

Clarion

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



OCTOBER 2023



LAWSUIT
Seeking pension justice

Union sues CUNY over retirement debacle.

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Erik McGregor

CONTRACT FIGHT

'EVERYWHERE WE GO'

Contract bargaining between PSC and CUNY is underway. And while negotiations take place inside conference rooms, union members are organizing on campuses and in the streets for a citywide campaign to build union power and achieve a just contract.

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CONTRACT **RF members ratify contract**

Members at the CUNY Research Foundation Central Office ratify a collective bargaining agreement, wrapping up a tenacious contract campaign. **PAGE 4**

ADMIN **Grad Center prez resigns**

Robin Garrell resigns as president of the Graduate Center. The move comes months after PSC members launched a 'no-confidence' campaign. **PAGE 5**

TECH **Brightspace: A big mess?**

CUNY's transition to new classroom software is billed as an improvement for faculty and students alike. But numerous labor concerns have arisen. **PAGE 6**



ACADEMICS **Fighting for the humanities**

Humanities education is under attack around the country, and the PSC worries that CUNY could erode its mission to mere workforce training. **PAGE 9**

Local action in the months ahead

By ARI PAUL

Fall is always a busy time for faculty, students and staff at CUNY.

It's a frenetic time for the PSC as well. Contract bargaining with CUNY is well underway. With more members back on campus, it's critical to organize and build strong local movements to support our contract and budget campaigns for a People's CUNY. As this newspaper went to press, campus chapters held visibility actions during Union Week, as a way to kick off the semester. The union will also host an online mass meeting for members in late September, as it did this time last year.

CITYWIDE ACTION

In October and November, the union plans a "Five boroughs in five weeks" set of campus actions to push for a strong and just new PSC-CUNY contract and robust funding of CUNY from the State. These actions will include a demonstration at the October public hearing of the CUNY Board of Trustees.

In December, the semester will culminate with a mass rally for a fair CUNY budget. This whole time, the union leadership continues to engage in contract bargaining that includes having member observers in the room to both put pressure on management and also allow for members to see the process and take that experience back to their campuses.

This means PSC chapter chairs are focusing on including members in the contract fight, achieving health and safety on campus, holding management accountable and building union power on CUNY campuses.

For Karen Weingarten, the newly elected chapter chair at Queens College, a critical tool for winning the contract on campus is hearing from more members on a regular basis.

"One thing I'm personally hoping to accomplish is to increase attendance at our chapter meetings," she said. "This fall, we're going to try to hold HyFlex meetings and return to the practice of providing lunch. One of the reasons I'd like to increase attendance at our meetings is that I want to hear from more members about what they would like to see from our chapter and the union: More information about benefits? Regular updates about contract negotiations? Organizing around campus-specific issues like health or safety? The return of unsponsored research, which we lost after the last contract?"

ADDRESSING LOW PAY

Zoe Hu, the chapter chair at the Graduate Center (GC), agrees. A main focus of her chapter, of course, is organizing to raise pay for graduate student workers. "GC graduate workers still remain some of the lowest-paid PhD students in the country," she said. But for Hu, winning a just contract means uniting everyone on campus around a com-

Chapter leaders organize



Zoe Hu, the PSC chapter chair at the Graduate Center, wants to address low pay on her campus.

mon goal, as the chapter did around the no-confidence campaign against the GC administration earlier this year (see story, page 5).

"The chapter must unite across its various campuses and titles," Hu said. "We plan to turn people out for open bargaining, pressing

management on making its facilities inclusive and serviceable, and fighting against an austerity logic that persists even after a better-than-usual budget year. Our main goal for graduate students is a \$53,000 yearly wage and full funding for all who want it. Some might say

this is unrealistic, but \$53,000 is the baseline living wage in New York City, according to the MIT Living Wage Calculator."

FINDING INSPIRATION

Hu said the chapter looked to other academic unions in the private sector for inspiration. "Are we to be satisfied with the notion that a living wage is 'unrealistic'? Organizing at New York University just won \$51,000 for its graduate students," she said. "And while some may argue that NYU is a private school, we should remember that private universities are limited by their endowments. A public school like CUNY, meanwhile, receives state funding, and \$53,000 for what is, in perspective, a small group of graduate students would only be a sliver of a slice of the pie."

For Weingarten, a big task this year will also be organizing with the other advocacy bodies at Queens College. "I also want to create more collaborations between chairs, the academic senate, and other groups on campus who are working to support faculty governance, which has been increasingly under attack across the country," she said.

At City Tech, the chapter worked tirelessly last year to build the strength of the chapter's executive committee. This year, the goal is to

invite more rank-and-file activists to become more involved.

"In anticipation of a vigorous contract campaign, we'd like to expand our network of union activists at City Tech by reaching out across titles and departments to bring in new people," said Carole Harris, the PSC chapter chair at City Tech. "As part of that process, we hope to educate members on the contract. This fall we have two workshops planned on rights and benefits, one for part-time faculty and one for full-time faculty."

OTHER ACTIONS

Chapter leaders are also organizing lunchtime meetings, film screenings and outreach to different departments on their campuses. "We're planning to host a screening of *The Five Demands*, a film about the 1969 student uprising at City College," said Kathleen Offenholley, the PSC chapter chair at Borough of Manhattan Community College. "We will be inviting BMCC students, staff and faculty, and we will have a question-and-answer session with the film director and some of the activists who participated in the historic uprising. We hope to use this event to inspire, energize and create community as we head into the fight for the next contract."

Acting locally for all of CUNY



Members across the University are organizing for a fair and just contract.

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Beating CUNY's 'kitchen sink' agenda

By ARI PAUL

Making progress in collective bargaining

Flanked by members of the PSC Bargaining Team as he addressed PSC member observers gathered before the union's fifth bargaining session with CUNY management in late August, PSC President James Davis didn't mince words when he characterized management's bargaining agenda.

"It's a bad bargaining agenda," Davis said, calling it a "kitchen sink" approach to labor relations. The management agenda, which the union had received in the previous bargaining session, includes a whole host of givebacks – excluding department chairs and various HEO titles from the bargaining unit, excluding elected union officials from serving in campus governance, limiting promotional opportunities and undermining job protections for HEOs, among other incursions.

