Clarion

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

19

MARCH 2012

Dave Sanders

PROBLEMS WITH PATHWAYS

As Spring semester got underway, faculty across CUNY found themselves grappling with requirements laid out by the central administration under the Pathways initiative, the system-wide overhaul of general education. Many faculty are concerned that the new requirements will diminish the education of their students, especially in areas such as foreign languages, history and the sciences. Above, Antonella Ansani, chair of QCC's Foreign Languages and Literatures Department, works with student Radika Grandison. The PSC is organizing a town hall meeting on Pathways on March 8 at 6:00 pm – see page 7 for details. **PAGES 6-7**

PSC Town Hall Meeting on Pathways

March 8 at 6:00

Details on page 7.

DIVERSITY

Union-backed study on CUNY and race

Preliminary findings from the union's two-year study on race and employment at CUNY were discussed at a December forum. A full report will be issued later this year. **PAGE 5**

SUPERMASSIVE

BMCC prof sheds light on black holes

Most galaxies have a supermassive black hole at their center. BMCC's Saavik Ford tells *Clarion* that the surrounding material is shaped like a doughnut. **PAGE 4**

PENSION HEIST

Corporate looters raiding retirement

Business elites have wrecked private-sector pension funds for years. Now they are demanding rollbacks in public sector pensions in New York and elsewhere. **PAGES 2, 10, 12**

Adjunct health care progress

But funding not yet secure

By PETER HOGNESS

In this year's executive budget proposal, Governor Andrew Cuomo has included support for CUNY's mandatory costs – including adjunct health coverage. PSC President Barbara Bowen called it "great news for the start of the new year" in a report to union delegates in January.

"This is a major step," and we got here because thousands of members demanded that CUNY to do the right thing," said Bowen. "The inclusion of this funding recognizes, at last, that health insurance for eligible adjuncts is a mandatory cost for the University. But funding is not yet secure. Now we must work to ensure that it remains in the final budget."

'UNFAIR BURDEN'

"An unfair burden is placed on the thousands of part-time faculty…who teach the majority of CUNY courses, usually without the support or compensation they deserve," Bowen testified at a February budget hearing. "Stable funding for the ongoing expense of health insurance for eligible adjuncts" is essential to CUNY's ability to provide education, she said – as basic as heat in the classrooms or electricity in a computer lab.

The union is also seeking additional operating funding for CUNY, to help repair the damage from past years of budget cuts (see page 3). But continued funding for mandatory costs, which has not been assured in the past, is seen as a crucial starting point.

Grassroots lobbying push continues this spring.

"I tell my students that the funding we get for CUNY, we only get because we go up and push these legislators," said Adam Tripp, an adjunct lecturer in economics at Bronx Community College. "It's not because someone just decides to be nice to us. We have to tell them about our struggles, and let them know we're looking for their support."

Tripp has signed up to join with other PSC members in a grassroots lobbying effort, meeting with legislators in the Capitol and in their home districts in New York City. "I first got involved with the union last spring," Tripp told *Clarion,* when he joined union and student delegations going to Albany. "It was a good experience, to be there in solidarity with each other and make sure that we were heard."

"The CUNY administration has made adjuncts indispensable to the running of the University, but has consistently failed to adequately compensate them or provide them with reasonable job security," said Alex Vitale, associate professor of sociology at Brooklyn College. "This is a big step forward, but numerous challenges remain."

"I know someone who's taught at CUNY as an adjunct for many years, who needs medication to stay alive," said Troy Anderson, an adjunct lecturer in English at LaGuardia. "It sounds dramatic, but health coverage is a serious issue – and in some cases it's literally a matter of life and death."

Continued health coverage for all faculty is important for CUNY students, Anderson added. "If we start losing our basic benefits, a lot of good teachers will leave CUNY for other work," he said, "especially since we don't get that much money in the first place."

SPEAKING OUT

Connie Gemson, an adjunct who has taught at LaGuardia for 15 years, urged PSC members to join the union's grassroots lobbying effort (see box, above). "This is our chance to make our priorities known," Gemson told *Clarion.*

Make our voices heard

Join other PSC members in meeting with State legislators this spring. We'll press for full support for CUNY's budget priorities, including adjunct health insurance, increased funding and more full-time positions, plus opposing attacks on public sector pensions. PSC delegations will travel to Albany on March 5-6, March 14, March 19-20, and May 21-22; on other dates union activists will meet with legislators in their district offices in NYC. For more information, contact Amanda Magalhaes (amagalhaes@pscmail.org, or call 212-354-1252).

