members are left guessing. Was bleach used? Were some other chemicals used? Henry’s questions to the BEOC administration about its remediation process remain unanswered.

BEOC chapter leaders raised their concerns at an April 11 labor-management meeting with City Tech, the CUNY college responsible for administering the BEOC. (Every educational opportunity center is administered by a CUNY college.) The City Tech president seemed to indicate that the health and safety issues at BEOC are not the college’s responsibility. The chapter is organizing its members, and the PSC leadership is pushing for a meeting with CUNY Central.

*Clarion* contacted the BEOC management for a response about the mold issues in their offices, but did not receive a response by press deadline.

In the Fall of 2021, when BEOC staff returned to partial in-person work, they found mold living in all kinds of places: on dry erase board erasers, on chairs, inside printers, on walls and on a corkboard, said a PSC member at the center. Members reported the issues to the administration, but say they often don’t know if an issue has been resolved, how it was fixed, or if there were any preventative measures taken.

In October 2021, at the Legal Aid offices in the same building, a New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOH) inspector found visible black, grey and white mold colonizing furniture, books and walls, and black mold on the ceiling near the HVAC diffuser panel, according to court documents filed by the Legal Aid Society. The DOH issued a violation and a commissioner’s order in early October, notifying the Leser Group, the land-

## Legal Aid files lawsuit over unsafe conditions



BEOC offices are located at 111 Livingston Street in Brooklyn, a building that the DOH has cited for significant mold issues.

lord for 111 Livingston, to determine the source(s) of mold and eliminate conditions leading to its proliferation by retaining the services of an HVAC technician and a mold remediator by the end of the month.

The DOH found in follow-up inspections in November that the issues were not fixed, and the DOH issued multiple summons to the Leser Group for noncompliance, including a second amended order. The Legal Aid Society occupies floors 6 through 11 of the Downtown Brooklyn high-rise and BEOC offices and classrooms are a few floors below them, occupying the entire first, second, third and parts of the fourth floor.

In March 2022, the Legal Aid Society constructively terminated their lease, and filed a lawsuit against 111 Livingston LLC, alleging that the landlord allowed “its systems and elevators to fall into a dangerous state of disrepair.” The underlying cause of the mold issues, the legal documents state, is an HVAC system in a “dilapidated and failed state,” the same HVAC system, a source with the Legal Aid believes, serves the BEOC offices. The system, at the time of the lawsuit filing, was still not repaired.

## FAILED HVAC

Legal Aid hired an outside engineer in October 2021 to visually assess the building’s HVAC system used for its offices. The engineers found several problems with the HVAC system that led to excessive humidity, including inadequate controls to remove moisture and dampers that remain fully closed or open (and if open, allowed excess humidity to enter). The engineers also found an open drain channel used for rainwater that was preventing the HVAC system from effectively removing moisture from the air.

On multiple occasions, as early as September 2020, Legal Aid forwarded the findings from independent health inspectors to the building’s landlord, but the underlying issue, the court documents state, was never fixed.

“The HVAC System does not operate properly. This wholesale failure to maintain the system has generated an unsafe environment, including fostering an environment prime for mold growth,” the Legal Aid complaint stated. “The underlying condition, namely the failed HVAC system, continues to plague the building and the premises.”

“The BEOC administration has not adequately addressed the many issues concerning the ventilation at BEOC,” said PSC Treasurer Felicia Wharton, who was previously chapter chair of the BEOC and has worked at the school for around two decades. Wharton recalled earlier instances of mold in 2016 and 2017, when the administration’s solution was cleaning it with bleach.

“Up to this day, we have not received any ventilation data or evidence that the HVAC meets the CDC’s recommendation,” she said. “I am very concerned for the faculty, staff, and students’ health and safety at the BEOC who continue to work and attend classes in the building.”

In the summer of 2021, CUNY’s own engineering consulting firm did not list 111 Livingston as a building suitable for in-person learning. CUNY hired Ramboll Americas Engineering Solutions to do ventilation assessments of CUNY campus buildings. The BEOC – which educates students in programs ranging from getting a GED and college preparation to obtaining professional certification in medical billing – is administered by City Tech.

In the June 30 City Tech Report, 111 Livingston is listed as a building that was assessed, but did not make the cut for a Tier 1 building suitable

for in-person learning, by complying with certain CDC guidelines. There are no details in the Ramboll report on why 111 Livingston did not qualify. When the PSC in the Fall of 2021 pressed for the engineering reports results through freedom of information requests, it received nothing for buildings associated with City Tech.

## ‘NUISANCE’ CONDITIONS

In the month after the Legal Aid lawsuit was filed, PSC members at BEOC received no official communication from either the administration or the building’s management about the Legal Aid lawsuit or the “nuisance” conditions cited by a city health inspector.

In fact, Henry, who works as an enrollment manager at the school,

found out about the lawsuit and the rampant mold in the Legal Aid offices in his building through a text from a friend after his friend shared the March 15 *AMNewYork* article “Legal Aid Society sues its own Brooklyn landlord for moldy office.” The article stated that Legal Aid has been dealing with a years-old mold infestation in the building, and that with no proper remedy, Legal Aid decided to move its more than 400 staff members from the building because of the unsafe conditions.

## SMALL STAFF

The BEOC has a much smaller staff, with around 75 full-time and part-time workers, according to one member’s estimate. Because of the pandemic, they have been working remotely for more than a year. For their own health, workers want to continue remote work.

“If the pandemic has shown us anything, it has shown us how important health is. I cannot conceive of a reason to put us at risk,” said one member who preferred not to be named. “I can’t really fathom why they would risk everyone’s health to bring in 25 students.” (Most classes at the BEOC are still remote.)

Cleaning and making the problem disappear is not the solution for the PSC Environmental Health and Safety Watchdogs. CUNY has a contractual duty to provide workspaces that are “free from recognized hazards” that could cause serious harm, according to Article 39 of the PSC-CUNY contract.