BARGAINING AGENDA

But Davis, addressing members in a conference room in CUNY Central's Midtown headquarters, remained confident that the union would not only fight back against these proposals, but also achieve many of the union's ambitious demands. He pointed out that CUNY's demands were completely out of step with the trends in other recently settled state labor contracts.

"We have seen very bad bargaining agendas before from CUNY," Davis said, noting that many bad management proposals have been defeated at the bargaining table. "I'm confident we're going to do that again," he said.

Proposing to remove department chairs and professional staff who work in the budget office, controller's office and other offices is an extremely harmful proposal, as it is not up to the employer whether someone in the bargaining unit can be a union member. Delimiting the titles that can join the union serves to suppress the union's dues income and it also breaks solidarity among members on campus. Some members, seeing this demand in the



The PSC Bargaining Team (standing in the back) and member observers (seated) before a PSC-CUNY bargaining session at CUNY headquarters.



Will administrators like Wendy Hensel (left) and Héctor Batista keep to their word?

context of a historic campaign by the Right to destroy labor unions, believe this demand to be anti-union.

Sharon Persinger, a university-wide officer on the PSC Executive

Council who serves on the Bargaining Committee, said it was particularly egregious that management would seek to bar elected union representatives from serving in

campus governance. Such a change amounted to management dictating to faculty who they were allowed to vote for.

The demand by management to allow campuses to refuse PSC members promotions based on budgetary constraints sends a "chilling message," Davis said, as it tells members, "You can forget about being promoted."

PSC First Vice President Andrea Vásquez noted in a lengthy statement to CUNY management that their agenda doesn't reflect the positive attitude with which management opened the first bargaining session. She quoted Héctor Batista, CUNY's executive vice chancellor and chief operating officer, saying, "Faculty and staff demonstrated exceptional flexibility, creativity

and commitment." And she quoted Wendy Hensel, CUNY's executive vice chancellor and university provost, saying, "We recognize that the people who are sitting on that side of the table are the people who make up the heart and soul of this university."

Member observers build union power.

But, Vásquez noted, "What CUNY has put on paper does not at all reflect those sentiments.

"We all need fair raises that, yes, do take into account the role that inflation plays at this time," she said. "That makes perfect sense to us. The raises the CUNY [Board of Trustees] granted CUNY administrators beat the rate of inflation by a landslide."

She added, "Even with the good raises we expect, it will be difficult

Continued on page 10



In a break from bargaining, the PSC Bargaining Team (right) discusses contract goals with member observers (left).



Demonstrators at a contract rally at Hunter College.

Paul Frangipane

Scott Heins

Ari Paul

Paul Frangipane

RF Central contract ratified

By ARI PAUL

PSC members at the CUNY Research Foundation Central Office (RF Central) ratified a new collective bargaining agreement that lifts pay, enhances health and dental benefits, and protects hybrid schedules.

Getting to this agreement wasn't easy. Management was intransigent on many of these issues, resulting in a spirited rank-and-file organizing campaign that involved numerous lunchtime pickets outside RF Central's Midtown Manhattan office and ultimately a vote supporting strike authorization. It was a hard-fought campaign, but also a testament to the fact that rank-and-file union organizing and on-the-job agitation wins real contract gains.

STRIKE ON THE TABLE

PSC members at the RF are private-sector workers and are thus not subjected to the state Taylor Law, which outlaws work stoppages by public-sector workers. RF management countered the strike vote with retaliatory threats. This summer, the union reported that the foundation's president, Héctor Cordero-Guzmán, "threatened to cancel workers' vacations and declared a 100% return to in-office work in retaliation for a strike authorization vote supported by almost 80%" of the members in the bargaining unit.

Eventually, workers achieved a settlement without a work stoppage. The union won annual raise increases with the following schedule: 3.5% on January 1, 2023, in addition to a \$1,000 signing bonus; 3.5% on Janu-

Securing hybrid schedules and other gains



Research Foundation members hold a lunchtime picket outside the Central Office.

ary 1, 2024, compounded; 3.25% on January 1, 2025, compounded; 3.25% on January 1, 2026, compounded; 3.25% on January 1, 2027, compounded.

The new contract also increases the dollar amount for longevity payments for RF workers with 10, 15, 20, 25 and 30 years on the job.

PSC members at RF Central said over the course of the last several months that enshrining some protection for hybrid schedules was a

major priority, not just for worker safety reasons, but because flexibility with remote work has yielded enormous work-life balance improvements. While the Research Foundation management had been reluctant to agree to any language enshrining the hybrid work schedules workers have had since the pandemic, the new contract maintains the current remote work practices – although management has the right to change or eliminate such practices upon 60 days' notice to the union. Management must begin impact bargaining with the union within the 60-day notice period, unless both the union and management waive their right to do so.

REVERSING BAD TRENDS

Charles Chung, the PSC RF-Central Office chapter chair, told *Clarion* that while the wage increases are not as high as many members wanted, the contract was an overall victory. "We were able to secure a remote work policy, and while the wage increases weren't what we were hoping for in light of the extraordinary inflation, they reversed the trend of the decreasing wages over the last several contracts," he said.

Chung added, "We also improved and secured benefits focused on supporting families, such as making the 20-day family sick leave side letter into a permanent policy, expanding the dental care reimbursement – that was won last contract but interpreted too narrowly by the RF – to cover all family members under the company insurance plans, significantly improving the life insurance covered by the RF, and changes to some rules to reduce the potential for bullying."

Another victory for retiree health care

By ARI PAUL

It's Groundhog Day for Mayor Eric Adams.

The mayor – obsessed with unnecessarily slashing city spending at the expense of municipal workers and retirees as well as the rest of the public – has repeatedly sought to move retiree health benefits into a privately managed plan. Retirees have fought back, never giving up even when the press and political leaders effectively said the fight was over. And retirees keep winning.

BACK AND FORTH

After Manhattan Judge Lyle Frank ruled last December that the City had to pay for Medicare and ordered it to stop trying to force retirees into Medicare Advantage by charging them nearly \$200 a month for Medicare Supplemental Insurance (Senior Care), the City said the judge's decision allowed them to force retirees into Medicare Advantage by eliminating the City's decades-long commitment to offering and paying for Medicare supplemental insurance.

Court stops Adams once again

But this summer, retirees went to court and won, again, before the same judge.

