

Clarion

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



MARCH 2020

ALL OUT FOR

DAYS OF ACTION

PSC to demonstrate citywide on March 12 and 13 for fair CUNY funding.

The union has been relentlessly pressing Albany lawmakers to properly fund CUNY and to introduce new taxes on the wealthy to fund public services. The union is bringing the fight to the streets and to CUNY campuses. Every member can do something.

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LAWSUIT Anti-trans bias at KCC

Prof cites harassment and retaliation over misgendering.

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ADJUNCTS

Using the new office hour

The new contract offers many adjuncts a new paid office hour. Here is a look at how some part-time instructors are using the new contractual provision.

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ORGANIZING

PSC field staff speak

It's a big union with lots of campuses. PSC organizers talk about what they do to organize faculty and staff during a challenging time for labor.

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FIVE QUESTIONS

The Poet Laureate of Staten Island

Marguerite María Rivas, an English professor at Borough of Manhattan Community College, was tapped to be the first Poet Laureate of Staten Island.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR | WRITE TO: CLARION/PSC, 61 BROADWAY, 15TH FLOOR, NEW YORK, NY 10006. EMAIL: APAUL@PSCMAIL.ORG.

Divesting from fossil fuels

● In response to a multiyear campaign by #DivestNY, in which the PSC Environmental Justice Working Group participated, the City of New York committed to divesting fossil fuel stocks from three of their largest pension funds. We need to help our NYSUT colleagues push the New York State pension funds to follow suit and demand that TIAA-CREF offer our members a fossil fuel-free fund for their investments.

The PSC has posted two petitions for members to sign, at www.psc-cuny.org/DivestCUNY. The Delegate Assembly passed a resolution in 2019 demanding divestment and fossil fuel-free TIAA funds (a copy of which can also be found at the petition page), and now you can add your voice to the call. Sign whichever petition applies to you.

Continuing to invest in fossil fuel companies when their business model is tied to burning fuels is unethical, and as governments, companies, and consumers all realize the urgency of the climate change threat, fossil fuels will lose value and some will have to be stranded completely, making fossil fuel companies overvalued right now.

This understanding has already begun to spread in the financial industry, as the energy sector has been the weakest performer in recent years. Analysis from the London School of Economics and the Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis have each shown that coal, oil, and gas are bad long-term investments. *Corporate Knights* reported that “The New York State Common Retirement Fund (NYSCRF) would be an estimated \$22.2 billion richer had it decided to divest its fossil fuel stocks ten years ago.” Some universities have divested their endowments or their employees’ pension funds (notably the entire University of California system) on financial as well as moral grounds. The CEO of BlackRock, the world’s largest asset manager, announced a phaseout of their investments in coal and other risky fuels, purely based on their fiduciary duty.

Those of us with TIAA-CREF investments should be offered a plan that contains no fossil fuel stocks or those supporting this harmful industry.

Ross Kennedy-Shaffer Pinkerton
Hunter College High School

The writer of the above is a member of the PSC Environmental Justice Working Group.

Editor’s note: PSC’s delegation to the 2019 NYSUT annual convention brought resolutions calling for divestment of TRS from fossil fuels and for a fossil-fuel-free option in TIAA-CREF, but the resolutions were voted down. Revised versions of the resolutions,



PSC members marched in a climate rally in Manhattan in the fall.

addressing some concerns raised by delegates last year about fiduciary responsibility, will be on the floor at the 2020 NYSUT convention in May.

Labor for Medicare for All

● One of the challenges for a labor movement worth its name is to represent and fight for the interests of all working people and not just those of its members. The argumentation that some Democrats, like Pete Buttigieg, have used against Medicare for All is destructive for labor, because it encourages the view of unionized workers as a special-interest group, which has supposedly used its political clout to secure privileges that most working people in the United States could not dream of.

The inability of American unions after World War II to gain a comprehensive national welfare state covering everyone, whether a union member or not, led to a parallel, ‘privatized,’ welfare state, which has created a wedge between unionized and non-unionized workers. In addition to failing to cover all American workers, this second-best solution has also proven precarious, even for covered workers, who may only find at the time of their greatest need that they are not as covered by their private, for-profit insurance as they thought they were.

The idea of anything short of a truly universal Medicare for All program is also problematic because, as students of welfare states know, the more universal social benefits are, the stronger their support among the population becomes and the less vulnerable they are to future reversals. This is why even very conservative Republicans, such as George W. Bush, have had difficulty privatizing truly universal programs, like Social Security, while non-universal welfare programs catering to low-income Americans have again and again been cut by Republicans and “centrist” Democrats alike.

Buttigieg’s preferred alternative to Medicare for All is consistent with his party’s long-standing complicity with and implementation of austerity. As such, it does not do labor unions a favor. Any gains unions have historically made through agitation and collective bargaining are much more precarious and reversible than the gains that would be conferred upon them by a genuinely universal, and thus politically more sustainable, welfare state.

Costas Panayotakis
City Tech

UCSC solidarity

● New updates are released daily regarding the wildcat graduate

workers’ strike at University of California, Santa Cruz, members of UAW Local 2865. Strikers, defying the no-strike clause in their union contract, are demanding a cost of living adjustment (COLA) of \$1,412 per month to offset extremely high rents in the area that often consume 60% of workers’ regular income and compel them to live in cramped, shared living situations. The strike began as a grade action in December, and the university system president has just fired 54 graduate students who refused to comply with grade submissions from the fall.

The picket line has been described as joyful, communal and hopeful; yet 17 protesters have been arrested and suspended, and some were even assaulted by the police. Because of the no-strike clause in the contract, protesters lack the legal protections of a strike fund or legal aid. Yet over \$100,000 has been raised online, including from Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders.

Under the current system-wide labor contract, graduate workers make \$2,400 pretaxes per month, excluding the summer months. The University of California has just agreed to give a \$2,500 annual housing stipend to all MA and PhD students at Santa Cruz, removing the previous “needs-based” qualification. But this, too, strikers respond, is not enough.

The wildcat strike is receiving broader national attention, with solidarity strikes promised from faculty and graduate workers at UCLA, Berkeley, Santa Barbara, Riverside and Davis. The strike has been featured in such high-profile publications such as *Mother Jones*, *Teen Vogue* and the *Guardian*. UCSC administration claims the undergraduate experience will be seriously harmed by the withholding of grades, but over 1,600 undergraduates have signed an online petition insisting the strike is not harming their financial aid and pledging solidarity with workers. Full-time faculty and staff, too, have voted in favor of the graduate workers’ COLA demands.

UCSC’s unprecedented strike could lead to more robust funding of public education in California and beyond, and an elevation of the needs of the rank and file. These issues will surely impact CUNY as we face more austerity and defunding with the current implementation of a new woefully inadequate contract. The wildcat strike shows us that action rooted in rank-and-file organization, often in opposition to union leadership, truly gets the goods. The PSC would do well to pay attention.

Boyda Johnstone
Borough of Manhattan
Community College

President Bowen responds: Thank you for raising the critical issue of the UC graduate employee strike. The PSC has sent a public letter to the UCSC administration condemning the firing of 54 striking graduate employees on February 28. It was rank-and-file action that gave the PSC the power to win our most recent contract, organized in more than a year of public demonstrations and following a vote to support the leadership’s call to authorize a strike in the previous round. The new contract is fully funded at the community colleges such as BMCC, and full funding for the contract is included in the city’s financial plan for the next four years. Of course the contract is not adequate to the vast need we have at CUNY, but it’s worth pointing out that it provided annual salary increases, maintained premium-free health insurance, added two years of free tuition for graduate employees, and raised pay for 12,000 adjunct faculty by an average of 45%. That’s why it had the overwhelming support of the rank and file of the PSC in ratification.

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Taking action for the state budget

By ARI PAUL

March is the final month of state budget negotiations. Lawmakers from both houses are meeting with lobbyists, advocates and constituents. The annual fiscal saga will end when the leaders of both houses reach a budget agreement with Governor Andrew Cuomo by the end of this month.

But this year needs to be different, PSC leaders have said. They are calling on the new Democratic majority in the New York State Legislature to be as progressive on fiscal policy this year as it was on other kinds of policy last year. The Democratic majority elected to the NYS Senate passed a series of sweeping progressive reforms in 2019 – on rent regulations, voter rights, criminal justice, women's rights, the DREAM Act and more.

"Those victories were tremendous," said PSC president Barbara Bowen, "and many PSC members supported them and celebrated them. Our members also worked hard to get progressive Democrats elected." She continued, "But the new legislature has yet to crack the hardest nut of all – the state's fiscal policy of unforced austerity. In many ways, that is the most consequential policy of all, and it is destroying CUNY. That policy must change."

WORKING WITH OTHERS

PSC leaders spent the summer and fall studying the tactics of the organizations and coalitions that succeeded last year, and they have developed a budget campaign that builds on what they learned. The key, they say, is volume. Advocates for rent reform succeeded in part because they demonstrated repeatedly in Albany and sent tens of thousands of social media messages to local legislators.