Winter gathering

Gary Schoichet

Former chapter chair Jack Judd (center) speaks during the PSC Retirees Chapter's February meeting.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

WRITE TO: CLARION/PSC, 61 BROADWAY, 15TH FLOOR, NEW YORK, NY 10006.
E-MAIL: PHOGNESS@PSCMAIL.ORG. FAX: (212) 302-7815.

No wonder there was no discussion...

● In the scheme of arbitrary 80th Street initiatives, the following item in the recent Bylaws amendments, which passed without discussion by the Board of Trustees on November 28, may not appear monumental – but it is a flagrant abuse of power and the accumulation of privilege and wealth. In Item No. 5, Art. 6, the Board created a new title of Chancellor Emeritus, allowing for the appointment of five years for a departing chancellor.

CUNY has designated departing chancellors as "chancellor emeritus" in the past. But those titles, like faculty emeritus positions, were honorary and unpaid. What is new in this Bylaw change is that, for the first time, "chancellor emeritus" is defined as a title that is part of CUNY's Executive Compensation Plan. In other words, it will now be a salaried position.

This "golden parachute" is very inappropriate at a time when students are being asked to pay more and CUNY college campuses asked to accept austerity budgets. One can only imagine the salary for which Chancellor Goldstein may end up teaching a course or two per semester in Accounting 101 or Introduction to Statistics at Baruch. For such expenditures, several professors or multiple adjuncts could be appointed. Quite a clear statement to those in the 99%.

Peter Ranis
York College & The Graduate Center (emeritus)

Unions oppose pension cuts

"It's time to rebuild the middle class, not attack what's left of it," says the New York State AFL-CIO in a statewide radio ad that began running on February 8. The ad is part of a hard-hitting campaign against proposed legislation that would reduce pension benefits for future public workers, including those hired at CUNY. Targeting "firefighters, teachers, nurses, school bus drivers, police officers – the people we all depend on – is the wrong way to go."

PSC SAYS NIX TIER 6

The PSC strongly opposes the "call for a new, poorer pension tier," said PSC President Barbara Bowen in a January 17 statement. "Such a change, if enacted, would do little to address current revenue shortfalls."

Cutting benefits for new hires would also "sabotage CUNY's efforts to attract top-quality talent, by reducing benefits for new faculty," Bowen said. When then-Governor David Paterson won pension cuts two years ago with the creation of a new Tier 5, the PSC successfully resisted inclusion of CUNY employees.

Under New York's constitution, pension benefits for current employees and retirees cannot be cut, so the proposal from Gov. Andrew Cuomo would affect only those hired in the future.

A February 2 report by State Comptroller Thomas DiNapoli warned that Cuomo's pension plan would hurt faculty recruitment at New York's public universities. DiNapoli also concluded that the Tier 6 plan would cost the State between $7 million and $16 million to put into effect, and could take a year or more to implement.

"New York State and City pensions are fiscally stable and well-funded," said PSC Executive Director Deborah Bell. "And analysts expect State and City revenues to rebound long before these proposed changes would have a significant impact on spending."

'It's time to rebuild the middle class, not attack what's left of it.'

Cuomo's proposed Tier 6 would make new employees pay more in order to receive less, and would require them to work longer to qualify for benefits. (See *Clarion,* August 2011.)

At CUNY today, those who enroll in the Teachers' Retirement System (TRS) must have five years of total service credit to qualify for a pension. Under Cuomo's proposed Tier 6 legislation, this requirement would increase from 5 to 12 years of total service credit. (Paterson's Tier 5 increased this "vesting period" to 10 years, but CUNY was not affected.)

At present, CUNY employees who enroll in TRS are required to contribute 3% of their gross salary to TRS until they have 10 years of membership or credited service; after that time they are no longer required to contribute. Cuomo's Tier 6 legislation would double this employee contribution to 6%, and require future members of TRS at CUNY to continue these contributions indefinitely.

Cuomo's bill would cut pension benefits for future members of TRS and similar defined-benefit plans, reducing the pension multiplier from 2% to 1.67% for each year of credited service.

Peter Abbate, chair of the Assembly's Committee on Government Employees, calculated that an employee earning $50,000 a year after 30 years of service would get a defined-benefit pension of just $2,000 a month under the governor's proposal, according to the civil service weekly *The Chief.*

Cuomo's proposal also takes aim at future enrollees in TIAA-CREF and other defined-contribution plans in CUNY's Optional Retirement Program (ORP). For future ORP enrollees, it would slash employer contributions by half or more, from their current 8% to 10% rate down to 4%. Employee contributions, currently at 3%, would become optional for ORP participants, and be matched by the employer up to a 3% maximum.