Judge Frank, according to the online newspaper *The City*, issued a ruling in August "permanently" prohibiting New York City from switch-

ing its 250,000 retired employees and their elderly or disabled dependents to a privatized Medicare Advantage plan managed by Aetna."

The City added that "Manhattan Supreme Court Justice Lyle Frank sided with city retirees, finding

merit to their argument that the planned switchover violated longstanding guarantees by the City that every active and retired city worker is entitled to city-funded health care through a combination of Medicare and other supplemental insurance."

The PSC has been outspoken in its opposition to any policy change that would jeopardize retiree health benefits.

Anne Friedman, the PSC Retirees Chapter chair, told *Clarion*, "PSC retirees are heartened and relieved by yet another legal victory in the fight against privatizing our traditional Medicare and supplemental care."

"Together with retirees across the city and on numerous fronts – our retirees continue to express their outrage, frustration and angst as City Hall insists that a notorious company like Aetna, whose primary motive is to make money, will serve us as well or better than our current health-care plan. With Aetna under investigation for fraud against the federal government, it is an insult to retirees' intelligence to expect that

we can have confidence in a plan they offer. The PSC has offered alternative routes to addressing some real financial problems that the City faces and City leaders should consider them seriously."

COMPTROLLER'S SUPPORT

City Comptroller Brad Lander called the ruling "a win for the many retirees who fought for the health care that they worked so hard for and were promised," adding, "When the Medicare Advantage contract was submitted to us this spring, our office declined to register it because we were concerned that litigation raised doubts about the City's authority to enter into the contract."

The Adams administration, however, is undeterred and has appealed the decision.

The PSC and other unions agree that the city government should take proactive steps to rein in out-of-control health-care costs, but that should not be at the expense of city workers. Council Member Tiffany Cabán embraced the judge's decision, saying on X (formerly known as Twitter) that "Making our health-care system financially sustainable requires passing universal public health insurance, not renegeing on our city's promises to retirees."



The PSC is fighting to protect retiree health care.

Fighting CUNY's pension nightmare

By ARI PAUL

Celia Sporer, an assistant professor of criminal justice at Queensborough Community College, is one of many PSC members seeking pension justice.

Like many PSC members, she did exactly what she was supposed to do to get her retirement contributions started once she was hired. "I signed every paper and authorized everything I was told to [do]. And for the past seven years, I trusted that CUNY was properly handling my pension," she said in an op-ed published in the *Daily News*.

INFO VANISHED

But after seven years, she explained, CUNY told her that she had no account and no record of ever having a pension. This was supposed to be the retirement plan for her, and a financial plan for her children.

She explained how this happened in the op-ed: "After I signed up for [the Teachers' Retirement System (TRS)], Queensborough did not set up my deductions and payments to TRS as it should have. TRS still had me listed as an adjunct at John Jay.

Lawsuit for impacted members



Paul Frangipane

Celia Sporer is one of many members seeking justice.

And since I didn't work at John Jay anymore – and CUNY schools fail to communicate with each other as they should – the administration at John Jay simply threw out the letters TRS sent them. But Queensborough knew this was happening in 2018, when they

sent an email to TRS with a list of people like myself who were not getting deductions for their pensions. But not only did they not follow through on a solution, they never even bothered to tell me about the email or that there was even an issue."

This leaves her in a terrible predicament: "I now owe \$33,000 to make up for the seven years without deductions plus seven years of interest." In addition to her regular deductions, it will take another 14 years for her to make up for these back payments.

"And here's the kicker: I'm not vested until I pay all of that \$33,000," Sporer said in the article. "If I don't get tenure or have to move for my family before then, I leave with nothing."

UNCARING ADMIN

Speaking to *Clarion*, Sporer said she wants justice. "I was very, very angry at the beginning," she said. "Somebody didn't do their job. I did what I was supposed to do.... Somebody dropped the ball, and nobody bothered to contact me, and nobody was really apologetic. They were like, 'It happens.'"

She added, "Somebody needs to take responsibility. We need to make sure this never happens again."

Sporer is just one of many living this nightmare. There are dozens – perhaps even hundreds – of members throughout the Univer-

sity stuck in the same Kafkaesque situation.

The union has filed a lawsuit against the University in order to rectify the situation. The suit states that CUNY failed in its responsibility to deduct pension contributions from the raises achieved in the 2010–17 PSC-CUNY contract. This has caused, the suit states, "some retired PSC members to receive lower pensions than they are entitled to."

From the union's point of view, CUNY is responsible for ensuring that eligible CUNY employees are properly informed about the pension options and enroll them accordingly. The union hopes that the lawsuit, which fully documents how members' lives have been upended by CUNY's mishandling of financial information, will make its members whole.

For more information about the lawsuit and whether you might be impacted, go to: <https://psc-cuny.org/issues/pensions-lawsuit/>.

If you believe your pension might be impacted, contact Greg Douros at gdouros@pscmail.org.

CUNY mishandled retirement info.

Garrell out at GC, faced campus pressure

By ARI PAUL

Robin Garrell has resigned as the Graduate Center president less than a year after faculty, staff and students issued a statement of "no confidence" in her administration.

As *Clarion* reported in January, a lengthy sign-on letter accused President Garrell and other "top administrators of blocking hires that would have added diversity to the faculty, fumbling fundraising efforts, shirking their governance duties, creating a general climate of low morale and understaffing key offices resulting in increased workloads for current faculty and staff."

INTERIM LEADER

CUNY Central has announced that Joshua Brumberg, the school's dean of science, has been appointed interim president. While it is not clear that the no-confidence statement is the direct reason for Garrell's departure, GC activists believe that the no-confidence campaign has raised awareness about problems at the school.

"Robin Garrell's resignation comes after months of public dissent and outrage around the administration's dysfunction, its disrespectful attitude toward faculty and staff, and its refusal to comprehensively address the material precarity that many graduate students face," said Zoe Hu, the PSC chapter chair for the GC. "Our next president must do better. So that we do not repeat the mistakes of the past, students, fac-

Met with calls of 'no confidence'



Dave Sanders

Robin Garrell addresses faculty, staff and students earlier this year.

ulty and staff must have a primary decision-making role in the search for Garrell's replacement. The process must be transparent, as befits a public institution like CUNY – this means no non-disclosure agreements. We need a president who will be attentive to issues around racial, class, gender and disability justice. We need someone who is deeply familiar with and apprecia-

tive of the GC's legacy, who is an academic and not an austerity-minded businessperson."