Actions on March 12 and 13 citywide



Union members, students and lawmakers rallied for a fair CUNY budget outside Baruch College.

With a membership of 30,000 people, the PSC can do the same. The union has organized a social media team that posts coordinated messages every week, a "flying squad" that stands ready to make quick visits to Albany and legislative hearings, a team of state legislators who have pledged to work with the PSC for CUNY funding, and a joint advocacy day with CUNY and SUNY students that brought 700 students to the capital.

"Members sometimes tell me that contacting Albany won't make a difference," said PSC Legislative Representative Mike Fabricant. "We have seen that that's not true, at least

All members can wear 'red for ed'.

with the new majority in the Senate and progressive legislators strongly backed by the PSC. If you are experiencing the effects of the chronic underfunding of CUNY – and there is no one who isn't – you should make your voice heard."

On Thursday, March 12, everyone in the union is being asked to participate in at least one action to demand an end to the fiscal starvation of CUNY. Members who cannot join the protest actions on their campuses can post to social media, call their state senator make themselves heard in other ways. And everyone is being asked to wear "red for ed" and sport the color adopted by teachers mobilizing for education.

Hundreds of faculty and staff have completed the sentence the union

suggested (see "15-minute activist" on page 12) on what the budget emergency means for them.

"I read every one that comes in," said Bowen. "It's impossible to do that without becoming filled with rage. Every single one of us is being hurt by Albany's planned impoverishment of CUNY. Everyone has something to say to Albany and City Hall on March 12."

REACHING OUT

"We spoke to senators who are representatives of the city, so most of them knew about CUNY. What we had to do was make a case for why we need more money, said Scott Sheidlower, the PSC chapter chair at York College, who went on the lobbying trip at the beginning of February. "The union is up there

THE BUDGET EMERGENCY

at CUNY is sabotaging our students, our work, our health, our future. It's time we transferred the crisis to Albany by taking action together. Everyone can do something on March 12 to stop the starvation of CUNY. **Tell us here that you will wear #redford** and take at least one action on Thursday, March 12 to demand an end to the budget crisis. You can join a protest on your campus, post a #redford selfie, call or email your legislators, or mobilize for a rally outside a legislator's district office. The state budget will be decided by April 1. This is the time to act!

making the case for CUNY. CUNY needs the money for the lights, to pay for the contract, to pay for student resources."

Sheidlower said that the lawmakers he met "were very receptive and, of course, one of the arguments I made is that CUNY helps people become part of the community, become part of larger society."

"We don't want lawmakers to have a moment when they're considering the budget and they don't see us," said PSC First Vice President

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Assemblymember Jo Anne Simon (left) spoke with students at a town hall event at City Tech.



Students visited lawmakers at their Albany offices in February.

At KCC, charges of anti-trans bias

By ARI PAUL

In June 2018, referring to federal law, CUNY General Counsel Loretta Martinez said in a memo to CUNY college presidents: “As with students, the law affords employees the right to use a preferred name and gender on all records, regardless of the individual’s legal name or sex assigned at birth, except in circumstances where legal name may be required on official records by law.”

Red Washburn a gender studies scholar at Kingsborough Community College has filed a federal lawsuit against the KCC administration on grounds that the administration has purposefully and maliciously discriminated against them due to their non-binary gender identity.

Washburn is an associate professor of English and Women’s and Gender Studies (WGS) at the south Brooklyn campus, as well as the director of Women’s and Gender Studies. Their scholarship spans queer theory, literature, anti-colonialism and Irish republicanism. The allegations in the lawsuit depict not a few one-off instances of misgendering, forgetfulness or bias, but rather alleges a sustained, systematic pattern of abuse by management of a worker based on the worker being a gender non-binary person.

After receiving tenure at KCC in 2017, Washburn began the process of changing their first name to “Red” and using the pronouns “they,” “them” and “their” at work (Professor Washburn had previously used female pronouns “she” and “her”) in Spring 2018, Washburn asked that college email messages and other documents reflect the change. The following summer, Washburn had gender-affirming surgery and asked for accommodations, such as modified duties and limited teaching duties, while recovering from their invasive medical procedure.

TURNING SOUR

The lawsuit, filed with the US District Court in Brooklyn, alleges that the college then began to exhibit hostility toward Washburn. “Since coming out as transgender, Dr. Washburn has experienced discrimination and retaliation from Kingsborough Community College,” the lawsuit said. “Dr. Washburn has also been required to engage in extensive efforts to prepare, file and prosecute discrimination complaints that have detracted from their ability to conduct the [academic] work of the school and have increased their level of stress at a time when they are recuperating from top surgery, which has impeded their physical healing...[The administration] also continually engaged in misgendering Dr. Washburn, despite clear notice of Dr. Washburn’s proper name, title and gendered pronouns. This misgendering continued unapologetically to a degree that denotes intentional

Misgendering, retaliation at issue



Red Washburn, associate professor of English and director of Women's and Gender Studies, alleges that Kingsborough Community College administration repeatedly misgendered them after their transition.

misgendering, rather than innocent mistakes made by persons unfamiliar with issues of gender.”

In addition to naming the college and CUNY as defendants, the lawsuit names several Kingsborough administrators, including Provost Joanne Russell, Mickie Driscoll (executive director of human resources and the labor designee) and James Capozzi (director of public safety until last December). The complaint alleges that the provost insisted on using Washburn’s old first name, even after being informed that Washburn had a new name “based on gender identity.” The lawsuit also alleges that Capozzi attempted to interrogate Washburn in regard to previous activist organizing and continuously misgendered them in his communications, and that he insisted on questioning Washburn as they were recovering from gender-affirming surgery, an insistence that contributed to Washburn’s “psychological distress.”

GOT WORSE

Washburn alleges these events happened even as CUNY Central attempted to keep CUNY campuses in compliance with New York’s Gender Expression Non-Discrimination Act.

Things got worse for Washburn, the lawsuit alleges, and included retaliation against the program they head. “Washburn claims the school defunded the Women and Gender Studies department soon after Washburn came out as transgender,” the *New York Daily News* reported. “Washburn also alleges in the lawsuit that they were moved into a new office at the school that was no more than

a tiny storage closet, claiming the room did not even have space for a desk. In the fall of 2018, the day before classes started, Kingsborough College canceled Washburn’s Sexuality and Literature class, claiming the enrollment was too low, the lawsuit said.”

Washburn’s lawsuit denies that enrollment was low. In an interview with *Clarion*, Washburn explained that administrators began to treat them negatively after their gender transition. “My administrators treated me as a valued colleague before I came out,” Washburn said. “I was given the classes I wanted, reassigned time, office space and invited to many conferences, talks, opportunities for grants, etc. I was treated with intellectual respect before I came out, just as I have experienced at more than a half a dozen colleges where I have taught for almost 20 years, including recently at Vassar College and Brooklyn College.”

The resulting trauma has been intense, Washburn said. “The experiences I have had with transphobia since I came out after tenure have harmed me immensely,” they told *Clarion*. “Physically, I have had to have two revision surgeries, rather than one top surgery. I am still not fully healed. Psychologically, I have acute PTSD and an anxiety disorder from being treated inhumanely for many years now.”

The bright spot, Washburn said, was that colleagues and students have been supportive. “Many of my colleagues and students wrote letters of support, signed petitions,

participated in roundtables, asked for meetings and supported me in my defense of the program,” they said. “The administration responded by calling people into [meetings] for investigations. I continued the campaign, getting support from across CUNY and the nation.”

ADMIN’S SIDE

The administration tells a different story about Washburn’s charge that budget cuts to WGS were personal retaliation against them. In a letter from KCC President Claudia Schrader and Provost Joanne Russell to the college community in the

‘Fall semester, the administration stated that any changes to the WGS program were a result of low enrollment (an average of 7.6 students in the concentration in the last five years, according to the college). The letter said, “The changes were made in the interests in equitable resource distribution.... As of Fall 2018, WGS faculty directors have the same level of resources for research, program development and work with students as all other directors of concentrations within the Liberal Arts Program.”

JUSTICE FOR ALL

At press time, the university had not filed a legal response to Washburn’s allegations. A spokesperson for CUNY declined to comment on the case, citing a policy of not commenting on ongoing litigation.

Jillian Weiss, Washburn’s attorney, told *Clarion* that there is some federal caselaw to support Washburn’s case, including a 2019 opinion ruling that discrimination against transgender people is a form of sex discrimination. “Professor Washburn seeks only equal treatment, not special treatment,” Weiss said. “We do not seek special justice, but equal justice under the law, as it is stated in the United States Constitution: ‘nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.’”

In addition to a monetary award, the lawsuit asks that Washburn be allowed to “transfer to another CUNY WGS, retaining their tenure and rank.”