“We want them out of that building until the conditions are fixed and we have verification that the issues have been fixed,” said PSC Watchdog Coordinator Jean Grassman. “I think this [issue] is in a class by itself. We’ve seen some pretty bad stuff.”

## Amazon

Continued from page 2

workers across the country to force Amazon into just and decent contractual standards for all its workers, and for Amazon workers to have a union voice at work.”

The New York State United Teachers and the AFL-CIO have contacted New York State Attorney General Letitia James to ask her office to investigate whether Amazon’s flagrant violation of labor laws during the ALU campaign disqualifies it from the hundreds of millions of dollars of tax credits it received.

At a labor rally supporting another vote at a warehouse on April 24, congressional candidate Brittany Ramos DeBarros asked the crowd, “You know what we could use that money for? A New Deal for CUNY!”

While union members are celebrating the NLRB vote at Amazon, ALU workers face the hard work of reaching their first contract. The

union is also looking to organize other Amazon workplaces. ALU is seeking help from the labor movement in what will likely be difficult bargaining sessions with Amazon.

“We’re really proud of Karen because she’s really putting the theory and the knowledge that she learned in our department into action,” Arena said, speaking for himself and other PSC activists in his department at CSI. “We’re going to keep building support for this campaign.”

Ponce said that ALU meetings have the same kind of energized spirit she recalls seeing at the PSC meeting. But it was important, she said, for all unionists to get over their differences. “At the end of the day, we have to stay united because the other people are going to break us apart, like Amazon and the bosses,” she said. “They love to see us divided. We have to stick to a certain agenda.”

PSC members can donate to the ALU at [amazonlaborunion.org/donate/](https://amazonlaborunion.org/donate/).

Dave Sanders

# State increases funding for CUNY

By ARI PAUL

Governor Kathy Hochul's budget announcement this April, her first since becoming governor last year, trumpeted increases to CUNY that will benefit the university in the short-term. It is the first time in decades that the PSC and others have not had to fight proposed budget cuts and the first time since the Cuomo era that CUNY has seen a non-austerity budget.

PSC President James Davis said the budget was the result of work by the union and its allies. "The tenacious advocacy of PSC members, CUNY Rising Alliance groups and the 76 New Deal for CUNY legislative cosponsors made possible the increased funding for full-time faculty lines, fringe benefits, critical infrastructure, part-time TAP, closure of the TAP gap, TAP for incarcerated individuals, childcare centers and other investments," Davis said.

## TOWARD MORE FUNDING

Davis added, "It's clear this budget demonstrates a renewed understanding and appreciation of CUNY's ability to uplift our communities, build futures and power New York State's economy. It sets us on a course to a New Deal for CUNY, which we must follow for the sake of future generations of CUNY students. Public institutions such as

## Full-time lines funded, tuition frozen



Zohran Mamdani, a Queens assembly member, voted "no" on the budget, saying investment for CUNY didn't go far enough.

CUNY that support working people and communities of color have been chronically underfunded for too long; undoing that damage will require more transformative investment. CUNY will receive the largest year-over-year increase in decades,

but the senior colleges will still be left next year with per-student funding below 2009 levels."

## POSITIVE GAINS

The budget allocation freezes CUNY tuition, a positive step. The

budget sets aside \$53 million to fund 500 new full-time faculty lines. The budget includes a one-time \$60 million investment in operational support for CUNY. CUNY's School of Labor and Urban Studies will see a \$1.2 million investment. Mental

health services will see a \$2 million boost, which is an improvement on the status quo, but PSC sources believe more is needed to meet the needs of CUNY students.

*Gotham Gazette* noted that the budget includes "about \$69 million to expand the Tuition Assistance Program for part-time students" and "includes \$965.8 million in capital funds for CUNY facilities, many of which are in disrepair." It said that "\$15.6 million was allocated to help CUNY and SUNY campuses create childcare centers."

## PAST BUDGETS

PSC Legislative Representative Luke Elliott-Negri put it this way: "CUNY will take in about \$220 million in new operating dollars this year. This is the largest year-over-year state increase to the operating budget since the PSC has been keeping data on such things. The last time we got a big bump was from 2008 to 2009. That budget was drafted under a new Democratic majority in the Senate, before [then-Governor Eliot] Spitzer went down and before the Great Recession kicked off. This year's increase is two to three times larger than that one. Before that we had George Pataki and Mario Cuomo, so I honestly don't know how far back you'd have to go to find an increase of this size. But it's far."

PSC and many of our advocates, understand that this is a partial victory. The union and its allies hope to push the governor's initial proposed budget allocation for higher education even further. The union also seeks a budget that would include funding for additional parts of the New Deal for CUNY, landmark legislation that would increase the number of full-time faculty and staff and make CUNY tuition-free. Queens State Assembly Member Zohran Mamdani was one of the lawmakers backed by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). He voted "no" on the budget, he said, because the allocation for CUNY didn't go far enough.

## NEED INVESTMENT

"While this budget is an improvement for CUNY, this still leaves the 16,000-plus students, faculty, staff and recent alumni that call my district home without the investments that they deserve," Mamdani said on the assembly floor before the vote. "[These needed] investments would fund academic advisors, create adjunct pay parity, adequately fund mental health services and would decrease and ultimately eliminate tuition.

As we fall short, I think of the stories of those I've connected with as I've fought for the New Deal for CUNY. I think of Rebecca, an adjunct professor driven into homelessness, by lack of adjunct pay parity. I think of Stephanie, who is forced to work multiple jobs, sleeping only two to three hours each night, just so that she could keep [up] with the cost of tuition. I think of Devon, a chronically homeless student, who is never able to get mental health care due to the lack of such services on his campus." Mamdani added, "It is for all of them that I must vote 'no,' and it is for all of them that I will con-



Students, faculty and staff rally in Albany, days before the budget settlement was reached.