POVERTY PLAN

That last provision would push many lower-paid members of CUNY's instructional staff to choose such a plan in order to skip the employee contribution, observers say, even if that meant inadequate income in retirement. Legislators raised similar concerns about a provision in Cuomo's plan requiring new public employees to choose between a 401(k) plan, with a smaller required contribution, and a traditional defined-benefit pension. Some warned that the 401(k) option could leave many lower-paid retirees on food stamps.

[For more on the attack on public pensions, see page 12. For what you can do, see box at top right.] **– PH**

Funding starts to stabilize

But past cuts, current tuition hikes, hurt CUNY

By PETER HOGNESS

After three years of steady cuts to CUNY, the executive budget proposed by Gov. Andrew Cuomo in January would largely maintain current levels of State support. Cuomo's budget would provide funding for CUNY's mandatory cost increases – including maintenance of adjunct health insurance funding.

"The faculty and staff who work at CUNY are heartened that the governor has begun to stabilize CUNY funding by following through on the promise of a real maintenance of effort," said PSC President Barbara Bowen at a February 1 budget hearing in Albany. "Now," she said, "the legislature and the governor must begin the work of restoring CUNY funding, eroded by years of inadequate budgets."

The start of this year's budget debates saw a political opening for possible increases in community college funding. Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver called for the State to increase support for the State's community colleges as part of an initiative to help the working poor. Silver put a spotlight on the issue, identifying community college funding as a key issue of economic opportunity.

While welcoming these developments, Bowen noted that past cutbacks have put CUNY into a very deep hole: "The State must make new investments to reverse the decline caused by the last three years of austerity budgets, which cut $300 million from CUNY, and 20 years of disinvestment before that," she said. And while the executive budget would "provide stability" for CUNY, she added, it still "relies too heavily on student tuition." Bowen testified at a joint hearing of the State Senate Finance Committee and the Assembly Ways and Means Committee, where she and First Vice President Steve London represented the PSC.

A STEP FOR ADJUNCT CARE

In past years, the PSC and its allies have too often had to battle against executive budget proposals for deep cuts in State support, forcing CUNY supporters to run hard just to stay in the same place. "This year," said London, "the governor provided funds for mandatory cost increases while keeping community college base aid funding and Tuition Assistance funding flat. Recent budgets have seen major decreases in the latter two."

Its funding for mandatory costs means that Cuomo's budget includes stable funding for the ongoing expense of health insurance for eligible adjuncts. "We ask for the legislature's support in ensuring that this funding remains part of the final enacted budget," Bowen said. This "will protect the health – and in some cases, the lives – of colleagues who do the majority of the teaching at CUNY." (See page 2 for more.)

Don Feldstein/UUP

PSC President Barbara Bowen (center) testified at an Albany budget hearing, urging reversal of a "trend of underinvestment" in CUNY & SUNY. At left, PSC First VP Steve London; at right, NYSUT Executive VP Andy Pallotta.

The importance of the community colleges for providing opportunity to the working poor was emphasized by Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver in his remarks before the Governor's State of the State speech when he said that Albany must do more. "With high unemployment and widespread underemployment, more and more of our citizens are looking to community colleges for a new path to a better life," Silver said in a speech on January 4. "By law, this State is obligated to fund up to 40% of the operational budgets of our community colleges, but only once in four decades has the State fully met that obligation. Now, when these learning centers are so important to our economy, to our companies and to our workers, we must increase our investment in them."

Proposal covers mandatory costs.

Silver was right on target, Bowen told legislators, on the growing role that community colleges are asked to play. In the first two years of the current economic crisis, CUNY's community colleges saw their enrollment grow by 12%. "Yet as the pressure on these colleges has grown," she said, "State support has shrunk." The State has cut community college base aid three times, since December 2009 – a 24% decline." This reversed progress on funding that had been made in the middle of the past decade, and contributed to moving community college funding in the wrong direction: a total 38% drop in State base aid for the community colleges since 1990-91.

RESTORE WHAT WAS LOST

To start repairing the damage, PSC leaders urged State legislators to restore community college base aid to its 2008-09 level, adjusted for inflation. London told *Clarion*, "that would set the rate per full-time-equivalent student (FTE) at $2,807, an increase of $685. For CUNY, this would add up to a total increase of $49.4 million in community college funds." He added, "for those who think this is a lot to request in a tight budget it is simply the amount that has been cut from State aid to community colleges over the past three years."

GOING HUNGRY TO LEARN

Senior college funding also needs to be restored, PSC representatives said. At CUNY's senior colleges, State support per FTE at the senior colleges is down by almost 20% since 2008, and by nearly 40% since 1990. "The only solution," Bowen argued, "is to reinvest public dollars in CUNY, and make a start in filling the hole left by more than 20 years of budget cuts."