But beyond that, Washburn is seeking a larger form of justice.

“I hope justice comes as a result this lawsuit,” Washburn told *Clarion*. “I want justice not just for myself, but also for all trans faculty and students in CUNY.”

‘They’: what’s in a pronoun?

By ARI PAUL

Conservatives like Canadian author and academic Jordan Peterson have thrown scorn on the mainstream emergence of “they” as a gender-neutral pronoun for gender non-binary people. And scholars have grappled with this seemingly new parlance.

Singular “they” is winning the day, as Merriam-Webster added it to dictionary in September 2019. “We will note that ‘they’ has been in consistent use as a singular pronoun since the late 1300s; that the development of singular ‘they’ mirrors the development of the singular ‘you’ from the plural ‘you,’ yet we don’t complain that singular ‘you’ is ungrammatical; and that regardless of what detractors say, nearly everyone uses the singular ‘they’ in casual conversation and often in formal writing,” the dictionary said on its website.

The *New York Times* cited how linguist Dennis Baron “points out that singular ‘they’ is older than singular ‘you.’ Only in the 1600s did singular ‘you’ start pushing out ‘thou’ and ‘thee.’”

Merriam-Webster continued, “There have always been people who didn’t conform to an expected gender expression, or who seemed to be neither male nor female. But we’ve struggled to find the right language to describe these people – and in particular, the right pronouns. In the 17th century, English laws concerning inheritance sometimes referred to people who didn’t fit a gender binary using the pronoun ‘it,’ which, while dehumanizing, was conceived of as being the most grammatically fit answer to gendered pronouns around then. Adopting the already-singular ‘they’ is vastly preferable.”

Adjunct paid office hours

By SHOMIAL AHMAD

Meeting one-on-one with students is work that many adjunct instructors have done for years at CUNY, often without pay. Starting this semester, teaching adjuncts are being compensated for this time.

Adjuncts who teach three or more classroom contact hours at a single college are now responsible for and paid for 15 additional office hours per semester. The number of paid office hours is doubled for those teaching six classroom contact hours at one college, and tripled for those teaching nine.

The addition of paid office hours represents one of the biggest contractual gains the PSC has made, as it boosts teaching adjunct pay significantly and provides tens of thousands of students with access to scheduled time with their instructors outside of class. In addition, the new provision recognizes the professionalism of adjuncts and takes a step toward further incorporating adjuncts into the academic life of their departments.

A WIN FOR STUDENTS

Chancellor Félix Matos Rodríguez celebrated the new paid office hours saying it “will restructure workloads to enable our faculty to devote more time to working individually with students, and to professional development and other activities that play a key role in our students’ success.”

As with many significant changes to the contract, implementation has raised several issues, but overall, says PSC President Barbara Bowen, “department chairs have been extraordinarily conscientious in making the hours work, and adjuncts have shown great flexibility and commitment to students in fulfilling them. As one department chair pointed out to me: ‘Adjuncts were doing this work without pay for years. There is no reason to think that they will be anything but responsible and conscientious now that they are being paid.’”

PSC Vice President for Part-Time Personnel Carly Smith said, “We need to make sure adjuncts aren’t being coerced into performing additional, uncompensated labor or forced to hold in-person office hours under inequitable, unreasonable conditions. We’re continuing to educate [department] chairs and adjuncts about the new provision.”

(Adjuncts who are experiencing problems with the new hours or who have questions about implementation should contact the PSC office and speak to an adjunct counselor.)

THE ROLLOUT

CUNY adjuncts who spoke to *Clarion* expressed happiness that they were getting paid for the work, but said colleges need to do a better job of facilitating useful office

A major contract provision for adjuncts



Art instructor Peter Dudek spoke with students during his office hour at Hunter College.

hours for students. In particular, more private spaces are needed for office hours to ensure confidentiality for students.

Genevieve LaForge, an adjunct lecturer in the philosophy department at John Jay College, has held hours in a shared adjunct office space on campus for years.

“Generally what happens at the beginning of every semester, our departmental administrator sends out an email asking for our syllabi and the office hours we’ll be holding,” LaForge said. “She’ll type up a chart and hang it on the department’s door. [The chart] will list the office hours and what classes we’re teaching and when students can contact us if they want.”

Students typically start visiting her in her office later in the semester, she said.

“If they’re proactive enough, they’ll at least come meet with you before the midterm. Usually, it’s after the midterm because they realize, ‘Oh, okay, I need some help,’” LaForge said.

A big change has gone into effect.

Under the Memorandum of Agreement, adjunct office hours are to be formalized as directed by the department chair. The union’s expectation is that departments will use the same method of publicizing part-time faculty office hours that they use for hours held by full-timers.

In the psychology department at Baruch College, the implementation of the new office hour provision “has been relatively seamless,” said Jennifer Mangels, the psychology department chair. Mangels said adjuncts in her department typically meet with students in the department’s assigned cubicles.

Noting that adjuncts can use up to three of their office hours for approved professional development, Mangels said. “While we always reviewed syllabi submitted by adjuncts for some mention of how students could contact them and whether they held office hours, we

now make sure that an office hour is listed explicitly on the syllabus, and we also post the office hours outside the department (which we do for full-time faculty as well).”

At Brooklyn College, the political science and sociology departments have long provided a shared office space for their adjuncts. “The department has individual cubicles for up to about 20 adjuncts, although we rarely have more than five or six adjuncts at any one time. Adjuncts can use that space for office hours, and some also use it as a personal work space,” said Naomi Braine, chair of the sociology department.

At times, adjuncts find that these shared spaces are a challenging environment.

SPACE NEEDS

“Some student conversations need to happen in a private space, as students often raise concerns – medical, financial, family, personal – that should be confidential,” said Susan Fountain, an adjunct professor in human relations at

the CUNY School of Professional Studies (SPS). “SPS has been pretty flexible about when and how we do office hours, but I hope that going forward, more spaces will be found that ensure the confidentiality that our students deserve.”

Peter Dudek, PSC adjunct liaison at Hunter College, echoed this concern.

“Many adjuncts do not have an office therefore they hold hours in their classroom. However, even when adjuncts do have an office it’s usually so small, and shared with multiple adjuncts, that it makes it difficult to discuss matters that are personal, political or simply sensitive to their students,” said Dudek, who is also an adjunct associate professor in the art and art history department at Hunter. “This is a problem.”

Dudek has always held office hours in his two decades of working at CUNY, even though he wasn’t paid for most of them. He does not have an office, but he holds an “open studio hour” for students who wish to attend and to seek his guidance.

“That hour can be used as an open studio hour for students to continue working on projects,” Dudek said. “Invariably in art classes there is always a need for more studio time, so this ‘office hour’ allows them to not be concerned about finishing within class time.”

For Trinity Martinez, an adjunct assistant professor of art, limiting the time she spends with students is a challenge she has encountered in her three semesters teaching in the art department at Brooklyn College.

“Last semester I officially held one office hour per week but since I get to campus a few hours before class and stay a while after class ends, and I had students constantly coming to me for help,” Martinez said. “A few students would stay for a full hour and I would have to tell them that other students needed my attention. Basically, it can become overwhelming when combined with lecture prep, grading, and teaching.”

Dire cuts at Queens averted

PSC had protested cuts

By ARI PAUL

In the Fall semester, as members at senior colleges were mobilizing against budget cuts at their campuses, the PSC chapter at Queens College was facing a reduction that seemed particularly dire. As *Clarion* reported, the English department was bracing for a cut of 800 seats out of a total of 1,200 seats allocated for introductory English classes for the Spring 2020 semester.

In satirical pamphlets, the PSC chapter at Queens asserted that English classes were going to be awarded to students in a lottery process where only the lucky ones could be assured access to the required courses they needed to graduate.

Meanwhile, English adjuncts were without classes to teach as a result, union activists said.

The good news is that this Spring semester, the cuts have been avoided.

“We cut some seats, about 150 or so, but we were able to do so without having to let go of any adjuncts who depended on our department for work, so that worked out okay,” said Karen Weingarten, the interim English department chair. “It was nowhere as dramatic as we anticipated.”

When the cuts were first announced, the PSC chapter at

Queens College confronted CUNY Chancellor Félix Matos Rodríguez – who until last year served as the president of Queens College – about the English department cuts in a campus Q&A session. At the session, David Gerwin, PSC chapter chair, said the cuts constituted a “red line” that the campus could not afford to cross.

“It was the one cut that most clearly demonstrated what would have happened to Queens,” Gerwin told *Clarion*, adding that such severe cuts would have redefined the college in a funda-

mental way. “At Queens College, you have a good chance of getting the classes you need to graduate. If they had cut 800 out of more than 1,000 seats in mid-level required English classes, that wouldn’t be true.”

According to Gerwin, the cuts would have made it nearly impossible for students to get into the classes they needed. “This showed how far down the road Queens was toward disaster,” he said.