Patrick Dodson

Emily Gallagher, a state assembly member from Brooklyn, speaks about the need for more higher education funding at a press conference in Albany.

tinue to fight to pass the New Deal for CUNY.”

Spectrum News reported that higher education “advocates are also concerned the budget did not do enough to address affordability issues,” noting that the New York Public Interest Research Group “pointed to the lack of deals to increase the maximum Tuition Assistance Program Award or finding ways of reducing the cost of tuition.”

**UPSET LAWMAKERS**

Other lawmakers were upset that Governor Hochul buckled to right-wing pressure during negotiations to roll back hard-fought bail reforms

and to shift public money to a new stadium for the Buffalo Bills.

“This budget fails to meet the moment and even reverses hard-won advances for basic justice,” said a statement from Emily Gallagher, a DSA-backed state assembly member from Brooklyn.

Assembly Member Ron Kim of Queens referred to the budget in a tweet about Buffalo Bills owner Terry Pegula saying, “A billionaire got 100% of what they wanted while CUNY/SUNY got 25%.”

The PSC chapter at Brooklyn College released a sobering statement about the budget, saying, “We need to be clear that Governor Hochul be-

trayed our students, our members, our coalition and our values.” The PSC BC chapter added, “\$240 million is less than half of what we need to make CUNY the transformative institution it should be.”

**SOME GAINS**

The statement continued, “We can be relieved that TAP now covers part-time students while also being furious that the chronic and racist underfunding of CUNY continues.”

Increased state funding to CUNY is the result of years of union ac-

tion, which included successfully pressuring the CUNY administration at the beginning of the academic year to increase its budget request from previous years, several mass demonstrations demanding funding increases and a New Deal for CUNY, many lobbying trips to Albany and constant communication with coalition allies, including the University Student Senate and the CUNY Rising Alliance.

Looking ahead, the state budget funding increase is but one step

forward in a protracted fight. The union demands more increases for more full-time faculty positions, as well as direly needed full-time mental health counselors and academic advisors. More funding is also necessary to make CUNY tuition-free, the union said. The PSC is now focusing on winning more funding in the city budget (see page 2), and it will continue to move forward and advocate for the passage of the New Deal for CUNY.

**State budget awards more funds for CUNY.**



Dave Sanders

PSC leaders drop off petitions at the governor's Manhattan office.



Patrick Dodson

CUNY student activists and PSC members lobby lawmakers in Albany.

# PSC's Spring membership drive

By THE PSC

In April, PSC chapter leaders, organizers and campus action teams mobilized to systematically contact colleagues who have not yet joined the union. Nonmembers can easily join the PSC at [psc-cuny.org/join-psc](https://psc-cuny.org/join-psc).

We are less than one year out from the end of our contract. We have repeatedly achieved strong advances through bargaining and united struggle. (See the points highlighting some of these wins.) But these past two years have been among the most difficult years we have all faced in our time at CUNY. What must we fight for today? Only with strong membership and strong member participation can we build a strong bargaining agenda and the power to win our demands.

## CHAPTER ACTION

Some chapters have already begun to host meetings to talk about our priorities for the next contract. Colleagues will be reaching out to one another by phone and in person, and the union will be sending out a member survey this spring about what members want to see in the next contract and what members are willing to do to succeed. We are a powerful force in the face of management

## Signing up new members

when *everyone* we represent is in our union together and when we move in solidarity with one voice to advance our interests and demands collectively. Join here at [psc-cuny.org/join-psc](https://psc-cuny.org/join-psc).

The New York State budget was recently finalized, and it is the strongest year-over-year budget CUNY has seen in decades, but it is still not enough to make the transformative changes we need to undo decades of underfunding. Our organizing was critical in pushing Governor Kathy Hochul to reverse course from her predecessor and make new investments in CUNY. Our organizing secured millions beyond her proposed budget and

## Membership builds workplace power.

we built broad and deep alliances across the state. We have been successful in this work and in our coalitions, because thousands of our members have constantly participated through their voices and actions.

We are stronger in all of these fights. We will make them stronger in the future when we are *all* union members.

Listed here are some of our many collective victories over the years. To expand on them, to dream bigger and reach farther, everyone should sign up to be a part of the union!

## MOST RECENT CONTRACT WINS

- Salary increases of more than 10%
- Two retroactive pay increases
- Pay for teaching adjuncts restructured: minimums for a three-credit course increased by the end of the contract to \$5,500 (an increase of 71%) and a four-credit course to \$6,875
- Additional salary increases for equity for all full-time CLT titles, all Lecturer titles and Assistants to HEO
- Travel funds under the contract doubled
- Research support for department chairs

## OTHER SALARY VICTORIES

- Salary steps
- Sabbaticals at 80% pay
- Paid adjunct office hours
- Broader opportunities for HEO advancement
- Raises for CLTs and HEOs with advanced degrees
- Paid release time for untenured faculty

## SECURED BENEFITS

- No-premium NYC health insurance
- Secure pensions
- Adjunct health insurance
- Graduate employee health insurance

- Paid sick days and sick leave bank
- Prescription drug coverage
- Dental coverage
- Strong vision and hearing aid plans
- Paid parental leave
- Paid family leave

## PROTECTED RIGHTS AT WORK

- Tenure
- Academic freedom
- Due process
- 13.3.b for HEOs
- Secure three-year adjunct appointments
- Graduate employment counted toward adjunct benefit eligibility
- Contract enforcement staff and grievance counselors
- Right to union representation
- Union rights for department chairs
- Health and safety campaigns
- Pension counseling
- Legal action against abuse of overtime

## SCHOLARSHIP SUPPORT

- Reduction in contractual teaching load
- Defense of faculty curricular rights
- PSC-CUNY research grants
- Increased funding for CUNY programs
- Professional development grants for HEOs, CLTs, adjuncts and graduate employees

# Checking increases to adjunct pay

By CLARION STAFF

Adjunct equity has been a long-standing priority of the PSC. The union secured access to the City Health Plan for individual adjuncts without having to pay insurance premiums, provided professional development through a dedicated adjunct professional development fund and achieved job stability for long-serving Teaching Adjuncts in prior contracts. In the current contract, the PSC added to these advances for adjuncts by making historic gains in adjunct pay equity. Taken together, these contractual advances cracked the systemic exploitation of adjunct labor.