LOW PAY

Hu added, "Many GC students make less than \$30,000 a year. It is impossible to maintain an intellectual community when the very members of that community are skipping meals, adjuncting multiple classes,

scrambling to avoid evictions or getting stuck at grocery stores because their credit cards have been declined. We need leadership that will recognize and honor this."

Michelle Fine, a distinguished professor of psychology, urban education and women's studies at the Graduate Center who was instrumental in organizing the no-confidence statement, told *Clarion* in an email that Garrell's departure is an opportunity to put the campus back on track with its original mission.

COLLECTIVE VISION

She said, "After a year of joyous and heartbreaking votes of no confidence and campus dissension, now the desires of the people of the GC – faculty, staff and students – must be mobilized to shape our strategic vision and help select the next president of the Graduate Center: someone who aligns with the GC's history, ethics, values, and commitments to racial, gender, class, and disability justice and public-facing scholarship. Someone who will champion our collective vision for financially viable fellowships, insurance for all, admissions for undocumented, DACA and asylum-seeking applicants, food in the commons, respect for staff and deep participation by faculty, staff and students."

The timing was more important than ever, Fine said. "In the midst of national, well-funded campaigns for book banning, censorship, white-washing of curriculum, austerity

and a slashing of liberal arts," she said, "this is a moment for us to reinvent public doctoral education, CUNY-style."

For Zee Dempster, assistant director at the GC's Institute for Research on the African Diaspora in the Americas and the Caribbean, the last straw under Garrell was the axing of critical professional staff. "I do lament that many honorable PSC members who worked in our Business Of-

fice lost their jobs or were removed from their positions, where another vision could have seen how vital it was to keep these people in place," she said. "Their displacement hinders the effectiveness of the entire building and was a prime catalyst for the no-confidence vote."

A NEW SEARCH

Dempster believes the campus has a responsibility to find a new president who will advocate for the institution during difficult times.

"The question that I as a PSC member want answered is, 'As president, what are your plans to campaign for a fully funded CUNY?'" she said. "This must be on the mind of the search committee. The Graduate Center is facing uncertainty, as does any organization headed by interim leadership. In the next year, a president must be found who envisions the GC as an educational capstone that is essential to the intellectual life of CUNY, New York City and beyond."

PSC members spoke out against admin.

Brightspace: progress or giant headache?

By ARI PAUL

This past spring, CUNY administration announced that it would introduce a new learning management system (LMS), Brightspace, to replace the often clunky and complicated Blackboard. It was slated to begin this Fall of 2023, with five campuses transferring over a semester at a time.

A CUNY announcement of the program states that the new system will include “a comprehensive learning management system that is modern and easy to use for faculty, staff and students.” It will also include “new capabilities to support teaching and learning across different modalities” and “support for growth in online learning.”

WORKLOAD ISSUES

However, faculty and staff are worried that the transition to the new system will be time-consuming and laborious, forcing unreasonable workloads onto PSC members. In some cases, these PSC members said, it might mean hours and hours of unpaid work.

For Sofya Aptekar, an associate professor of urban studies at the School of Labor and Urban Studies, the whole process of converting from Blackboard to Brightspace involves “a lot to move over.” It would mean added work, “doing a lot [of] this labor on top of normal course prep.” For adjuncts, she added, that might involve doing hours of conversion work in preparation for a class that could very well be suddenly cancelled at the beginning of the semester.

“For adjuncts it’s not paid, which is really unfair,” Aptekar said.

HEOs, many of whom will assist faculty in the switchover, are fearful that the process will be so arduous that it will force many to work beyond their 35-hour limit in the PSC-CUNY contract.

SYSTEM BENEFITS

John Verzani, the chair of the CUNY University Faculty Senate, sees benefits to the new system, and potential problems, citing a previous switchover at SUNY.

“While I expect disruption for some, hopefully it won’t be for too many, as the porting process proceeds. The process of selection allowed some faculty input, and the SUNY rollout gives CUNY some expertise to build on, should we choose,” said Verzani, a professor of mathematics at the College of Staten Island. “My biggest concern is the time frame, as the process started later than expected. [State approval came in June.] Blackboard is an essential tool for many faculty and students and used at a scale which can swamp vendors who are not ready, which I trust is not going to be the case. I have heard not all at SUNY are happy with the shift, and if the process is tougher than anticipated, there will be seri-

Faculty and staff fear workload increase



John Verzani, chair of the CUNY University Faculty Senate, has aired his concerns.

ous strain on the few local support people.”

Maria Plochocki, an adjunct assistant professor of writing composition at Baruch and York Colleges, noted that a major cause of concern has been that this decision was made without enough input from faculty and staff who will be impacted. What will happen if there are delays in implementation? Will data storage and retrieval from Blackboard be compromised? These are the questions her colleagues are asking.

“A major concern is support, or the administration’s failure to propose anything concrete, or that sounds remotely sufficient,” Plochocki said. “The transition will be quite time-consuming for some, especially those with more complex course content such as videos and podcasts.” She added that “no financial compensation, no release time” has been offered.

PROGRESS MADE

On the one hand, after hearing PSC concerns on the issue, CUNY administration officials told the union that more training on the transition will be offered and that it will slow down the transition process. But other concerns remain.

Plochocki added, “Functionality is a concern. Blackboard has classroom shells but also spaces for organizations such as clubs, even entire departments and programs,” noting

that it wasn’t clear that the new system would offer the same kinds of technological advantages.

Members in higher education officer titles are also concerned about the amount of work they will need to do in order to facilitate the switchover, said Rulisa Galloway-Perry, a PSC HEO chapter co-chair.

Some fear that it will be so burdensome that it will push HEOs to work well beyond the 35-hour week contractual limit.

STAFF CONCERNS

“HEOs are always concerned that they are forced at the last minute to learn, implement and troubleshoot new systems without any input on the effects that these new programs bring to their daily workload,” said Galloway-Perry, who is the academic advising director and senior co-curricular administrator in the Africana studies department at John Jay College.

“HEOs are never given time for professional development in order to enhance their skills or be trained properly – meaning receiving at least a full day of training and given guides to refer to during the trial-and-error period of learning a new system. HEOs never have input on how these new programs change their workload, or if it is actually consciously creating another job function [or] a longer job description.”