The chapter fought major reductions.

The administration did not say whether union protests against the English department reductions were what prompted the college to avert the cuts.

While he expressed relief that the English department cuts were largely avoided, Gerwin added that members are still organizing against systemwide budget tightening.

Taking action for the state budget

Continued from page 3

Andrea Vásquez, who is coordinating the work of the flying squad. “We want them to always see PSC pressing for CUNY.”

The union is a part of a coalition demanding that, in light of the governor’s budget proposal, the state look to raise revenues for the state’s public services. The coalition’s motto is: tax the wealthy.

The call for such fundamental change has not gone unnoticed in the press, with various media reporting on union calls for new revenue to address the \$6 million budget gap the governor is citing to justify, as *Spectrum News* reported, “pushing more of the burden from ballooning Medicaid costs onto localities which teachers’ union claim could leave little money for schools and other priorities.”

ELECTION YEAR

PSC leaders noted that 2020 is an election year for state lawmakers. The assembly has shown more interest in the idea than the senate or the governor, and the revenue coalition that the PSC is a part of has proposed various ideas that could be included in the assembly one-house budget resolution.

PSC activists have assembled a team of legislative allies, including several representatives who just arrived in Albany last year.



PSC President Barbara Bowen addressed students and members before an Albany lobbying action in February.

Senator Jessica Ramos, chair of the Senate Labor Committee, said on Facebook, “There are 112 billionaires living in [New York] collectively worth over \$500 billion.... Taxing the ultra-wealthy must be an option if we want to keep our talented workforce!”

One shouldn’t be fooled into thinking hiking levies on the state’s wealthiest people is a radical, fringe idea that cannot gain traction. Polling conducted

by NYSUT found that the notion is popular.

Weeks of struggle for CUNY funding in Albany

“The survey ... found 92% of respondents support increasing revenue by applying a 2% state tax on a taxpayer’s wealth greater than \$1 billion, raising the state income tax rate on income above \$5 million per year and placing a new tax on luxury homes and apartments in New York that are worth more than \$5 million and are not a primary resi-

dence,” the *New York Daily News* reported. “The poll found that 64% of voters say implementing new taxes on the super-rich would have a positive impact on New York’s economy. Another 72% say they are more likely to vote for a candidate who favors passing new taxes on ultramillionaires.”

“Cuomo has made it his brand to limit the state budget to a 2% increase from the previous year, but we’re facing a \$6 billion budget hole, so the old model of refusing to

raise revenue can’t hold anymore,” said Susan Kang, an associate professor of political science at John Jay College. “He needs to put forth a budget that includes things like the expansion of the mansion tax, a financial transaction tax and upper brackets on city taxes.”

HURT BY THE CAP

The PSC’s testimony at a State Senate budget hearing in Manhattan argued that CUNY is triply hurt by the 2% spending cap. Students and unionists have staged several protests in support of more funding for public higher education during the Spring semester, and the union – along with student allies – have held town halls to address the chronic underfunding of CUNY at City Tech and Hunter College (another forum was scheduled to take place at Lehman College as this newspaper went to press).

PSC plans actions on several CUNY campuses on March 12 and 13. Members have been promoting the union’s agenda for more funding on social media during the budget negotiations. The union is pushing every PSC member to take action in support of increased funding for CUNY. Members can also send letters to elected officials via the PSC website at www.psc-cuny.org/StopStarvingCUNY.

REVENUE

Read my lips: Yes, new taxes

By JAMES A. PARROTT

When billionaire former New York City Mayor Mike Bloomberg proposes raising taxes on the wealthy and corporations, we know it must be well past time to do just that.

It’s certainly true, as Governor Andrew Cuomo maintains, that the cap on the federal deductibility of state and local taxes (the SALT deduction) was a politically motivated attack on blue states like New York and California. But we shouldn’t lose sight of the fact that the wealthiest and big businesses in New York benefited handsomely from gigantic 2017 federal tax cuts.

Let’s not forget that long before Trump was sworn in, Governor Cuomo had pushed through several tax cuts for New York’s wealthy, big banks and corporations. State tax cuts enacted between 2011 and 2016 reduced revenues by at least \$5 billion, and while some of that has gone to middle-class taxpayers, much has gone to the wealthy and big business.

In fact, several elements of the governor’s whole fiscal policy approach are problematic like the 2% state spending cap that has slashed funding for critical human services, sharply reduced support for CUNY and SUNY and constrained the ability of local governments to function all across the state. Adherence to his so-called “global Medicaid spending cap”

led budget officials to use various accounting maneuvers to obscure the growth in Medicaid spending. Instead of the \$6 billion Medicaid shortfall surprise this year, honest budgeting would have shown three or four years ago that real management efficiencies and more revenues were needed.

INCREASED MEDICAID COSTS

With the state expanding coverage under the Affordable Care Act and cutting its uninsured rate in half to 5.4%, you would expect to see some increased Medicaid costs. In New York City, 3.5 million residents rely on Medicaid – 6 million statewide – and with the aging of the population, costs are increasing for long-term and personal care services needed to keep people in their homes. Management improvements are needed to rein in skyrocketing personal care costs, but providing health care to hundreds of thousands more requires more revenue at some point.

The place to start in seeking additional state revenues should be to revisit ill-considered corporate tax cuts enacted in 2013 that heavily favored big banks and targeting those who cashed in bigtime from the 2017 Trump tax cuts. A recent Hart Research poll showed that nine out of 10 New York voters support raising taxes on

wealth over \$1 billion, incomes over \$5 million, and luxury homes and apartments owned by nonresidents.

No one wants to see their taxes rise, and recently elected state senators are understandably wary given that they’re facing voters again this fall when there’s no shortage of well-funded, anti-government apostles out there. Leadership means marshaling the evidence, and broad support in favor of sound public policy. Why shouldn’t New York’s corporate taxes be restored to where they were relative to the size of the state’s economy in 2013? That would raise \$2.5 billion. Why shouldn’t LLC filing fees on highly profitable hedge funds, private equity funds and real estate partnerships be increased to raise \$1 billion, a fraction of the windfall those entities received courtesy of the Trump tax cuts?

MONEY FOR SCHOOLS

The continued economic expansion means that state tax revenues are projected to rise by 5.2% a year over the next two years. That will help address the Medicaid funding shortfall, but there’s no escaping the fact that New York has been underinvesting in education – at all levels, public higher ed, K-12 and early childhood education. New York businesses benefit day in and day out

from a well-educated population and workforce, and they should help pay for it. That’s just smart, and fair, business.

In the last two recessions, New York has turned to the progressive income tax to help offset revenue shortfalls. We may need to do that again when the inevitable economic slowdown or decline occurs. We should keep that in mind as revenue options are explored this year.

BROAD SUPPORT

It’s heartening to see broad support around the state for the idea of appropriately taxing luxury New York City real estate owned by nonprimary residents who aren’t paying New York income taxes. As a member of the New York City Advisory Commission on Property Tax Reform, I know how critical such a tax is to making the numbers work on long-overdue property tax reform needed to rectify glaring inequities here in New York City. Property tax relief for thousands of moderate- and middle-income homeowners hangs in the balance. Manhattan luxury homes are, after all, part of New York City’s property tax base, not the state’s.

James A. Parrott, director of economic and fiscal policies at the Center for New York City Affairs at The New School, is also an adjunct professor in the Roosevelt House Public Policy Program at Hunter College.

It is time for the rich to pay more.

Taking back the White House

By CLARION STAFF

PSC delegates will vote this month on whether to accept the Executive Council's (EC) recommendation to endorse Senators Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren in the New York Democratic presidential primary on April 28. In the view of the union's Executive Council both Warren and Sanders stand out in terms of their progressive stances on taxation, student debt, free college and labor rights.

This is a big first for the PSC and its national affiliate, the American Federation of Teachers—locals making presidential endorsements for their own state's primaries. Members have debated who the union should support.

At press time, Warren had dropped out of the race, although she had won many of the hearts of PSC members.

Feel the Bern

We have a demand that our representatives recognize an economic system dominated by corporate capitalism that concentrates resources and undermines democratic governance.

Members have their say

Elizabeth Warren's vision is the management of the capitalist system as it stands. But management can always be undone.

Only Bernie Sanders offers transformative action in response to a crisis—a crisis of governance, a crisis of economy and a crisis of environment.

If the PSC endorses Warren with Sanders, then we demonstrate an absence of commitment to the movement Sanders represents.

Sarah Durand
Associate Professor, Biology
LaGuardia Community College

Gaining steam

I have been a fan of Warren for a long time, having used her Congressional testimony in 2005 on the "Overconsumption Myth" in my Sociology of Family class. I have followed her political career and thoroughly admire how thoughtful her evolution has been.