This is not just a story of numbers, Bowen emphasized. As a consequence of these cuts, she said, students "wait in long lines to use the handful of computer terminals in the library with Internet access, as they have no access at home." Some are forced to wait a semester, or even a year, before they can get into a course without which they cannot graduate.

CUNY students may end up in a science lab course that enrolls 30 people – but only has 20 laboratory stations. "This means," Bowen explained, "that a third of the class 'completes' an experiment without access to scientific equipment," or gaining any hands-on experience. "As faculty and staff we do what we can to offset these results of austerity funding," Bowen said. "But we know this is no way to run a university."

Constant tuition increases cannot close this funding gap, Bowen told committee members. It would take thousands of dollars of increases in annual tuition to make up for decades of reductions in State support – and union leaders said this would raise tuition so high that CUNY's ability to provide affordable, accessible higher education would be destroyed.

"While the governor's proposed budget takes an important step toward stabilizing CUNY funding, it relies too heavily on increased tuition," London told *Clarion*. At CUNY's senior colleges, tuition has gone from 21% of funding in 1990 to 47% today. At the community colleges, it climbed from 22% to 42% in the same period. Yet thousands of CUNY students, including many of the very poor, are not covered by New York's Tuition Assistance Program (TAP).

"It is a cruel and persistent myth that financial aid protects all low-income students from...tuition hikes," Bowen said. "I can name several CUNY students who have told me they go to school hungry because they don't have the money for both college and food."

AN INVESTMENT FOR TOMORROW

Bowen thanked legislators for adding $9 million in funding for SEEK, College Discovery, and other opportunity programs when both houses came back for a special session in December, but she noted that without increased funding, CUNY plans to limit next September's incoming class in both programs. In a broader sense, she argued, all of CUNY is an opportunity program – and one of the most effective ways that State dollars can be spent.

"No investment offers New York more benefit – economically, culturally, intellectually – than investment in public higher education," Bowen concluded. It is time, she said, "to rethink higher education funding in New York State."

Move to close tax loopholes

A broad community-labor coalition wants New York State to plug corporate tax loopholes – gaps in the tax code and in enforcement that cost more than $1 billion a year.

Recovering this revenue "will help New York to create jobs...and prevent more devastating budget cuts to services and our safety net," said a statement from 99% New York, the coalition (including the PSC) backing the package of tax reforms.

Albany needs to "eliminate the absurd situation where bodegas and car repair shops are paying a higher rate than Goldman Sachs or Verizon," said Michael Kink, executive director of Strong Economy for All.

"While our students are paying more, the highest earners in this state continue to get tax breaks," said PSC President Barbara Bowen in Albany (see above). "Money is, in effect, going right from the pockets of our students who cannot afford lunch into the bank accounts of hedge-fund managers."

"New York State's corporate income taxes have become more and more like Swiss cheese as more and more tax breaks have been added," said Frank Mauro, executive director of the Fiscal Policy Institute. "The result of these developments is that general business corporations have gone from carrying 9.6% of New York State's tax load in the 1970s to 4.3% last year."

DODGING THE BILL

Real estate partnerships are dodging State and local taxes by underreporting and misreporting capital gains from real estate sales, costing New York State between $200 million and $700 million each year, warned 99% New York.

Another loophole targeted by the coalition is the current exemption for hedge fund profits under New York City's Unincorporated Business Tax. And hedge fund managers who make their money in New York but live elsewhere don't pay New York taxes, another kind of special treatment that the coalition aims to end.

Observers in the capital say these reforms have a shot at being passed, reflecting how Occupy Wall Street and related organizing have changed the political atmosphere. Occupy Albany's Colin Donnaruma told the *Times-Union* that the tax changes would "generate much-needed revenue for the 99%." **– PH**

Unlocking the mysteries of the universe

BMCC astronomer goes where light cannot

By JOHN TARLETON

When Katherine Saavik Ford was a young child, one of her favorite places was the Hayden Planetarium at the American Museum of Natural History. Today, she works there.

Ford, 33, is an associate professor of astronomy at BMCC, a member of CUNY's doctoral faculty in physics and a research associate in the department of astrophysics at the museum. Ford and her husband, fellow astronomer Barry McKernan, work together on the study of supermassive black holes.

Ford's interest in the stars was inspired by those regular trips to the planetarium from her home in Flushing, Queens, checking out models of the planets or gazing up at projections of the night sky on the planetarium's curved ceiling.