Elisabeth Gareis, a professor of communication studies at Baruch College, explained that she and her

management system for teaching hybrid or online must know what to expect and must have sufficient support and time to prepare their courses for the transition.”

FEAR ABOUNDS

This has all led to faculty and staff spending the beginning of the fall semester in a state of trepidation.

“In particular, staff are worried that already understaffed IT departments will be overwhelmed, adjunct faculty are concerned that they will have to do significant work without compensation and faculty with heavy LMS use are overwhelmed by the thought of not only having to learn the ins and outs of a new LMS but having to re-create course-specific how-to instructions (written and video) on their own time – work that cannot be outsourced,” Gareis said.

Worse, she added, the administration doesn’t appear to be taking these concerns seriously.

She said, “Calls for differentiated support, including release time and/or compensation, are left unanswered. And it is not clear who is ultimately accountable: the schools, the colleges, CUNY, Brightspace? The distinct feeling is that the cost for the transition will be paid by faculty and staff. The motto: ‘Open the floodgates and apologize later.’”

Gareis said that CUNY campus administrations at campuses going through the transition should give PSC members “an extra semester transition time, reassigned time or extra pay, one-on-one support for one-to-two weeks for proofing and fixing mistakes and help for re-creating materials.”

UNION MOBILIZING

The union remains active on this issue. Union officers are speaking to members about their concerns and have had multiple meetings with the CUNY administration in which those concerns were highlighted. The union will continue this effort, PSC leaders said, noting that CUNY took a step in the right direction by offering more training for the transition and admitting that the rollout has happened too quickly.

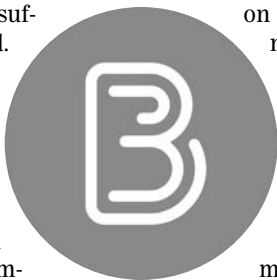
Aptekar also noted that the contract with Blackboard is a huge giveaway to a private business. “Given the size of CUNY, why can’t we have something that is developed by us and for us, instead of an outside company?” she asked, noting that many faculty members are worried about data cultivation.

“As a public institution, we should be working with other public institutions, creating public versions of this utility rather than enriching private corporations with public money.”

Verzani echoed this sentiment, saying “one concern raised during the acquisition process was whether the data collected by the vendor would be sold off in some form to commercial enterprises.”

He added, “It was a concern then and remains now.”

CUNY responds to PSC pressure.



Sofya Aptekar

colleagues have been frustrated by the clunky nature of the transition, which many fear has already interfered with their class preparation.

“Although support measures have been promised, they remain vague and don’t provide reassurance that the transition will go smoothly. We’ve been told that there will be tech support and tutorials, but the information is not specific enough, especially for faculty who teach partially or largely online,” she said. “The lack of concrete information on available support makes it difficult, if not impossible, for faculty to decide which courses and modality to teach. Faculty who depend on a learning

David Sanders

What budget restorations teach us

By ARI PAUL

When Mayor Eric Adams and City Council Speaker Adrienne Adams announced the most recent city budget deal this summer, the speaker made it clear that funding CUNY was a major goal for city lawmakers.

“CUNY, near and dear to my heart, is one of the most effective pathways to equitable economic opportunities for New Yorkers,” Adams said. “As such, CUNY was a major funding priority for the Council. The \$32.4 million restored to this budget for our public institutions of higher education will help avoid the bulk of programmatic cuts they faced.”

This restoration was certainly welcome news for PSC members. The union had been organizing for months with community and student groups to fight against the mayor’s proposed budget plan, which cut so deep that vital CUNY programs faced extinction. Proposed changes included budget cuts for Accelerate, Complete, Engage (ACE) and Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP).

COUNCIL INTERVENTION

“Without the Council’s intervention, the mayor’s budget would have dramatically compounded years of city cuts to community colleges,” said PSC President James Davis in a statement. “Even with these much-needed restorations, the mayor’s Program to Eliminate the Gap (PEG) cuts over the last two years have left CUNY on a dangerous financial path and undermined students’ success. Since 2020, city-funded community colleges have lost over 300 full-time faculty and staff.”

Preparing for the next fight



The union engaged leaders, including City Council Speaker Adrienne Adams.

As PSC members gear up to campaign for more state budget funding, the union is aware that Mayor Adams will likely seek more austerity budgeting at the city level next year. For now, the union looks upon the hard work of organizing, lobbying and community outreach it did over the last year as a guide to fighting against austerity next year.

Heather James, an assistant professor of social science at Borough of Manhattan Community College, was one of the activist union members who led the PSC’s city budget campaign.

“Highlights of this Council funding include: \$9.1 million in restorations to ACE, which was threatened with a cut of the same amount; \$5 million in new funding for ASAP; and \$5.9

million in new money for full-time academic advisors,” James said. “In particular, advising was a hard-fought PSC priority, [and it was] part of our effort to increase wraparound services for students without creating an unbearable and unfair workload for faculty and staff.”

ENGAGING WITH LEADERS

Luke Elliott-Negri, the PSC legislative representative, reiterated: “This year, the speaker, her budget negotiating team and effectively the whole Council prioritized CUNY in negotiations with the mayor. The PSC worked directly with Speaker Adams and many council members to ensure that our issues were at the center of the conversation.”

As James pointed out, despite all of the union’s hard work and all of the City Council’s pushback against cuts, the mayor’s commitment to austerity remains strong.

“The mayor absolutely refused to restore his cuts by writing the funding back into his executive budget,” James said. “[The Council] funded us ourselves using the discretionary funding allocated to the legislative branch. This money is limited; the funding we secured was a feat of which we should be very proud. However, the fight for this funding also highlighted the structural and cultural pressures that have weakened the Council as compared to the mayor with regard to the budget process. Looking back on this cycle, I am proud of our wins but also hope to engage in a conversation about changing city governance, specifically the budget process, for the better.”