The casual invisibility and insidious sidelining of her as a serious candidate in much of the media has been infuriating. Things have picked up a

bit since the last two debates, and she is garnering the attention and support of academics, journalists, celebrities, as well as state-level elected officials. Consistently, she has demonstrated a capacity and a willingness to go after the wealth and greed of the corporate influences that have torn our democracy to shreds. Mike Bloomberg's is certainly not the first corporate head she has skewered.

Don't get me wrong. I have enormous respect for Bernie Sanders and all that he has done to pull the Democratic Party leftward. I salute his activism and his courage. But I just do not feel he speaks to the intersectional feminism that we so desperately need in the person to dethrone Donald Trump.

Robin Isserles
Professor, Sociology
Borough of Manhattan
Community College

Issues matter

As an educational union, we have important information to contribute to this debate. But I would also ask that when we talk about endorsing

Bernie or Warren or both of them, we not limit our reasoning to only education. We are teachers, but we also care about our students, our children, our neighbors and our friends. Our raises matter, but so do the cost of health care, and climate change, institutional racism and sexism, and the prison and military industrial complex. We don't want to encourage public cynicism about endorsements by presenting the impression that they are based only on narrow short-term interests, especially after what happened with the Culinary Workers Union in Nevada. So I would just ask that when we talk to members about an endorsement that we not limit our concerns and aspirations or our own knowledge and authority to only the ways that the bosses define our value.

Sigmund Shen
Associate Professor, English
LaGuardia Community College

Why Liz

Elizabeth Warren knows the issues that affect working—and middle-class people. I believe Warren when she says she wants to restore our government so that

big businesses do not have so much influence over politics and the economy. Warren has been skeptical of high finance since her time as a bankruptcy attorney because she's been in the trenches with real people fighting laws that skew toward the powerful. Warren proposed the original Consumer Financial Protection Bureau. She understands the predatory nature of our system and the debt crisis facing public servants, including many PSC members. I relate to her well-researched plans and experience as an activist for a better, fairer tax structure and government.

Her womanhood matters—despite the left's attempts to ignore it. Barack Obama's presidency did not make us a post-racial society, and we aren't post-feminist either. Warren is a truly progressive candidate with a list of accomplishments. Why shouldn't she receive more attention from those who are so apt to support women's advancement in theory?

I support the union's dual endorsement, because it is important that the PSC stand behind the progressive wing of the Democratic Party. This year presents an opportunity to see more of our values reflected in the Democratic Party's presidential nominee.

Heather James
Asst. Professor, Social Sciences,
Human Services and Criminal Justice
Borough of Manhattan
Community College

Rise up and be counted: the 2020 Census

By SHOMIAL AHMAD

The New York City labor movement knows that numbers matter, and the 2020 Census is a once-in-a-decade chance to get as close to an accurate count of the population as possible. Data from the census helps draw congressional and state district lines, determines a state's number of congressional representatives and helps determine allocation of hundreds of billions of dollars of federal funding for school lunch programs, highway construction, fire departments, Medicaid and more.

UNIONS IMPACTED

"Every single one of our industries [where we organize] is impacted by the numbers that are the final outcome of the census," said Lucia Gomez, political director of the New York City Central Labor Council (NYCCLC), the regional labor federation of which the PSC is a member. For more than a year, the council through its Labor Counts! initiative has been coordinating efforts with its member unions to mobilize for the census. "Everything about the census is about power; it is about bringing resources into our neighborhoods. If people don't fill it out, we jump-start a decade on the wrong foot."

Beginning March 12, people living in the United States can re-

Labor and the census

spond to the census by phone, mail or online at my2020census.gov. The census asks basic questions, including for a count of everyone living in each household, as well as the name, gender, race, and ethnicity of each and whether an individual owns their home, rents or has some other arrangement for their place of residence. There is no citizenship question on the 2020 Census.

Unions in the NYCCLC that are part of Labor Counts! have been communicating with their members about the importance of the 2020 Census. At their borough-wide meetings, locals in AFSCME DC 37 have been training organizers on how to communicate to members the importance of participating in the census. The United Federation of Teachers has trained the union's district representatives on how to engage neighborhood residents where their schools are located. Other unions have sent mailings, newsletters and organized union field staff around the issue.

PSC EFFORTS

The PSC has hosted trainings for census volunteers. PSC Treasurer Sharon Persinger, who has been active in the Labor Counts! coalition, said it is important for members to

be informed, especially because census numbers help determine funding for so many education programs, including the allocation of Pell Grants.

"PSC members are concerned about the quality of education generally in the city because it impacts how students are prepared when they get to CUNY," Persinger said. "We need to be out there supporting getting a complete count. [We should tell] our students that their families should fill out the form and fill it out fully and make sure everybody is included."

RESOURCES

Persinger, who is also a professor in the math and computer science department at Bronx Community College, wants members to know there are good teaching resources on the census website at census.gov/schools, and that students, especially ones who speak multiple languages, can apply for well-paid, temporary part-time work with the census at 2020census.gov/en/jobs.html.

Gomez stresses the importance of the CUNY community involvement in the effort because there are CUNY campuses citywide, CUNY colleges are focal points in many densely populated and diverse neighborhoods.



"For me it's a no brainer that every organization, every institution [in the city should] be engaged in something as basic as the census," said Gomez. "It helps our communities to know that these institu-

tions are part of the process, so they can trust it."

To get involved with Labor Counts!, call the New York City Central Labor Council office at (212) 604-9552.

PSC's political director retires

By SHOMIAL AHMAD

Throughout her four-decade career, Kate Pfordresher, PSC director of research and public policy, developed and advocated for structural change in New York City. For Pfordresher, who grew up in suburban Illinois and Ohio, and graduated from Smith College with a studio art degree, her career has been a path motivated by improving material conditions for workers – at CUNY and beyond. Pfordresher said farewell to her CUNY post at the end of February.

“Kate has been one of the very precious resources of the PSC. Her skill sets made a significant difference in the development of precise, persuasive arguments which advanced the interests of PSC members and students,” said PSC Legislative Chair Mike Fabricant, who worked closely with Pfordresher on state and city political work. “Perhaps most important, Kate’s commitment to the work of the PSC inspired others to do more, invest more in assuring a quality and accessible education for students.”

BUILDING POWER

For 12 years at the PSC, Pfordresher built the union’s research and public policy department with the union’s elected leadership. Because the state and the city fund CUNY colleges, the public policy department’s mission is manifold, including legislative and policy work, lobbying, budget analysis of the state, city and CUNY budgets and developing a political program for the union. The department also supports the union’s Legislation Committee, which has the responsibility under the PSC constitution to advise union leadership on electoral endorsements, political action and legislation affecting its membership.

Decades of experience in politics and labor



Kate Pfordresher, the outgoing PSC political director, outside New York City Hall in January.

During the budget season, the department helps draft lobbying materials and organizes lobby days where CUNY faculty, staff and students meet with scores of state and city lawmakers. And during electoral season, the Legislative Committee vets, interviews and recommends candidates for endorsement. This political groundwork helps the union advocate and push for policy that meets the needs of CUNY, its faculty, staff and students.

“Demands and movements are extremely important, but policy matters,” Pfordresher told *Clarion*. “How governments actually imple-

ment the structures for providing and doing the work and setting regulations really does matter.”

Pfordresher fell into her work with “twists and turns” and no clear idea of a destination. But a motivating factor through it all was a drive to create social and economic change.

MATERIAL NEEDS

After graduating college, she worked as a welfare rights paralegal, and she went on to research and develop policy in health care, labor rights and public higher education. Policy change meant concrete wins: getting a park in a local neighborhood, securing drivers licenses for

the undocumented and passing the New York State DREAM Act.

For more than a decade, she worked for AFSCME District Council 37 and one of its locals as a researcher and as a grievance representative. She cut her teeth with the labor movement while working at the Graduate Center’s American Social History Project (ASHP) in its formative years, where she created film and slideshows about labor history and did administrative tasks.

She went to South Africa in the early 1980s with other ASHP staff, and that trip shaped her politically. “For me, the anti-apartheid movement – especially the emerging black worker union movement – was a turning point and formed my views of democratic unionism, political change and gave me my first opportunity to work with New York City unions,” Pfordresher said.

LOBBYING

Early on in her career at the PSC, Pfordresher helped establish a joint faculty, staff and student lobby day, an event that has grown throughout the years. Intimate meetings between union members and lawmakers help those lawmakers understand the common interests of CUNY faculty, staff and students, and the day-to-day struggles of CUNY’s working-class students, she said. In 2018, PSC members, under the Legislative Committee’s direction, aided in the successful effort to flip the New York State Senate to Democratic Party control. PSC members made thousands of phone calls and canvassed door-to-door in key legislative districts.

Justyna Jagielnicka, a mental health counselor in the Student Life/College Discovery Program

at Borough of Manhattan Community College, made more than 1,000 phone calls for the campaign. Jagielnicka learned from Pfordresher’s confidence, assertiveness and knowledge of the political landscape. “Her actions really inspired me, especially when phone banking during late hours,” she said. “I will miss Kate dearly.”