The union achieved a significant pay increase by employing three methods: 1) across-the-board step increases in 2018, 2019, 2020 and 2021, 2) getting CUNY to recognize Teaching Adjuncts for work they already do by formalizing a paid office hour for a three-credit course and 3) an enhanced single rate of compensation for each title for most Teaching Adjuncts starting in Fall 2022.

## SALARY STEPS

Before the current contract, Teaching Adjuncts were required to wait years to move up to higher salary rates. Adjuncts moved to a higher salary step only after three years of service and many adjuncts left CUNY employment while on the lower-paying salary steps. With the single rates that go into effect on August 25, 2022, Adjunct Lecturers, Adjunct Assistant

## Salary steps and raises



Professors, Adjunct Associate Professors and Adjunct Professors will be moved to a single rate: \$91.67, \$100, \$108.33 and \$112.50, respectively. Hourly rates for a three-credit course will be \$5,500, \$6,000, \$6,500 and \$6,750, respectively, and for a four-credit course will be \$6,875, \$7,500, \$8,125 and \$8,438, respectively.

## LOWEST STEP

Seventy percent of Teaching Adjuncts are concentrated on the lowest salary step of the Adjunct Lecturer title. In Spring 2020, the semester immediately preceding contract ratification, those Adjunct Lecturers experienced a 37% increase for a three-credit course, first by two increases of 2% each, one in 2018 and one in 2019, as well as a paid office hour. The contract provided two more 2% increases (one in 2020 and one in 2021), before moving to a single salary step for each adjunct title in 2022.

This fall semester, an Adjunct Lecturer on the bottom step will receive an increase of 18%, from \$77.49

to \$91.67. For a three-credit course, an Adjunct Lecturer will be paid for 45 instructional hours, plus 15 office hours for a total of \$5,500 per three-credit course, a 71% increase from \$3,222 in 2017.

While the majority of Teaching Adjuncts will move to a single rate in 2022, there are some exceptions. Teaching Adjuncts whose salary rate as of August 25, 2022, is higher than the new single rate, will have their rate "red-circled." Those adjuncts will continue to have their pay calculated on their teaching hours, including office hours, multiplied by their red-circled hourly rate of pay. No one is penalized by the implementation of the single rate. Before the single rates kick in on August 25, it is important for Teaching Adjuncts to claim the red-circled step immediately if one is entitled to it but not being properly compensated. The union wants to make sure that every Teaching Adjunct who is eligible for a movement onto a red-circled step is moved before the Fall 2022 semester.

## SEEKING HELP

If adjuncts encounter issues with their pay, teaching adjuncts should contact their chapter chair or the campus grievance officer. If there is no response within a few days, please contact the PSC grievance department at (212) 354-1252. Members

should keep in mind that they have 30 working days to grieve an issue from the time of its occurrence or their awareness of it.

Pay for office hours and the higher single rates is a base to build on in future contracts. The restructuring of adjunct pay in our current contract is a breakthrough, but more is needed to reach equity for adjuncts. The union's progress in narrowing

the wage gap between full-time and part-time faculty pay has compelled colleges to create more full-time lines and appointment opportunities for adjunct faculty. The PSC will continue our fight for adjunct pay equity through the contract and through legislation like the New Deal for CUNY. It is a collective struggle that benefits all of our members and students.



Dave Sanders

## Mourn the dead, fight for the living

Claudia Shacter-deChabert, an adjunct lecturer at the CUNY School of Labor and Urban Studies, lays a flower during the Workers' Memorial Day ceremony in Lower Manhattan on April 28.

# Retired adjuncts getting stiffed, still

By ARI PAUL

In December of 2018, PSC retirees gathered at LaGuardia Community College to raise a problem with the CUNY Board of Trustees (BOT) at an open hearing. The problem, they said, was that CUNY had failed to provide updated payroll information for hundreds of PSC retirees to the Teachers' Retirement System (TRS), meaning that they were not receiving the proper amount in their regular pension payments.

In June of 2019, retirees converged again at Hostos Community College for another BOT hearing, raising the concern that the problem still hadn't been fixed.

## SHORT PENSION PAY

CUNY has still not sent payroll data to TRS reflecting retroactive pay due under the 2010–2107 collective bargaining agreement for several hundred retired adjuncts. And CUNY has still not provided TRS with any payroll data reflecting retro pay to adjuncts from 2017 to the present and has rebuffed repeated requests from the union to estimate a date by which this task will be accomplished. This failure has meant that hundreds of members, who gave years of their lives to CUNY, are still receiving smaller monthly pension payments than they have actually earned.

PSC has been meeting regularly with officials from both CUNY and TRS, pressing them to fix the problem. While progress has been made, several hundred retired adjuncts still have not had their pen-

## PSC pushes CUNY on the problem



Bill Friedheim, PSC retirees chapter chair, testifies about the TRS problem at a Board of Trustees hearing in June 2019.

sion payments corrected. Nearly 460 adjuncts from community colleges are still waiting for CUNY to send their updated 2010–2017 payroll information to the pension system, according to data provided to the union, and more than 200 retired adjuncts from senior colleges are in the same position.

"There is just incredible anger about this, off-the-charts anger," said Bill Friedheim, the PSC retir-

ees chapter chair. "People dedicate a good part of their professional lives to teaching, and what do they get in return when they retire? It's kind of the back of the hand. CUNY does not see this as a particularly urgent issue. It's particularly egregious because the most exploited part of the teaching labor force, adjuncts, are not only underpaid and exposed to difficult conditions [of] trying to scratch to-

## Waiting years for a CUNY fix

gether a livelihood – then this. [It] is just another gross insult to the labor force."