"It was a window onto the universe," she recalls. "I wanted to know more." Clarion *spoke with Ford about where that curiosity has led.*

Dave Sanders

Katherine Saavik Ford, faculty member at BMCC and the Graduate Center, stands in front of the Willamette Meteorite, a 15-ton "lump of iron and nickel" at the American Museum of Natural History, that spurred her interest in outer space as a young child. Today Ford works at the museum as a research associate in astrophysics.

What are some things you remember from your planetarium visits as a girl?

The planetarium had these scales that would allow you to see how much you would weigh if you were visiting another planet, like how much you'd weigh on Jupiter. The idea that you could be somewhere so far away that you could weigh differently, that amazed me.

And there was the Willamette Meteorite. It's the largest meteorite ever found in North America, a 15-ton lump of iron and nickel from the core of a protoplanet that shattered in the early days of the solar system. I remember touching it when I was five years old – my dad lifted me up when the guards weren't looking. The idea that you could touch it, that rocks could fall out of space and you could study them, was so cool.

So, enlighten us on the subject of black holes.

Black holes are collapsed stars whose gravitational pull is so strong that not even light can escape. They are formed at the end point of a massive star's life. Supermassive black holes, which probably result from the glomming together of many smaller black holes, are found in the center of almost all known galaxies. They contain the mass, of one million to ten billion suns all compressed into a single point not even one nanometer across.

Barry and I studied 245 supermassive black holes, and worked to analyze the light coming from material falling into the black hole. The generally accepted picture is that there'll be a very flat, thin disk of material directly feeding the black hole – very hot stuff. The hot stuff shines, just because it's hot.

Outside of that, the material gets cooler and is puffed up, forming a kind of doughnut around the hole. There are some serious theoretical problems with this picture of the structure and it's probably too simplistic. But the main point of our study is that no matter what you think the structure is, it has to be very, very consistent, because the ratio of energetic light (X-rays) to less energetic light (infrared) is very consistent. That means the ratio of hot to cool stuff should also be very consistent.

Where is this research headed?

Astronomers have traditionally studied and cataloged supermassive black holes on a case-by-case basis. We call it 'stamp collecting.' There wasn't enough cross talk between theory and observation. I think that's beginning to change.

In our own work, our last few papers have focused on comparing the planet-forming disks around young stars and the accretion disks around supermassive black holes, with the smaller black holes playing the role of planets. Some of the findings come from the model for planet-forming disks, which probably can be "imported" into our work almost wholesale. My former field of study was strongly related to planets and planet formation. You could say this synthesis is in part the result of our romantic and scientific marriage.

What are you working on now?

We are mostly focused on developing instruments that will be placed on the James Webb Space Telescope, which will be stationed 900,000 miles from the Earth starting in 2018. This telescope will make it possible to see faint objects next to very bright objects at great distances. It will be like being able to see a firefly next to a lighthouse. This will enable us to see structures near supermassive black holes and help us understand how these things feed.

Why is it important to study black holes?

It gives a better understanding of gravity, which will yield a better understanding of the physics of the universe. It could, for instance, lead to new developments in fields of energy. In 1850, we had no idea what the benefit from the theory of electricity would be.

And knowledge is valuable for its own sake. It's good to wonder, to be curious and able to explore. Everything we do doesn't have to be quantifiable down to the last penny. The value of studying English will someday help you write the memo the boss wants, but that's not what English is for.

Studying black holes expands our knowledge of gravity.

I don't know what's behind my interest to explore – and that is how I think of it – but I think if I'd been born in a different time and place (and probably of a different gender) I might have been a sailor or other type of explorer.

I did have aspirations to be an astronaut, and I'm not sure I'd turn them down today if someone offered me a slot. I'd have a hard time saying yes to a Mars mission, with a three-and-a-half-year-old kid. Two-and-a-half years' minimum duration, very high risk – talk about work-family problems! But maybe when he's off to college....

If, God forbid, I were to be diagnosed with a terminal illness tomorrow, I would strongly consider cashing out my retirement account to buy a ticket [for a space flight] on Virgin Galactic.

Does the fact that you and your husband are in the same department affect the balance between work and the rest of your life?

Barry and I like teaching in the same department a lot. It makes our workload a little lighter as we share materials and notes. We also have collaborative conversations on our subway rides home to Astoria at the end of the day. When we get off the subway, we switch to talking about dinner. Only later, after our son has been put to bed, do we talk about work again.

To relax I like to knit and do some gardening. We live in a ground floor rental, so I have a little patch out back. I also try to go to the gym regularly.

Where did you study, and when did you come to CUNY?

I started at BMCC when I was 28.

I enrolled at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute when I was 16, and was 20 when I graduated from RPI. I completed my PhD at Johns Hopkins at 25, and I was a Carnegie Fellow in Washington, DC, for a year and a half.