DEMOCRATIC CONTROL

Securing a Democratic majority in the State Senate means that key progressive bills that often died in the Senate now have a real chance of going to the governor’s desk to be signed. In its first month, the Democratic-controlled NYS Legislature passed the New York State DREAM Act, which freed up state financial aid for undocumented students if they attended high school in the state.

Pfordresher says the union, despite its size, has political clout, because many of PSC’s members are registered to vote and do vote in national, state and local elections. But she would like more PSC members to see the union as the place to do their political work in order to “reach the union’s full power.”

Lorraine Cohen, PSC vice president for community colleges, has worked with Pfordresher and admires her calm, caring and generous approach to her work.

She helped build PSC's power.

“She has been indispensable to the legislative work of the union,” Cohen said. “She has organized Albany visits with political leaders and local visits to the offices of city and state leaders. She has done important research on the budget and recruited speakers to appear at City Council hearings. She has put together talking points and other materials that inform activists when they visit the offices of political leaders.”

Newly retired, Pfordresher plans to remain politically active, especially during this significant election year. But she also plans to take some time off for herself and her family. She’ll spend more time with her husband, James Moore, a PSC member and an associate professor in the anthropology department at Queens College, and taking care of her almost-1-year-old granddaughter, who lives in Brooklyn. Another thing that Pfordresher always makes time for, even when she had a hectic schedule at the PSC, is singing in her community chorale group, Brooklyn Conservatory Chorale. On March 15, they will perform Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony.

“It’s a model of solidarity to be in a group of 50, 60, 100 people making music and being in sync to make it beautiful.”

She found that same solidarity at the PSC where she “put everything [she] knew into use and [was] challenged to grow,” as she worked in concert with PSC leaders members and staff.

It's time to Reed between the lines



University of Pennsylvania Political Scientist Adolph Reed Jr., spoke on the current state of American politics during a recent PSC retiree chapter meeting.

On campus and in the streets

By SHOMIAL AHMAD

With nearly 30,000 members spanning more than 25 CUNY campuses and work sites across the city's five boroughs, PSC's seven-person organizing staff has a lot of territory to cover – and they are essential to the work of a union like the PSC that locates its power in the collective force of its members.

“When we took office, the PSC didn't have a single organizer on staff,” said PSC President Barbara Bowen. “We changed that immediately, because increasing the union's political leverage requires organizing thousands of members to act together. Now the union has an exceptionally talented organizing staff, some with PhDs and all of whom have significant experience in the labor movement or social justice organizing.”

DOING IT ALL

Organizers are the union staff whom members often see on campus – meeting with newly hired faculty and staff, identifying members' issues and training PSC members to have workplace conversations with their coworkers. They carry signs and AV equipment at protests, set up chapter meetings, conduct one-on-one member meetings and hunker down in the PSC office managing spreadsheets and other materials.

“One of the big challenges we face as a union is strengthening our department rep[resentative] structure,” said Deirdre Brill, the PSC organizing director, who has worked at the union for more than a decade and has led the department since the summer of 2012. “Our work, which aids the PSC's ability to grow and sustain membership levels in the face of extreme and growing casualization of academia, will determine our strength as a union.”

Brill is no stranger to labor or the academy. She has a PhD in history from the University of Pennsylvania and taught at Rutgers University for a year as a lecturer. Brill also worked on adjunct organizing campaigns prior to joining the PSC as part of the American Federation of Teachers Northeast Regional Organizing Project.

The Supreme Court decision *Janus v. AFSCME* forbids public-sector unions from collecting “agency shop” fees from non-members. As a result, every newly hired member of the bargaining unit – whom the PSC represents – must make an individual decision to join and pay dues to the PSC. The situation puts unions like the PSC in a constant state of organizing newly hired faculty and staff, training existing members in outreach to new employees and urging non-members to sign union cards.

PSC field staff talk about organizing



Brian Graf of the PSC organizing staff led members in chants during a demonstration at Hostos Community College in the Bronx last summer.

The mission of the organizing department remains constant: to build “collective power” and recognize “the fundamental importance of collective action in confronting unaccountable institutional power,” according to the department's mission statement. At CUNY, this means organizing on multiple fronts that include pressuring for a good contract, pushing for more CUNY funding on health and safety issues, timely payment for adjuncts and a host of other contract enforcement issues.

“One of the major challenges right now is all of the health and safety issues our members are confronting. There are buildings undergoing major construction, leaky ceilings and mold and extremely cold or hot offices. We're trying to deal with those in an environment where regulations are often incomplete or lax and allow CUNY to hide behind the fact that they are ‘complying with the law,’” said Brian Graf, a PSC organizing coordinator who also works with the PSC Health and Safety Watchdogs.

ADDRESSING SAFETY

In the past few years, organizers have addressed health and safety problems at CUNY, including a situation where faculty were teaching in makeshift laboratories and constantly suffering problems from dust and debris due to ongoing construction at Baruch College's 17 Lexington Avenue building. In another situation, hundreds of classes needed to be relocated at the beginning of the semester because of a series of pipe bursts at Bronx Community College. Graf said that it is encouraging to see more and more union members realize that they

should not accept these standard working conditions.

“It's also encouraging that more and more rank-and-file members are realizing they need to stand up for themselves and become active on these issues,” Graf said.

While talking to members at Queens College, Sam Rasiotis found a potential contract violation: an adjunct who attended a mandatory workplace violence training was not paid for the time. Rasiotis ended up working with PSC's contract enforcement department to file a class action grievance.

“I emailed all the adjuncts at Queens College asking, ‘Have you been invited to this? Have you not been paid?’ A bunch wrote me back, and we went through and figured out who qualified and who didn't,” Rasiotis said.

In the end, the union won and the qualified adjuncts were paid. While the win may seem small – around

\$60 per adjunct – it meant something to members to see the results of their collective action. The successful grievance also helped to support contract negotiations leading to fully paid “professional hours” for teaching adjuncts.

Because CUNY faculty and staff are politically active in many causes and not just the union, one challenge is engaging members to be active in the PSC.

MAKING THE UNION VISIBLE

“We have to work really hard to make the union the place where they practice their politics,” said Sam Lewis, an organizer who previously worked at New York Communities for Change. “I think it's about the union being really visible and active on campus.”

Eric Paul, an organizing coordinator who has a PhD in history and who has taught as a faculty member and worked as a community organizer

in an immigrant rights organization prior to coming to the PSC, said, “It is always a challenge to get people to take that first step of talking with coworkers and taking collective action, due to apathy, fear, or fatalism, but many members do. It starts at a chapter meeting, in a hallway conversation or an office visit.”

CONNECTING ONE-ON-ONE

For Jorge Guzman, an organizer who started off as a rank-and-file nursing home worker, a key aspect of organizing is connecting with workers individually.

“When I was in healthcare organizing, I had to do a lot of one-on-ones and go to hospitals and sit in cafeterias and just talk to people,” said Guzman, who has more than seven years' organizing experience working with nursing home workers, maintenance staff and custodians. He said an organizer has to hear and understand workers' issues, said Guzman.

“You might not think that it's a big issue, but if it affects them a lot, it's a big issue for them. I've learned that there are no small issues.”

One of the challenges in organizing is bringing together people who have different points of view, people who do not necessarily agree with you, said Janet Kwon, a PSC organizer who has worked at a workers' center in Koreatown in Los Angeles and at the New York Taxi Workers Alliance. Kwon, who is the newest organizer on PSC staff, said, “It's amazing that there's such high membership. People should take ownership of the fact that CUNY relies on their labor. They actually do have a lot of power, and by mobilizing and acting collectively, that's how they are going to win more.”

If you have a workplace concern, contact the PSC organizer assigned to your campus or work site. Organizing staff contact information is found at the bottom of the webpage psc-cuny.org/about-us/staff.

PSC members at St. Pat's for All



PSC members marched in the St. Pat's for All Parade in Queens on March 1. The parade serves as an alternative to New York City's traditional St. Patrick's Day parade, which has been historically hostile toward LGBTQ people.

Five Questions for Marguerite María Rivas

By CLARION STAFF

It goes by many names. The Forgotten Borough. Shaolin. Staten Island.

Last summer, lifelong Staten Island resident Marguerite María Rivas, an associate professor of English at the Borough of Manhattan Community College, was named Staten Island's Poet Laureate by Borough President James Oddo. In her four-year term, she will represent Staten Island at literary events and promote poetry for young people in the borough.

She is the first person to officially hold the title.

NATURAL CHOICE

She was a natural choice for the job. A graduate of the College of Staten Island, Rivas has often said her poetry has been inspired by the working people and the natural beauty of the borough (she is quick to point out that Staten Island is one of the most ecologically varied of any NYC borough).