## OUTDATED SYSTEMS

Friedheim has been fighting CUNY on this issue since 2018. He told *Clarion* that the CUNY administration has come up with various excuses for why it has not fixed the situation.

"Part of the problem is that payroll is really not centralized and there

are differences from college to college. It's not automated," he said.

But that isn't an acceptable rationale for the delay, he said, noting that it is common for adjuncts in other university systems to teach at more than one location.

"The problem is CUNY payroll. I don't know how much of it is incompetence or contempt of the adjuncts involved," Friedheim said. "I think it's largely incompetence and underfunding. CUNY payroll is just not up for the job."

Union officials point out that TRS has also demanded that CUNY provide it with payroll information in a form different from the way CUNY tracks it, which is another factor contributing to the sluggish response.

## UNION SOLIDARITY

For the last several years, this issue has been the focus of activism from the union's retirees chapter. The next step in the fight, Friedheim said, is to get more of the union involved, including current adjuncts whose future pensions may be impacted.

"A larger group of people have to take ownership of this," he said. "It has to be an issue where we build some kind of union solidarity."

Meanwhile, the PSC's top officials and executive staff are pushing CUNY to fix the issue promptly.

"We appreciate that CUNY is working to address this," PSC Executive Director Dean Hubbard told *Clarion*. "But it has taken far too long and the administration needs to address this with greater urgency."

# Gov. lowers pension vesting period

By ARI PAUL

One often overlooked part of the state budget agreement reached in April is its inclusion of some much-needed pension reform. Specifically, the budget agreement reduces the vesting period for Tier 5 and 6 pension benefits from 10 years of service to five years.

This reduction is a significant victory for public employees. Many public sector unions pushed for this change in the month before the final budget was announced. At the time of Tier 6's adoption under then-Governor Andrew Cuomo in 2012, the PSC blasted the new reform, widely considered far less generous than previous pension tiers, because it would acutely impact PSC's part-time members and create impediments for CUNY in hiring new instructors.

## ATTRACTING TALENT

As the Public Employees Federation explained in a statement, the budget agreement "re-establishes the five-year vesting period for benefits in the New York State and Local Em-

## A win for Tiers 5 and 6

ployees' Retirement System so that the state can attract and retain talent in this extremely tight labor market. This begins the process of repairing the Tier 5 and 6 retirement plans so state and local governments can attract and retain the workers they need to maintain operations and build the public sector workforce of the future."

The imposition of Tiers 5 and 6 by then-Governor Cuomo was largely seen as a way to "reduce retirement benefits drastically for future employees," a 2011 *Clarion* article noted, also citing the *New York Times*, saying, "Cuomo's plan would raise the retirement age from 62 to 65 for state workers, and from 57 to 65 for public school teachers; raise the employee pension contribution from 3% of salary to 6%; and 'ban the use of unused sick leave or unused vacation time to enhance an employee's pension calculation.'"

President Barbara Bowen, the PSC president at the time, was quoted

saying, Cuomo's imposition of new pension tiers "was pure political opportunism," in which he joined with Republicans who blamed the state's budget woes on compensation for state workers. She added, "A lower pension tier is a bogus solution to the state budget deficit."

## ANGERING THE RIGHT

Anti-union political forces decried the change: "It looks like 'big labor' got things they were seeking and rolling back pension reform is one of them," Peter Warren of the anti-union Empire Center for Public Policy complained in an article in the *New York Post*.

District Council 37, New York State Nurses Association, the United Federation of Teachers and other unions had lobbied through March for pension reform. The PSC hailed the new change.

For more background on the tiers within the Teachers' Retirement System, go to [nysut.org/members/retirees/teachers-retirement-system](http://nysut.org/members/retirees/teachers-retirement-system).



## Solidarity at May Day

PSC members and retirees joined hundreds of other labor activists at a May Day march in lower Manhattan.

## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

# Building on our recent gains

By **JAMES DAVIS**  
PSC President

Coming off important gains for CUNY in the New York State budget for the upcoming fiscal year, the PSC is focusing our attention and that of our members on the city budget (see page 3) and on preparation to win a great next contract.

## STATE BUDGET GAINS

The infusion of state funding that CUNY will receive is a result of persistent, energetic organizing by PSC members. The increases from Albany, most of which are recurring funds baselined into CUNY's budget, serve to bolster the university's operations on a scale that has not been seen in years. It is not enough, by a long shot.

After decades of austerity, CUNY needs more, several hundreds of millions of dollars to bring us to where we should be. This year could have been a year for the state to make even greater funding strides. Our focus must remain on building our power internally and externally to win the full, directed funding demanded in the New Deal for CUNY. This year, our collective efforts succeeded in closing the TAP gap, which

has plagued college budgets for many years, winning over 500 new lines for full-time lecturer and professor positions and securing \$1 billion in new capital funds to repair and upgrade our campus facilities, among other vital needs.

## MONEY FOR COLLEGES

More money for the CUNY budget means that local administrations will have more money in their local budgets that PSC chapters should push to direct. PSC members know best about the many needs that have gone unfilled as campuses have had to cover the TAP gap and make do with less. Now is the time to push locally for necessary hires and other student-, faculty- and staff-centered advances that our campuses have done without.

The increased state funding also improves the context in which we will negotiate a new contract. Our current contract expires at the end of February 2023, and we will have an opportunity, with an engaged membership and a better CUNY budget, to improve upon existing provisions that PSC members struggled mightily to achieve in previous rounds of negotiations.

The PSC has a long history of making critical advances in contracts. That process begins by developing an ambitious bargaining agenda that is shaped by the expressed needs of our members. We are preparing well in advance of February 2023 in order to understand our members' interests and build the collective power required to win as many of our demands as possible. By participating in an online survey, available this month, you can shape the priorities we pursue in negotiating the next contract. You can also let the PSC Executive Council know how you are willing to participate in the campaign. It is important that as many members as possible in all the titles the PSC represents complete the survey. Please be sure to respond to the online survey and encourage your colleagues to do so also.