COALITION BUILDING

The PSC has worked with The People’s Plan (TPP) NYC, an anti-austerity coalition that fights for a fair budget. TPP was sour on the final agreement, saying in a statement: “Advocates and council members worked tirelessly during this budget process to protect New Yorkers from a mayor who repeatedly lied to the public and sowed division by scapegoating asylum seekers. We were able to claw back bare minimum funding for libraries, 3-K conversions and Promise NYC, affordable housing and NYCHA, among other vital restorations. These restorations demonstrate the power of organizing, and the critical

opposition role of the Council. But the fact that these fights were necessary in the first place shows just how low Mayor Adams has set the bar.”

GETTING INVOLVED

Susan Kang, an associate professor of political science at John Jay College, said that a major lesson from this latest city budget fight is that the PSC must engage aggressively with city lawmakers throughout the year in order to advance the faculty and staff agenda.

“We should be cultivating our relationships with city council members early and often because city funding is so important for our community colleges,” she said. “We should be in their faces right away, like in the fall, so we can be a priority because so many groups are competing for their attention.”

In order to accomplish this, Kang said, the union would need the support of its members to show the city government its strength.

To this end, the union encourages members to join the union’s legislative committee and participate in early lobbying and campaign efforts this year.

Progressives are already fighting the mayor, who has called on “city agencies to cut 5% of their budgets” and warned “agencies to prepare for future cuts – possibly amounting to 15% across the board,” citing the influx of migrants, according to *Gothamist*.

“It would be great if more members got involved in our electoral and legislative program, because it builds our power and builds our relevance with elected officials,” Kang said.

Lobbying city and state lawmakers



PSC members and students march for a fair city budget earlier this year. The union organized with other anti-austerity groups throughout the spring.

MASS MEETING!

Thursday, September 28

6:30 PM

Contract for #A PeoplesCUNY

Be part of a mass online demonstration of solidarity and support for a strong new contract! Hear the latest from the PSC Bargaining Team after seven negotiating sessions with CUNY management, and learn what you can do in Fall 2023 to help win real raises, improved working conditions and better benefits.

psc-cuny.org/calendar/contract-for-a-peoplescuny-mass-online-meeting/



Why the humanities at CUNY matter

By ARI PAUL

Humanities programs across the United States are under increasing threat. West Virginia University recently announced sweeping faculty layoffs, and as the *Washington Post* wrote, is “poised to jettison all of its faculty dedicated to teaching Spanish, French, Chinese and other foreign languages” and “is moving toward elimination of a master’s degree program in creative writing.” This past winter, *The New Yorker* reported on the dismal slide in humanities majors over the past decade.

Academics around the country note the trends indicating that the American public university system is increasingly devaluing the humanities in favor of workforce training. And widespread disinvestment raises the specter of cuts to the core mission of urban public higher education. New Jersey City University announced in a statement last year the “sunsetting of undergraduate majors and minors, graduate, certificate and doctoral programs, and the layoff and non-reappointment of faculty and some professional staff,” including the layoff of 30 tenured faculty members. CUNY administrators have continued cuts to the campuses while often touting new investment in the sciences and job training. Understandably, many worry what may become of CUNY’s commitments to language, arts and other important areas of study.

COUNCIL RESPONDS

However, at a City Council Committee on Higher Education hearing on September 6, Higher Education Chair Eric Dinowitz expressed the need for a public humanities education in higher education. It’s a theme he has, fortunately, promoted ever since he became chair of the committee. A former K-12 teacher and UFT member, he told *Clarion* after he became chair that he wanted CUNY to offer a continuum of education for public school graduates, and that includes a full humanities education.

In this context, CUNY administrators heaped praise on their university system’s many humanities programs and highlighted that it was central to CUNY’s mission. “Studying humanities is not a privilege for the wealthy, it is a right and a necessity for everyone,” said Karin Beck, associate dean of arts and humanities at Lehman College.

Several PSC members followed the CUNY administration testimony to drive home the importance of humanities at CUNY.

Luke Waltzer, the director of the Teaching and Learning Center at the Graduate Center, spoke about his program, where doctoral students have the opportunity to teach humanities at CUNY’s two-year colleges.

“Disciplinary training must be broad and porous rather than limited, and our students in all fields are exposed to a range of methodologies within and beyond their fields

PSC members fight for a full education



PSC panelists, from left: Alan Aja, Sarah Chinn, Barbara Bowen, Hugo Fernandez and Luke Waltzer.



Karin Beck (center) is the associate dean of arts and humanities at Lehman College.

from which they assemble their tool kits,” he said in prepared testimony. “These transferable skills and commitments are required to thrive in the modern economy, and are passed through Graduate Center students to the thousands of CUNY undergraduates they teach. ‘Workforce development’ and ‘training in the humanities’ are not opposing ideas. Employers want to hire graduates who are well-rounded and who can communicate with various audiences effectively. The humanities are crucial to comprehension of the ethical dimensions of the drivers of economic development in the 21st century, including machine learning and artificial intelligence, health care and clean energy.”

NATIONAL CONTEXT

Waltzer put all this in the national context, noting that New York City and CUNY, which is known internationally as “the people’s university,” can and must do better.

“It’s not news that trends in public higher education are hostile to the humanities and to the notion of liberal education more broadly, while wealthier private institutions deepen their investments in these areas,” he said. “Institutions like BYU-Idaho and Ensign College have approved 90-credit BAs in business management and applied health by eliminating general education requirements.

At CUNY and in New York we have a choice: Do we want to follow these trends that narrow a degree into a vocational pursuit, or do we want to double down on our mission of access by seriously considering just what we’re giving the ‘children of the whole people’ access to. We must welcome them into institutions that are pathways to worlds of knowledge that simply can’t be accessed, comprehended or extended without a deep and enduring commitment to the humanities.”

Remy Salas, an adjunct lecturer in ethnic and race studies at Borough of Manhattan Community College, reiterated the idea that a broad humanities education is a part of general job training.

“The humanities foster critical thinking, analytical prowess and a profound sense of creativity. They empower students to explore the shared threads that bind humanity together while also highlighting the nuances that set us apart. Moreover, the humanities offer a wealth of practical applications that enhance one’s professional skill set,” Salas said. “Drawing from my personal experience as a former City Hall and city agency employee, serving in policy roles, I can attest to the indispensable role that my humanities education played in my early career trajectory. My proficiency in writing, honed through humanities

coursework, greatly contributed to my professional advancement. As a dedicated professor, I have had the privilege of witnessing numerous students discover their own strengths and successfully apply them in academia and the professional area. A significant number of my former students have ventured into sectors such as technology and finance, where their global perspectives and effective communication skills have set them apart.”