The borough president's office said of the laureate, "Her poetry has been widely published in journals, anthologies and in a best-selling college textbook. She is also the author of two full-length collections of poems. In her book, *Tell No One: Poems of Witness*, her poems reflect the kinship and the resiliency of Staten Islanders in the aftermath of September 11. A poem from this collection, 'Witness,' is included in the National September 11 Museum's online collection, along with two others."

Rivas hopes that she can bring attention to "Staten Island authors and poets who have been forgotten, specifically women who have paved the way for modern poetry," the *Staten Island Advance* reported.

The poetic voice of Staten Island



Marguerite María Rivas says her home borough has inspired her poetry.

Rivas spoke to *Clarion* for our ongoing "five questions" series.

You've been the Staten Island Poet Laureate for a few months now. How has your new title helped you promote poetry in the borough?

I did a reading and an interview for two Brooklyn Book Festival Bookend events on Staten Island and will be reading at an interborough series, NYC Voices, representing Staten Island. I have worked with Staten Island nonprofits, including the National Lighthouse Museum and the Staten Island Museum, on

programs highlighting their collections. For the former, I wrote my first occasional poem as Staten Island Poet Laureate, a poem about famed lighthouse keeper Kate Walker. For the Staten Island Museum, I'll be doing an interactive public poetry program, which dovetails with a major exhibit celebrating the centenary of women's suffrage. For National Poetry Month, I will

also be working on an initiative to prompt students in grades 6, 7, and 8 to write poems about their Staten Island communities. I am also planning projects marrying poetry and

other art forms in public venues and will be working with branch libraries on Staten Island to promote literacy through poetry.

Much of your writing has been inspired by your life on Staten Island. What makes the borough unique as a literary inspiration?

I feel a kinship with Staten Islanders that is tied to our geography and to our history. Staten Island has both natural and urban areas and is beautiful in its human and natural diversity. One of my areas of scholarly interest is recovering women's literary production, which has led me to do historical research leading to the recovery of Staten Island's literary history. Staten Island has long been home to artists and writers who have found inspiration here, from Henry David Thoreau to the Wu-Tang Clan.

We live in a time of changing media, where the internet looms large and there are fewer bookstores to buy poetry or host readings. Is it harder or easier for young people to get access to poetry these days?

Younger people have found ways to create community around poetry, especially spoken word poetry. They are creating zines and publishing magazines and chapbooks. It is an exciting time for poetry and poetry lovers. Staten Islanders have found creative places to bring poetry to Staten Islanders of all ages – community centers, a book café, a clothing store, to name a few.

One of your books focuses on Staten Islanders' resiliency after 9/11. Two decades later, how does that event affect the population still?

Staten Islanders are still living 9/11 and dying from it. Every year there is a solemn ceremony at

Postcards, our 9/11 memorial, honoring 275 Staten Islanders killed that day. There is now an additional memorial at the site, marble panels inscribed with the names of first responders who have died from 9/11-related illnesses since. At last year's ceremony 10 new names were read. There are 83 names on those memorial panels, women and men who worked in the aftermath of the attack, either in the recovery or cleanup processes. There are many more still suffering from the effects of that day and its aftermath. For many Staten Islanders, the specter of 9/11 still looms large.

You are a College of Staten Island graduate and you teach at BMCC. Have you ever thought about writing a poem about the need to invest in urban higher education?

Although I haven't thought about writing poetry that speaks directly to the need to invest in urban higher education, my poems are inhabited by people who have been served by it, who continue studies despite challenges. Hopefully, my poetry illuminates struggles faced by those who have been single-parent students, have worked three jobs while going to school, have survived domestic abuse, have lived with housing insecurity, but have prevailed.

In many ways, their stories are mine.

Bement Avenue Nocturne

By MARGUERITE MARÍA RIVAS

Daughters, when you lie awake
wishing for sleep,

do you hear the scuff of the wash
bucket,

slap of mop, drip of gray water

and know that when she scrubs the
kitchen floor

your mother sees your future, our
futures

beyond this worn linoleum?

She blesses herself with hands,
cracked and bleached,
kneels and murmurs a benediction
over your narrow beds,
then places her calloused palms
upon your backs
feels for an adagio of your breathing
rising with the pulsing of her hopeful
heart.

Note: Professor Rivas read this poem at the "CUNY Writers Against Austerity" reading at the Great Hall of Cooper Union in March of 2016.

\$500 PRIZE

2020 STUDENT LABOR JOURNALISM AWARD

The New York Metro Labor Communications Council is offering a \$500 prize for work by undergraduate and graduate students on the theme:

"The 2020 Elections and My Life/My Community"

THE COUNTRY IS about to elect a president in November; additional state and local elections will take place. How will this impact your life and/or the life of your community/communities? What issues are most important to you and are candidates talking about them? You are encouraged to write or make a short video or audio recording about the impact of these elections on you—as a student, a worker, and that of your family or community.

The prize is given to the student whose work touches our emotions and/or brings insight to this issue. The prize will be awarded for a written article of approximately 1,200 words, or for a video or audio report of 2-6 minutes in length. The topic is wide open for you to explore.

APPLICATION DEADLINE: May 4

Please include your name and the school you are attending. Students do not need to be journalism majors.

For more information or to email entries, write to metrolabornyc@gmail.org.

The Metro New York Labor Communications Council (Metro) includes union communications professionals who work for the city's public and private-sector unions and other organizations representing working people.



Librarian Nora Almeida, center, helped students do screen printing and button making at City Tech.

ACTIVISM

The art of the battle

By NORA ALMEIDA

In September 2019, I spent two weekends leading up to the Global Climate Strike in a small park in Brooklyn's Gowanus neighborhood making art with local families, student organizers, artists and environmental activists. I shared a table with members of Mobile Print Power, a multigenerational printmaking collective, who cocreate artwork for social justice campaigns. During the art-builds, I talked to hundreds of people about the climate movement and taught young people how to screen print – including students from the interdisciplinary course I teach at City Tech.

INSPIRED BY THE CITY

I walked home after each art-build around dusk, exhausted, jubilant and covered in paint. The day before the Climate Strike, I lugged my screen printing supplies to campus and tabled with NYPIRG organizers during student club hour. We talked to students about climate justice while making buttons and printing posters using an image designed by a City Tech communications design student.

On the day of the Climate Strike, as I marched through the streets of Manhat-



The IWW sabo-tabby

tan amidst a sea of strangers, I kept spotting familiar designs from the Gowanus art-builds. Later that afternoon, I ran into our campus NYPIRG representative and striking City Tech students wielding the posters we'd made together. It is hard to describe how it feels to spot a stranger on the

train or at a rally carrying a symbol from a movement you're part of. Symbols have the capacity to transform a space or make us feel safe. From Black Power fists to the "sabo-tabby" of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) to the egg-yolk-yellow anti-nuclear movement's Smiling Sun, symbols function as cultural signifiers, play a role in how a struggle is understood by the public and contribute to the production of political power.

THE ART OF LABOR

Some of the most creative social justice campaigns in history have come from labor and student movements. In the 1960s, Students for a Democratic Society members created now-iconic graphics for antiwar demonstrations and in support of the Black Power Movement. In May 1968, students occupied École des Beaux-Arts and formed Atelier Populaire (popular workshop) to create artwork in support of labor and student rights during the French wildcat strikes.

The IWW, for example, was the first activist group to use political stickers – members carried little red songbooks full of

labor anthems, and they engaged in political theater. In 1913, when striking Paterson silk factory workers, with support from IWW leaders, staged a 'strike pageant' at (the original) Madison Square Garden, more than 150,000 spectators attended the pageant, which included a reenacted picket-line, funeral, and "march" up Fifth Avenue. While the pageant didn't end the strike, it raised public awareness about dangerous conditions for textile workers and paved the way for future labor laws.

The process of making art is a generative and integral part of organizing. When I'm making art with students on campus, we talk about the issues most affecting them – like the CUNY funding crisis – in an informal, non-hierarchical environment. Last February, I made posters with students in advance of Higher Education Action Day and was surprised to discover how many students don't know about the "TAP gap," or why support services and library hours are cut, or why tuition keeps creeping up. It is important to share our experiences and collectively develop creative tactics (and symbols) we can use to advocate for funding.

A WAY TO PARTICIPATE

At CUNY, art-builds can provide a mode of political participation for members of our community – students and faculty of color, precarious workers, undocumented students and those with disabilities – who are either unable to engage in direct action campaigns or can only do so at great risk. In the case of the current funding crisis at CUNY, making art might also help us counteract some of the feelings of disempowerment, isolation and anxiety that prolonged austerity creates.

CUNY needs its own popular workshop to unite the labor struggle and the student struggle, and to energize anyone who does not feel connected to (or does not have the emotional energy for) modes of organizing that replicate institutional hierarchies and power dynamics.