## MEMBER INPUT

The survey is not the only way to participate in the development of the union's bargaining agenda and contract campaign. In the coming months, we are engaging in one-on-one, member-to-member conversations about the contract and

building power to win a strong settlement in our next contract. Campus Action Teams have been formed on every campus, comprised of members in different job titles, to help facilitate these conversations. The union's principal officers and vice presidents are attending chapter meetings throughout May in an effort to listen and hear from a broad range of members.

The contract survey is another route through which the PSC Executive Council will hear about what we should collectively fight for and what we can do to win. Salary and benefits, job security and promotion, health and safety and remote work and online instruction are some of the issues that members can consider when deciding on how to build on the gains in recent negotiations and how to align the next contract with the evolving conditions in which we work at CUNY.

One of the most important lessons of the state budget cycle was that when the PSC is united and mobilized, we can make huge strides. Members stepped up time and again to participate in our vigorous campaign. The work of our chapter leaders and Campus Action Teams will help to ensure the same intensity of engagement elevates our contract campaign.

## Looking toward our next contract

## HEALTH AND SAFETY

# Why I fought for COVID safety

By **JEAN GRASSMAN**

*Editor's note: Jean Grassman, one of the union's Environmental Health and Safety Watchdog coordinators since 2009, was honored as a 2022 NYSUT Higher Education Member of the Year for her health and safety work in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. (NYSUT is the PSC's state-level affiliate.) A version of this reflection was set to a video honoring Grassman's work at [tinyurl.com/jean-grassman-video](https://tinyurl.com/jean-grassman-video). Below is an edited version of her statement as this year's honoree.*

I grew up in Wisconsin. I'm a farm kid, so I know how to milk a cow. I know how to drive a tractor. During the 1960s, there were milk strikes, where farmers would be asked to dump their milk. We had a herd of about 60 Holsteins. And my father did it. It was interesting, because while my father did it, none of the other farmers in the area did it. So it just fell flat. It was at that point I realized that if you want to make change, it has to be collective action.

I think the PSC is outstanding. It has been historically outstanding in supporting health and safety in the workplace. A few of our members were deemed essential members, so in the height of the pandemic, they were being asked to go back in. And it was really, truly frightening.

We were on the phone all the time.



Jean Grassman, a PSC Health and Safety Watchdog chair, was honored by NYSUT this spring.

We were doing Zooms all the time, trying to establish what CUNY was doing. We wanted to know as union members,

whether we would be protected and what changes would be needed in order for us to come back.

## Pushing CUNY on health and safety

We really pushed to have a safe return. I remember the one Watchdog meeting, where I had to deliver the message, "Hey, folks, [COVID-19] is in the air. It's really not being spread by hands and surfaces. It's in the air, and that means we have to look at the ventilation. We have to find out from CUNY whether they've evaluated the ventilation."

## VENTILATION ASSESSMENTS

In some ways, that was a success because CUNY did look at the ventilation. The difference is that people won't be getting sick. People won't be feeling sleepy in class because the carbon dioxide levels are so high. It makes for a better workplace.

I do see a connection between my work as a unionist and being an environmental health scientist and an industrial hygienist. I really want to promote social justice and an end to racism and ableism, with a greater emphasis on having a society that's oriented toward people's needs rather than capital. I think really good unions tie themselves to the broader societal effort.

What we saw with the PSC is that members were really engaged.

*Jean Grassman is an associate professor of environmental, occupational and geospatial health sciences at the CUNY Graduate School of Public Health and Health Policy. She also serves as the organizational secretary on the New York Committee for Occupational Safety and Health.*

## GLOBAL

# Why international solidarity matters

By GIACOMO BIANCHINO

The PSC has a long list of resolutions expressing international solidarity. Our union has protested TIAA's investments in land grabs in Brazil, offered support for student protesters at Jawaharlal Nehru University in India and condemned a government-armed raid against students at the State University of Haiti. The union has stood in solidarity with the people in Cuba, denouncing sanctions and has come out against a new Cold War with China.

These actions do have their detractors, who claim these resolutions are a "distraction" from the "bread-and-butter" issues facing a New York City labor union.

We are witnessing a time of great global political turmoil, so it may be time to reappraise what role internationalism should play at the PSC. What balance should be struck between bread-and-butter union demands and political outreach to groups in the global struggle against imperialism and exploitation? There is a material imperative for unions like ours to foster international solidarity because there are concrete ways in which CUNY is implicated in American imperialism.

## BUSINESS UNIONISM

The belief that solidarity is outside the purview of union activity derives from the "business union" model of organization. In this model, workers in a particular sector, or in the case of the PSC at a particular employer, mark their ultimate goal as the settlement of relations with management through a process of bargaining and compromise. Such a model of collaboration predominates in American unions, and generally, in unions in the west.

While business unionism in America has helped construct in the last 75 years a kind of "accord" between labor and capital, this accord has been stacked gradually in favor of capital since the 1970s. Real wages have stagnated, and even started to fall, as corporate profits continue to climb. Union membership across the country has declined, and right-to-work laws have proliferated. At CUNY, thousands of adjuncts were laid off during the pandemic and many lost their medical insurance.

The problem with the business union model is that it prioritizes collaboration between capital and labor, ultimately denying that the power of the union is based on the political power of workers as a class. The working class's unique tool is the withdrawal of its labor, the ability to bring the boss to the table by threatening to bring production to a halt. If we give this up, we consign ourselves to playing to the terms of the capitalist class. We learned last year that higher education worker solidarity across New York was vital for the victory of strike movements. The PSC played its part, showing solidar-



PSC members march with other labor and community groups on International Workers' Day, May 1.

ity and refusing to scab on striking Columbia University graduate student worker teachers at the end of 2021.