College isn’t just job training.

of Microsoft writing in 2018: ‘As computers behave more like humans, the social sciences and humanities will become more important.’”

NOT JUST FOR ELITES

Bowen added, “The second question I hear in today’s title, however, is disturbing. Humanities may be acceptable for students at elite institutions – students who already have the cushion of intergenerational wealth or who may not be endangered by the violence of systemic racism – but isn’t a major in philosophy or English an unaffordable luxury for a student at CUNY? The answer is no. If the measure of a ‘viable academic path’ is whether it leads to a job, then the evidence of the Queens College English department should be enough. Take a look at the department website; it profiles recent English majors who are now oncology nurses, attorneys, teachers, visual artists, journalists, video game writers, novelists and more.”

Speaking to *Clarion*, Sarah Chinn, a professor of English at Hunter College, noted that one major problem at CUNY is that because humanities don’t require heavy equipment or labs like the sciences do, the humanities can often be overlooked when it comes to being resourced.

“The humanities have suffered significant neglect,” she said. “There’s a sense that we don’t bring real prestige to the campus.”

During the hearing, Dinowitz asked PSC members what more could be done to improve the humanities at CUNY. Bowen made it clear that the problem was the general underfunding of CUNY and the chronic austerity on campuses throughout the city. At schools where classrooms don’t have enough desks or aren’t properly heated, where faculty are underpaid compared to faculty at peer institutions, Bowen said that the humanities were bound to suffer. What is needed, she said, was more robust funding of CUNY generally.

“What needs to be done is more investment in CUNY overall,” Bowen said. “The general austerity at CUNY is very heavily visited on the humanities.”

FIERY STATEMENT

In fiery testimony, former PSC President Barbara Bowen, an associate professor of English at Queens College and the Graduate Center, said, “I hear two questions in the title of today’s hearing. First, whether studying the humanities, in an economy that worships technology and substitutes gig work for secure employment, can lead to a meaningful job. There is abundant proof that the answer to that question is yes. CUNY officials have supplied statistics, and survey after survey of employers shows that the qualities they value are the qualities nurtured by the humanities. We even have the president



Eric Dinowitz, chair of the City Council’s higher education committee, voices support for the humanities.

Unionization surges in higher ed

By SHOMIAL AHMAD

Organizing in higher education is nothing new, but a new study by the CUNY School of Labor and Urban Studies (SLU) shows recent upsurges in unionization, following both the Great Recession and the pandemic. The uptick is mostly attributed to an increase in organizing by graduate student workers and contingent faculty.

“Labor activism has increased in the past few years among highly educated young workers, frustrated by poor pay and precarious employment,” said report coauthor Ruth Milkman, a distinguished professor at SLU and the Graduate Center. “Museum workers, journalists, nonprofit staff, medical interns and residents, as well as graduate student workers in colleges and universities, have turned to unions to improve their situations.”

UNIONIZATION TRENDS

Every year, SLU examines national and local unionization trends. This year’s report, “State of the Unions 2023: A Profile of Organized Labor in New York City, New York State, and the United States,” shows that New York leads in union density with 604,000 unionized workers living in New York City’s five boroughs, making up roughly 37% of unionized workers in the state.

New York’s unionization rate is double the national rate. In 2022–23, it was 20.2%, while nationally, the rate was 10.1%.

From 2022 to 2023, there was also a dramatic uptick in student-worker collective bargaining units – 30 more units, representing 35,655 workers. Academic workers comprised a significant percentage of traditional unions. For instance, academic workers now total about a quarter of the

New CUNY SLU report on US unions



Faculty on strike at Rutgers University earlier this year.

United Auto Workers (UAW) membership. Labor successes are due in part to growing support for unions among young adults, increased attention to working conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic and increased organizing efforts by major national unions, including the UAW, United Electrical Workers, and Service Employees International Union (SEIU).

The uptick in student-worker organizing took place specifically at

private colleges. Nearly 75% of the new graduate assistant units and all undergraduate units were formed at private colleges during 2022–2023. There were new units at Yale University, the University of Chicago and Johns Hopkins University.

“The reason you see such a large uptick is because prior to 2016, student-workers [at private universities] were not considered employees,” said William A. Herbert, distinguished

lecturer at Hunter College and the executive director of the National Center for the Study of Collective Bargaining in Higher Education and the Professions.

NLRB DECISION

Herbert noted that in 2016, in one of the last great labor moves of the Obama administration, the National Labor Relations Board ruled in a case involving Columbia University that graduate student workers were, indeed, employees, and thus could unionize. The increase in organiz-

PSC grows legal team

The PSC welcomes its new legal coordinator, Natalie Grieco.

Grieco graduated from Cornell Law School, one of the nation’s premier schools for labor law, this spring. Prior to law school, Grieco worked as a labor organizer for several years, including stints at the California Nurses Association and the Montana Federation of Public Employees.

Grieco will be working closely with the union’s contract enforcement staff and the legal director on arbitrations and other matters. When asked about her decision to move from organizing to labor law, she said, “I was interested in supporting the labor movement from the legal perspective.”

ing at private colleges is the result of this ruling coupled with greater awareness of working conditions during the pandemic.

Also of significance was the increase in the number of strikes in higher education. Since January 2022, there have been 20 academic worker strikes, accounting for nearly a third of higher education strikes since 2013. Notable strike actions include those at the University of California, Rutgers University, The New School and Fordham University. Another new development is the growth in union-represented undergraduate units.

In 2022–2023, new student-worker unions were established at Columbia University, Barnard College and Wesleyan University. SEIU has a current campaign to organize 10,000 undergraduate workers in the California State University system.

Full report at tinyurl.com/state-of-unions-2023

Beating CUNY’s ‘kitchen sink’ agenda

Continued from page 3

to get to where we should be in one contract. That is one reason we have always negotiated noneconomic demands. They recognize and reward members in ways that show respect, fairness and appreciation for the work we do.”

Hammering home the fact that CUNY faculty and staff need real raises, PSC research shows that CUNY faculty and staff are underpaid when compared to peer institutions in the tristate area. However, CUNY management disputes this claim.