If the way forward for CUNY is to create broad coalitions with other social justice organizations, to encourage broader participation and mobilization on our campuses and advance a public narrative that everyone has a right to a quality education, then we should make art together and embrace opportunities for non-hierarchical interaction. To gain political traction and build a movement, CUNY students and PSC activists need to get creative; we might surprise administrators, lawmakers and even ourselves.

Nora Almeida is an assistant professor in the library department at City Tech.



Protest fist

PSC should get creative with protests.



15-MINUTE ACTIVIST

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Letters to Albany

The state budget will be decided by April 1. For decades, CUNY has been underfunded. That means non-completive salaries, crumbling infrastructure from pipes bursting in major CUNY classroom buildings to broken faucets and toilets, and on a basic level, no toner, no supplies for everyday teaching in some academic departments. Let lawmakers know the very real and concrete ways that CUNY is severely underfunded. Complete the sentence, "To me, the budget emergency at CUNY means that _____." Go online to tinyurl.com/CUNY-budget-emergency and share your thoughts. Let New Yorkers and the people who fund CUNY know that CUNY's faculty, staff and students deserve more.

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NEWS

Clarion | March 2020

Higher ed: reproducing social inequality?

By CLARION STAFF

At the end of 2019, *Chronicle of Higher Education* senior reporter Karin Fischer wrote a lengthy report about how higher education in the United States maintains social stratification and remains largely unaffordable for large segments of the population. She asserts that American higher education is at a do-or-die moment: either we fix this problem now, or higher education "could be completely broken."

It is a complex historical tale Fischer weaves, and she sees some signs of hope, including CUNY's ASAP initiative, which despite being a popular and beneficial program, is sorely underfunded.

Fischer's piece, "The Barriers to Mobility: Why Higher Ed's Promise Remains Unfulfilled," appeared on December 31. She recently spoke to *Clarion* editor Ari Paul.

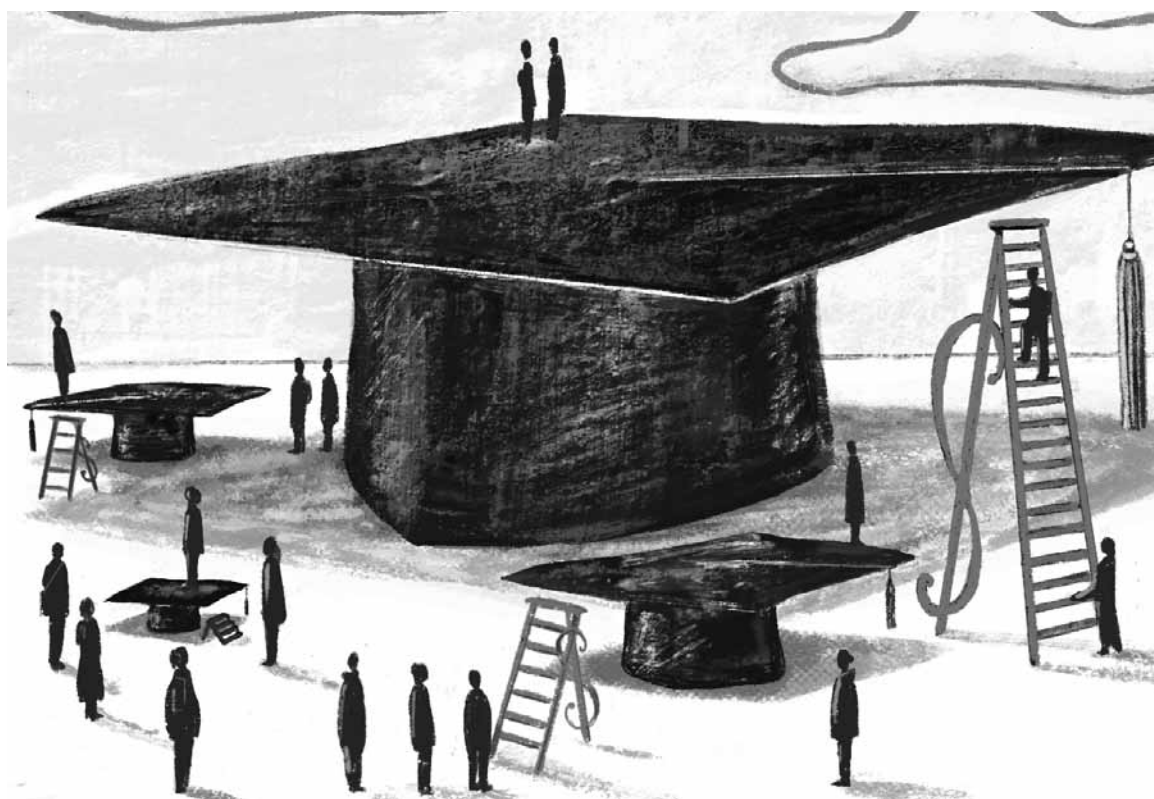
The main takeaway of your piece is that "Instead of acting as a leveler, higher education magnifies economic differences and reinforces them." Who's to blame for this? Colleges, government?

The answer is everyone. The federal government's spending on student aid programs hasn't kept pace with mounting costs. State and local governments have failed to invest in public colleges, leading to rising tuition. Universities can make curricular choices, like remedial education, that frequently disadvantage lower-income students. The K-12 system often doesn't adequately prepare students to succeed in college. You can even go back to community investments in infant and maternal health and early childhood education and see the long-term consequences for poor Americans. Because there are so many culprits, it's hard to see a single fix, be it governmental policy on an institutional shift, that is a game-changer.

What made you interested in this story and how did you start doing the research?

The genesis of this particular article – which is the first in a longer

A reporter digs into the divide



Jud Guiteau

a third of the costs of college. Congress increased funding, but not nearly enough. Many of the experts I spoke with said the federal government has to do more to ensure that colleges serve low-income students, such as conditioning participation in the financial-aid system on enrolling a minimum percentage of Pell Grant recipients. On the state level, we know that during the recession, increasing tuition priced too many low-income students out of college, and legislatures hold public college purse strings. Over the past couple of decades, a number of states have moved toward grant programs based on merit, not need – or the programs have been more focused on middle-income students than tailored to aid the neediest. States can incentivize colleges to enact curricular reforms that could help low-income, first-gen and minority students access college and earn a degree. And these are just some of the policy levers.

You cover higher education internationally. Can the United States learn lessons from overseas about how to make college more accessible?

Unfortunately, ensuring educational equity is a problem overseas, too. When you look at countries that have enacted some variation of free college – that buzzword of the presidential primaries! – the way they've typically been able to do it is by limiting the number of spaces at public universities. And that ends up creating some weird dynamics. In Brazil, for example, almost everyone who benefits from free college at top-ranked public universities got there because they went to private high schools and could afford the kind of preparation that helps them gain admission. Germany, too, has free college, but it's a very stratified system, where certain students get tracked into higher education and others don't. One of the particular challenges of the American higher-ed system is that we really elevate the idea of equity of opportunity, and that makes other countries' solutions hard to adapt.

series – was a collaboration between the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, but I've been writing about the socioeconomic divide in higher education and its consequences for more than a decade.

Over the years, I've written about everything from how geography can be destiny in educational attainment to community-wide efforts to attack educational inequities to the connection between education and poor health and early death. In terms of what drew me to the topic, I grew up in Newfoundland, Canada and Northern Maine – two poor regions where college-going is low – so I saw the difference education makes firsthand.

As far as research goes, it was a little like drinking from a firehose – there is a growing amount of data that illuminates education inequities, their causes and their consequences. The goal of this piece, as

the first in a series, was to look at the post-World War II promise of college as a ladder to the middle class and where that promise broke down. It's a lot to synthesize, and one of the biggest problems my editor and I faced was just how much research was out there.

You mention CUNY ASAP as offering "some lessons on what colleges can do to help low-income students succeed." Do you think it could be a model around the country?

The CUNY ASAP model has already been adopted in other college systems and states, so we know it can be done. But that's not to say it's easy. It's an approach that demands a lot of investment in time and money. Colleges have to offer dedicated advising, wraparound financial aid and be highly attuned to all the nonacademic hurdles that so often trip up students. I know CUNY spent about

\$16,000 more on each ASAP student than for his or her classmates. CUNY leaders, of course, argue that ASAP's strong outcomes justify the spending. Still, will colleges – and the people who fund them – be willing to invest in such intensive interventions? Given that falling taxpayer support for higher education is one of the factors in the growing educational divide, I'm not sure how optimistic to be about ASAP catching on widely.

Having reported this story, what policy fixes – either at the state or federal level – do you think are necessary to make higher education a "leveler"?

There's a need for multiple fixes. Take the national level: families, particularly those that are first generation, routinely get tripped up by the complexity of federal financial-aid forms. The value of the Pell Grant hasn't kept up with inflation or rising tuition, so it now barely covers