I like teaching at CUNY because you feel like you are helping people who really need it and aren't going to get it anywhere else. I can't count the number of students who have said at the end of a semester, "This wasn't the class I expected – it was so much better."

How and why did you first become active in the union?

I started my faculty life at a public university in South Carolina, where I was an affiliate professor while being curator at Ingram Planetarium. It was a right-to-work state and I felt constantly under pressure, in fear of the whims of administration. Requests for raises were routinely met with a flat "no," even for so-called star professors. Also, my mother had been a shop steward as a social worker at her county mental health clinic.

When I arrived at CUNY and found out that we had a union, I signed my card right away and started coming to meetings. I'm busy with many responsibilities, but if I don't step up, if I'm not active in the union, before too long we might not have one. I've worked under that system and I never want to have to do that again.

What has it been like as a female scientist entering a mostly male field?

I was often the only female in the classroom during my junior or senior year in college. When I was at RPI, there was an emeritus professor who would say women should not be allowed in laboratories because it would damage their ovaries.

When I started in the physics program at RPI, some of my classmates told me that I got in only because the school was trying to increase its diversity. I got a 4.0 that semester, which shut them up.

The biggest gender issue today is the effect of childbearing on women in STEM [Science, Technology, Engineering & Mathematics] fields. Maternity issues are a big part of the problem of why we have such a gender imbalance in the natural sciences.

There is going to have to be some sort of big structural change, because the time when women scientists are biologically best able to have kids is the time in their lives when their careers are least stable. The first year after I had my son was tough. Sometimes I would consult behind closed doors with female colleagues and get tips about how to get through it.

What's it like being a scholar at a place you visited so often as a girl?

There are times I stop and say, "Oh my God, I work here!"

On nights when I work late at the planetarium, I sometimes take our son on a walk down the spiral ramp, looking at the displays of the planets. Realizing I have this space to myself and with the infectious energy of a three-and-a-half-year-old beside me, it's like being a kid in a candy store.

Study of race & employment at CUNY

Report & discussion on preliminary findings

By PETER HOGNESS

A hundred people gathered at the end of Fall semester for an update on the PSC's ongoing study on how race, gender and ethnicity affect hiring, promotion, tenure and reclassification at CUNY. The December 9 forum at City Tech presented information on the project and some of its preliminary findings, followed by discussion led by the study's research team and members of the union's CUNY and Race Advisory Council.

"The large turnout and the comments at the forum demonstrated two things," said Jonathan Buchsbaum, a PSC Executive Council member and co-chair of the union's Anti-Racism Committee. "Members want to see the PSC take an active role in improving CUNY's record on race, and they are eager to hear the results of the union's study ."

The evening's first speaker was Frank Deale, a professor at the CUNY School of Law, who provided historical context. "To get some historical sense of the idea of affirmative action, you have to go back to the Civil War, to the Reconstruction Era," Deale told the audience. It's striking, he said, how contemporary arguments against affirmative action, in favor of what is said to be a "color-blind" alternative, are foreshadowed in those debates. Deale quoted a minority report in Congress that opposed creating a Freedman's Bureau to provide economic benefits to former slaves because there was no such agency for white people:

"A proposition to establish a bureau of Irishmen's affairs, a bureau of Dutchmen's affairs, or one for the affairs of those of Caucasian descent generally…would, in the opinion of your committee, be looked upon as the vagary of a diseased brain… Why the freedmen of African descent should become these marked objects of special legislation, to the detriment of the unfortunate whites, your committee fail[s] to comprehend…."

AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

"So even going back to the period immediately after the Civil War," remarked Deale, "you had this unwillingness to recognize that there were in fact differences between what African Americans had suffered in this country compared to the Irish, the Dutch or others 'of Caucasian descent.'"

Today, Deale noted, CUNY's Board of Trustees is on record as supporting a policy of affirmative action, supporting "positive steps that will lead to recruiting, hiring, retaining, tenuring and promoting increased numbers of minorities and women." He urged listeners to work toward "trying to get institutions and employers to adopt affirmative action plans on a voluntary basis," as "the product of political struggles primarily from below."

The next speaker was Carol Wright, lead researcher for the PSC's CUNY and Race Project, who described the design of the PSC's current study: a two-year research effort, it is a mixed-methods study based on both quantitative and qualitative research. The former involves analysis of CUNY-wide employment data over a ten-year period, from Fall 1999 through Spring 2009. Qualitative research includes focus groups and interviews at selected campuses, comparing some of the larger departments across those schools.

Gary Schoichet

From left, panelists Felipe Pimentel, Henry Park, Carol Wright and Iris DeLutro at the PSC's December 9 forum.