LACK OF AFFORDABILITY

The PSC’s position is underscored by the findings of a recent CNBC article: Manhattan is the most expensive place to live in the United States, Brooklyn the fourth most expensive, Queens the 13th and Nassau County the 15th. Research shows that few PSC members can afford to live where they work.

The union is aggressively fighting against management’s proposals at the bargaining table, and seeks not only to keep the contract intact, but to enhance job security protections, benefits and pay for members.

Since contract bargaining began in early summer, the union has invited member observers to each bargaining session. These members have shown management that the Bargaining Committee (which is made up of the union’s principal officers and Executive Council members) is supported by the rank-and-file. It also serves to illustrate the labor axiom, “The boss is the best organizer.” When members see management’s disposition toward the union at the table, they are inspired to organize and express their unity. As Clarion went to press, union members were engaging in “union week” on their campuses and preparing for further actions throughout the five boroughs.

“It feels like they’re consistently refusing to see our concerns as

valid,” said Forrest Riise Pelsue, a graduate assistant at the Graduate Center who observed the fifth session. “They’re very quick to dismiss any concerns that we raise.”

MEMBER SUPPORT

In addition to observers, rank-and-file members from across the University have offered testimony to management at the bargaining table in order to humanize many of the PSC’s demands.

Davis said having member observers in the room during bargaining builds union power as the contract campaign goes forward. He pointed out, for example, that there was a strength in the diversity of PSC’s observers, noting that at each session CUNY saw professional staff, full-time faculty, adjuncts, graduate workers and CLIP instructors among those assembled.

“We feel your support in the room,” Davis said.



PSC marches for climate justice

PSC members take part in a massive march in Manhattan against fossil fuels on September 17.

NYSUT catastrophe insurance

The Trustees of the NYSUT Member Benefits Catastrophe Major Medical (CMM) Insurance Trust are pleased to offer an open enrollment in the CMM Plan from September 8, 2023 to October 13, 2023 – with an effective start date of January 1, 2024.

REGISTER FOR AN UPCOMING WEBINAR

Member Benefits is hosting a number of live informational webinars about the CMM Plan and open enrollment period. These sessions run through October 12, 2023.

The CMM Plan offers supplemental coverage that you and your eligible family members may need. Once the out-of-pocket deductible has been satisfied, this Plan provides benefits for eligible expenses that your basic plan does not fully cover, including prescription drugs. As of January 1, 2023, the CMM Plan also includes a Critical Illness benefit that pays a one-time \$1,000 lump sum in the event that a covered member is diagnosed with a critical illness.

During this open enrollment period, NYSUT in-service members have the opportunity to

enroll themselves (and any eligible dependents) in the CMM Plan. The open enrollment also makes available to current CMM Plan participants the opportunity to enroll any eligible family members who are not already enrolled under the plan.

GET MORE INFO

To learn more about this opportunity, please visit the Catastrophe Major Medical page: tinyurl.com/nysut-catastrophe-medical. Or call AMBA toll-free at 888-386-9788.



Carole Harris of City Tech says, 'Join the PSC.'

Greeting new PSC members

By ARI PAUL

The PSC started off the fall semester with hundreds of new members. It's all part of a massive effort by the union's organizing department and campus activists to ensure all workers have the chance to join the PSC.

The PSC's organizing department, over several weeks before the start of the fall semester, targeted five campuses – Baruch College, Lehman College, Queens College, Hunter College and Borough of Manhattan Community College – for signing up professional staff as new PSC members. During this "summer membership blitz," the PSC was able to sign up 120 new members in a little more than a month.

In addition, PSC organizers worked closely with other campus leaders at the beginning of the semester to attend new hire orientations. Altogether, organizers and PSC activists signed up more than 200 new members, including more than 100 at the Graduate Center.

DIALOGUE MATTERS

"We have a great union that listens to its members on critical issues within CUNY," said Rulisa Galloway-Perry, a PSC co-chair for the Higher Education Officers Chapter. "It is important that we engage our union colleagues in meaningful dialogue to hear their experiences and concerns, whether they are good or bad. During this round of contract negotiations, members felt like their voices were heard and memorialized in the contract demands. Our organizers picked up where the chapter chairs left off this summer and enrolled 120 new members into the union. Strong membership in a union is the bedrock of purpose and we will never underestimate this power."

Rico Doan, the union's organizing director, noted that the summer blitz was important for a number of reasons. One, the university doesn't shut down over the summer. "The work of the university continues regardless of whether classes are in session or not," he said.

But another big part of the blitz was getting these new members more involved in their chapters and talking to workers in other titles, thus building the power of the union in the ongoing contract campaign.

"It's the first step to getting them involved in the contract campaign," Doan said. "When we sign up a professional staff member, maybe their most important issue is the remote work agreement, but then they see an adjunct that they work with who needs job security, or a full-time faculty member who needs a workload reduction. We're building cross-title solidarity."

Still not a dues-paying member? Sign up here: <https://psc-cuny.org/join-psc/>.

GOT UNION?



Lucy McIntyre
Higher Education Associate

Joining the Professional Staff Congress means joining a community of faculty and staff dedicated to fighting for our rights and the rights of our students. As a union, we can unite and demand that our hard work and contributions to the university are respected and appreciated. Don't miss out on the chance to have a voice in shaping the future of CUNY - join PSC-CUNY today and let's work together towards a better tomorrow! >>> <https://psc-cuny.org/join-psc> <<<





15-MINUTE ACTIVIST

Post a contract sign

The PSC's bargaining agenda is described in a series of 10 different posters. They declare some of the things "PSC/CUNY Members Want": "real raises," "remote work options," "job security," "an end to workplace bullying" and other issues. These signs, often used at rallies and marches, reflect the union's demands at the bargaining table.

Show the CUNY community that you support the PSC's broad and ambitious bargaining agenda. Hang up one of these posters in your workplace. To obtain a poster, reach out to your chapter chair. For chapter chair contact information, go to psc-cuny.org/about-us/who-we-are/chapters/.

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OCT/NOV FIVE BOROUGHES IN FIVE WEEKS

As the PSC fights for a just contract and the full funding of CUNY, union activists are planning actions in every borough in October and November – Staten Island, Manhattan, Queens, Brooklyn and the Bronx.

Members should be in touch with their chapter leadership about upcoming events to pressure CUNY, the State and the City to ensure that faculty, staff and students gain what their hard work deserves.