## GLOBAL WORKERS

Local solidarity, however, is only part of the picture. Workers have no nation, as Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels said. Neither does the ruling class have a country, as shown by the readiness of corporations to coordinate at an international level. Take, for instance, NAFTA, a free trade agreement signed by the United States, Canada and Mexico, which went into effect in 1994 and was designed to ensure that American industrialists could outrun local labor by successfully offshoring production wherever possible. In America, this led to the loss of hundreds of thousands of jobs. In Mexico, where the flight of capital depended upon the continued existence of low wages, the poverty rate actually increased in the decades after the agreement came into effect.

It is in contexts like these that solidarity unionism comes into its own. After the signing of NAFTA, independent unions like the Pittsburgh-based United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE) started to collaborate across the border with Mexico's Frente Auténtico del Trabajo, a group of independent unions. This collaboration eventually became the Tri-National Solidarity Alliance, which helped

labor activists in Mexico to pressure the Mexican government into changing labor laws through a campaign of international union pressure.

In the world of farmworkers, solidarity unionism has produced some incredible results that otherwise would have remained out of reach. In the 1980s, the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC), based in North Carolina, was able to use ties of international solidarity to secure a wage raise in the tobacco picking industry. FLOC leader Baldemar Velásquez, after being told by farmers that they could not compete with Mexican growers, contacted friends in the Mexican labor movement and encouraged them to pursue higher wages in their negotiations. When they achieved this, it lowered the price differential between Mexican and American crops and it brought the American growers to the table.

In both these cases, international solidarity wasn't a distraction from bread-and-butter issues, it *was* the bread-and-butter issue.

## CUNY AND EMPIRE

What role can an education union like the PSC play in building the power of the global working class? CUNY, which is an institution that is meant to serve the city's working class, is deeply embroiled in the global network of capital and American global hegemony. The growth of the pow-

er of the capitalist class also has a direct impact on the lives of our members and CUNY students.

CUNY regularly signs agreements with major corporations who have track records of terrible working conditions. The most recent example is the agreement to funnel students into Amazon's workforce through CUNY's Amazon Career Choice program. Amazon uses strike-breaking tactics and its international logistical chain circumvents worker organizing. CUNY is transforming itself into a pipeline for students to be funneled into unstable and anti-labor workplaces, despite the fact that PSC members at LaGuardia Community College were part of the successful community campaign in 2018 and 2019 to stop a proposal to build a highly subsidized Amazon headquarters in Queens.

Amazon's program at CUNY, however, is not the most nefarious. In 2017, CUNY signed a memorandum of agreement with the CIA (then run by Mike Pompeo) to participate in their Signature School Program. Among other things, the CIA were invited onto campus to conduct on-campus interviews and workshops. CUNY was targeted as a recruitment site for future CIA agents.

## LABOR AND IMPERIALISM

One doesn't have to go too far into the CIA's history to learn about its role in undermining workers' democracy abroad. What is, perhaps, less known is the AFL-CIO's historic role, since ended, in the CIA's international operations. The PSC is affiliated with the AFL-CIO through its national parent union, American Federation of Teachers. During the Cold War, the AFL-CIO, through its American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD) program, helped to uproot left-wing unions, orchestrate the disappearing of unionists, and even topple democratically elected regimes.

CUNY also plays a direct role in American military expansion by investing in excess of a million dollars in weapons manufacturing through shares in Lockheed Martin, Boeing, and General Electrical. Meanwhile, America's military allies often collaborate with security forces within the United States to perfect the techniques of repression used against our very own students. As *Clarion* has frequently reported, the anti-Muslim fervor reached CUNY when the NYPD monitored Muslim students at CUNY as recently as 2014.

## UNION CONNECTIONS

This May, the Research Foundation of CUNY is hosting a "defense and intelligence research forum" meant to, according to its promotional material, "expose faculty to the [defense and intelligence] research landscape of the federal government with the aim of increasing awareness of the projects funded by these agencies."

If we are serious about building our own power, we must resolve to build the power of the international working class. We must connect the indifference of CUNY management toward its workers' well-being to its transformation into a corporate entity whose direction is set by capital. Our work is internationalist by default; and if we fail to see solidarity as a bread-and-butter issue, then we give away the strength of our position. We must pursue divestment from weapons contractors and abandoning CUNY's relationship with security agencies. We must continue to show solidarity with all oppressed peoples.

If we turn our backs on the world, we leave them exposed to a truly global enemy.

*Giacomo Bianchino is a PhD candidate in comparative literature at the Graduate Center.*

## Working class power across the world



## 15-MINUTE ACTIVIST

### Support Starbucks workers

Starbucks workers around the country are organizing, winning victories at a handful of locations across the country and pursuing unionization votes at dozens of others. Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz has a “long history of opposing unions” reports CNBC, and the *New York Post* reported that he has intensified his “fight against unionization.” PSC members, show your solidarity by signing the Starbucks Workers Solidarity Committee petition, supporting the workers’ right to organize at [tinyurl.com/starbucks-solidarity-pledge](http://tinyurl.com/starbucks-solidarity-pledge).

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# Vax mandate, questions and answers

By CLARION STAFF

PSC President James Davis said, “The PSC and CUNY are in the process of negotiating the implementation of CUNY’s COVID-19 vaccine mandate. Despite not having completed the negotiations, we wanted to provide clarification about the part on which we have reached agreement with CUNY: the medical and religious exemption criteria and procedures. The deadline to submit an exemption request is May 18.

“At the same time, our role as a union is to make sure that our members who do not wish to or cannot be vaccinated are treated fairly and equitably. CUNY has extended the COVID-19 vaccine mandate only to employees in the Executive Compensation Plan and those represented by the PSC, not to other employees, creating a real inconsistency with consequences for both the public health outcomes of the policy and the negotiations in which we are engaged.”

### WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE FULLY VACCINATED?

CUNY has defined the required number of dosages for full vaccination as both doses in a two-shot series (such as Moderna or Pfizer), or the one dose in a single-shot vaccine (such as Johnson & Johnson), without boosters. If you received a different World Health Organization-authorized vaccine, contact your campus Human Resources Office for details.

### WHAT HAS THE PSC AND CUNY AGREED TO?

The parties agreed to an effective date for implementing the mandate: May 27, 2022. We also reached agreement on the procedure and standards for medical and religious exemptions. We have not yet reached agreement on next steps for employees who refuse to be vaccinated and do not obtain an exemption. CUNY will likely seek to curtail the contractual protections for employees who refuse to comply with the policy. However, they must honor our contractual disciplinary provisions

## Negotiations are ongoing



unless and until we reach agreement on anything different. We believe our members should not be subject to termination for noncompliance with the vaccine mandate, given the inconsistency with which it has been introduced across CUNY’s workforce, and we will oppose any expansion of management’s rights with respect to discipline.

### WHAT ARE THE CRITERIA AND STANDARDS FOR MEDICAL EXEMPTIONS?

A. Full medical exemptions to the vaccine mandate shall be considered where an employee has:

1. Documented anaphylactic allergic reaction or other severe adverse reaction to any COVID-19 vaccine (e.g., cardiovascular changes, respiratory distress, or history of treatment with epinephrine or other emergency medical attention to control symptoms). Generally, it does not include gastrointestinal symptoms as the sole presentation of allergy. OR
2. Documented allergy to a component of the vaccine. It does not include sore arm, local reaction, or subsequent respiratory tract infection. OR
3. Other documented contraindication as delineated in CDC clinical considerations, with the understanding that CDC guidance can be updated to include new considerations over time.

B. Temporary medical exemptions or deferrals to the vaccine mandate

shall be based on the following valid reasons to defer or delay COVID-19 vaccination for some period:

1. Within the isolation period after a COVID-19 infection.
2. Within ninety (90) days of monoclonal antibody treatment of COVID-19.
3. Treatments for conditions as delineated in CDC clinical considerations, with the understanding that CDC guidance can be updated to include new considerations over time, and/or determined by a treating physician with a valid medical license responsible for the immunosuppressive therapy, including full and appropriate documentation that may warrant temporary medical exemption for some period of time because of active therapy or treatment (e.g., stem cell transplant, CAR T-cell therapy) that would temporarily interfere with the patient’s ability to respond adequately to vaccination.
4. Pericarditis or myocarditis not associated with COVID-19 vaccination or pericarditis or myocarditis associated with COVID-19 vaccination.
5. Other contraindication as documented by a licensed physician.

### WHAT ARE THE CRITERIA AND STANDARDS FOR RELIGIOUS EXEMPTIONS?

A religious exemption may be granted if an employee holds sincere religious beliefs that are contrary to the

practice of vaccination and provides a signed statement explaining why an exception is being requested. Employees may be required to provide documentation to support the exemption request. Requests shall be denied where the objection is personal, political or philosophical in nature. Requests for exemptions will be reviewed in accordance with the standards established by Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the New York State Human Rights Law, the New York City Human Rights Law and any other applicable federal, state and local laws.

### WHERE ARE THE CRITERIA AND STANDARDS FOR MEDICAL AND RELIGIOUS EXEMPTIONS POSTED?

These criteria and standards are available on the CUNY coronavirus website ([www.cuny.edu/coronavirus/](http://www.cuny.edu/coronavirus/)) and apply CUNY-wide.

### WHAT IS THE PROCEDURE FOR AN EXEMPTION REQUEST?

Beginning Friday, April 29, 2022, PSC-represented employees may submit requests for medical or religious exemptions via CUNYfirst. The deadline to submit an application for a medical or religious exemption is May 18, 2022. When you submit your request, identify the primary CUNY college or unit at which you are employed. Your primary CUNY college or unit will review the application and enter the determination in CUNYfirst, which will notify you at your CUNY email address to log in to access the decision. The determination will apply CUNY-wide. Review panels are comprised of at least one representative from the college’s Human Resources Office and a representative(s) from the college’s Office of Legal Affairs and/or Office of Diversity and Compliance.

### Details on medical and religious exemptions

### IF MY EXEMPTION REQUEST IS GRANTED, HOW DOES IT AFFECT MY WORK?

You will remain on payroll and continue to work. If you work in person, you will be urged to wear a mask in indoor public spaces and be required

to test on-site for COVID more frequently than university guidelines require of vaccinated employees. You may, in addition, be subject to restricted access to various college/university facilities. If as a result of restricted access you cannot perform your work, a suitable alternative will be arranged.

### IF MY EXEMPTION REQUEST IS DENIED, HOW MUCH TIME WILL I HAVE TO GET FULLY VACCINATED?

An employee whose medical or religious exemption is denied will have six weeks from the date of notification to comply with the vaccine mandate by getting fully vaccinated.

### WHAT HAPPENS IF I DON’T GET FULLY VACCINATED WITHIN SIX WEEKS AFTER DENIAL OF MY EXEMPTION REQUEST?

Unless and until the PSC and the University reach agreement otherwise, the 2017–2023 collective bargaining agreement continues to govern matters of employee discipline, including discipline of employees who fail or refuse to comply with the vaccine mandate.

### CAN I CHALLENGE THE DENIAL OF MY EXEMPTION REQUEST?

If you wish to challenge the denial of an exemption request, you may initiate proceedings at the local, state and federal agencies with jurisdiction to review challenges to the denial and/or contact the PSC Contract Enforcement Department about the possibility of filing a grievance pursuant to the PSC-CUNY collective bargaining agreement.

### WHEN WILL AN AGREEMENT BE REACHED ABOUT THE REST OF THE VACCINE MANDATE POLICY?

The PSC is eager to complete negotiations and provide clarity to our members about the consequences of noncompliance with the mandate. On a matter this complex and important, however, we will not rush for the sake of concluding the process, so we cannot predict exactly how long the remaining negotiations will take.