Progress report on a PSC research project

Wright holds a PhD in educational policy studies from the University of Wisconsin. As a visiting scholar and research associate at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, she worked on MIT's school's 2010 report on faculty diversity (see tinyurl.com/MIT-Race).

Panelist Henry Park, a graduate student in developmental psychology at the CUNY Graduate Center who has worked on the PSC project, described some of the limitations of CUNY's existing data on race, recruitment and hiring, and what this has meant for the union's study. Data on affirmative action and recruitment, for example, existed only in hard copy and had to be entered into a database by hand. Park and Wright discussed the work that project staff have done to check the reliability of CUNY's data, and where possible to correct mistakes or missing values.

Panelist Felipe Pimentel, assistant professor of sociology at Hostos, said he had run into similar problems with CUNY data in his own research. In the union's CUNY and Race Project, he said, "we have to congratulate" staff on the work they have done to clean up the available data. "We have made a big investment in this project," said Pimentel, "and I think we are going to get good results [based on] data that is much better than what we were given in the first place."

PRELIMINARY

While cautioning that the initial quantitative results were still preliminary, Wright's presentation described a few of the main findings to date. Over this 10-year period, she said, "as a proportion of all full-time faculty, the percentages of black and Hispanic full-time faculty of all ranks has not increased. It has basically remained unchanged." Black, full-time faculty remain at around 13% of the total, with Hispanics around 8%. While the absolute number of white full-time faculty increased, their proportion declined from 74% to 69%, while the percentage of Asian full-time faculty increased from 7% to 10%. Figures for Native Americans remained extremely low throughout the ten years, Wright said.

In the Higher Education Officer (HEO) series, Wright said, the percentage held by Asian, Hispanic and black employees did increase over this ten-year period. As with faculty, the number of white HEO-series employees rose but their proportion declined, from 54% to 45%. Wright also discussed overall data on part-time faculty (67% white at the end of the decade) and those in College Lab Technician titles (40% white at the same point).

COHORT ANALYSIS

"We are interested in career trajectories," said Wright. "One approach to understanding this issue is to conduct a cohort analysis" – that is, to follow a set of individuals who enter a system at the same time.

As a first step in cohort analysis, the study team looked at first-time assistant professors appointed in the Fall of 1999. "We are going to be looking at additional cohorts," Wright told the forum. The numbers involved are small, and Wright emphasized that it is important not to generalize from this cohort alone. "But this is a starting place, she said, and it's really interesting to see what happens to this group ten years later." What stood out, Wright said, was an "exceptionally high attrition rate for black women" in that cohort – more than double the attrition rate for the cohort overall. A majority of black women hired as first-time assistant professors in Fall 1999 were no longer at CUNY ten years later. Within this cohort, black women who remained showed markedly lower rates of promotion.

"We have to see whether this pattern holds up across other cohorts," cautioned Wright. "Nor do we know why these women left. Were they recruited away? Did they leave for family reasons? Were they denied reappointment or tenure?" Though warning against drawing any firm conclusions from this preliminary finding, Wright called it "troubling" and said it "requires further investigation."

In February, Wright told *Clarion* that analysis since the forum has also found higher attrition rates for black women in other faculty cohorts. The study team is in the process of conducting cohort analyses for HEO and CLT titles, and all these results will be included when the study's full report is released later this year.

The project is also looking at existing best practices, Wright added. "There are some very innovative and creative things going on in some departments that I'm not sure that other departments know about," she said. "Some departments have done actually a very good job of recruiting and retraining faculty of color. Others have done a very good job of recruiting…but many of those faculty have left. So what's going on that's different?" Once both quantitative and qualitative analyses are complete, said Wright, the study's final report "promises to provide a very rich record of our members' experiences of race at CUNY."

In the discussion period, an engaged audience posed questions and comments on both preliminary data and the historical and political context. Topics included the past role of social protest in increasing race and gender diversity in CUNY's hiring; the importance of looking at the specific historical experience of Puerto Ricans and other national and ethnic groups, not just at broad racial categories; the need to reach out and involve organizations based in communities of color in discussions of race and hiring at CUNY, rather than limiting discussion to an in-house exchange; questions on the extent to which faculty of color at CUNY are concentrated in programs on ethnic studies or bilingual education; and many more.

TO START DISCUSSION

The comment that provoked the most responses came from Bill Ferns, associate professor of computer information systems at Baruch's Zicklin School of Business. What's key is "to talk about how we're going to use the data to go back to our campuses and have a conversation about this with our colleagues," said Ferns. "We have to deal with having those challenging conversations. It's not easy, but that's the only way I see that we can start moving things forward," he said to applause.

"Talking about race is difficult, it's problematic," agreed panelist Iris DeLutro, PSC Vice President for Cross-Campus Units. "People are uncomfortable…. But if the conversation isn't initiated, [then] you really can't change things," DeLutro concluded. "It's not an easy thing, but it must be done."

TWU to MTA: '99% is kicking!'

TWU Local 100

Above, members of Transport Workers Union Local 100 at a contract rally in December. Local 100 President John Samuelson told the MTA to "shove it" on January 15, as the transit contract expired with management sticking to its offer of 0% wage increases. Negotiations resumed February 2.

Where is the 'Pathway' to lang

By JOHN TARLETON

New York is a global city. Its inhabitants hail from every country in the world, while international commerce and tourism make much of its economy hum. But CUNY's new rules on general education downgrade the study of foreign languages – a change that has sparked deep faculty concern.

CUNY's overhaul of general education is known as the "Pathways initiative," and on December 1, the Pathways Task Force Steering Committee issued its final guidelines. The new rules provide for a "Common Core" of 30 credits – a "Required Core" of 12 credits plus a "Flexible Core" of 18 credits. There will be no CUNY-wide requirement for world language study. While most CUNY colleges have a foreign language requirement today, the new Pathways rules put those requirements at risk.

REQUIRED CORE

The Required Core will consist of six credits in English composition and 3 credits each in math and science. The Flexible Core will consist of six 3-credit courses, with students required to take at least one course in each of five categories: World Cultures and Global Issues; US Experience in its Diversity; Creative Expression; Individual and Society; and Scientific World. Foreign language classes will be among the many courses potentially listed under World Cultures and Global Issues.

New mandates spark concerns

In addition to the 30-credit Common Core, a "College Option" allows senior colleges to add an additional 6 to 12 credits of general education requirements. Here also, many courses besides language study will be vying for inclusion.

"This will bring about the marginalization of foreign language study at CUNY," said Orlando Hernández, a professor of humanities at Hostos who is a poet and translator. A member of the Pathways Steering Committee, Hernández dissented from its final recommendations on foreign languages and history.

"Foreign languages are now required at most CUNY schools and across the country, and they should definitely have been included in the Required Core," said Luigi Bonaffini, chair of Brooklyn College's Department of Modern Languages and Literatures. "The Pathways Task Force unfortunately ignored a host of requests from within and beyond CUNY" to include a foreign language requirement.

Dave Sanders

Emily Tai, chair of the QCC Academic Senate Steering Committee.

"One would suspect that omitting foreign languages from the Required Core would lead to diminished foreign language study throughout CUNY," Alicia Ramos, the chair of CUNY's Council on World Language Study, told *Clarion.* "It is possible for colleges to prescribe foreign language study in the College Option or in the Flexible Core. But because colleges will in all likelihood aim to preserve as much of their present structure as possible, the reduction of credits [for general education] will inevitably lead to some losses," said Ramos, an associate professor of Spanish at Hunter.

NOT ELECTED

Pathways was announced as an effort to simplify transfer requirements in the CUNY system, which many students have found difficult to negotiate. Most faculty responded that the changes under Pathways will do little to resolve these problems, while inflicting significant damage on the curricula at CUNY colleges. The University Faculty Senate (UFS), college governance bodies and the PSC have sharply criticized the Pathways process as undemocratic and an assault on faculty authority over curriculum, and the union is preparing a lawsuit in response. Strategic legal questions inform the timing of the filing of the suit (see *Clarion,* December 2011).

Pathways' effect on foreign language instruction is just one of many areas in dispute, but it is drawing criticism from faculty in a range of disciplines. They say the new general education rules mean that far fewer CUNY students will be exposed to this challenging but essential component of a higher education.

"There are too many people who think the whole world speaks English and studying other languages is therefore a waste of time," UFS Chair Sandi Cooper told *Clarion.* "And now the CUNY central administration seems to feel the same way." Cooper noted that the Pathways Task Force was selected by CUNY central administration. Had it been elected by CUNY faculty, she said, its decisions would have been very different.

"Mastery of a foreign language is crucial. It lends a certain breadth of perspective," said Emily Tai, associate professor of history at Queensborough Community College and chair of the QCC Academic Senate Steering Committee. Tai, who speaks French and Italian, observed that knowledge of a foreign language is an increasingly important skill for people going into business careers at a time when many firms operate globally. In a multicultural city like New York, she added, it also increases social and civic competency: "Learning a foreign language is a key tool for negotiating our globalized world."

Pathways provokes 4-credit debate

By PETER HOGNESS

As Spring semester got underway, faculty across CUNY found themselves grappling with the requirements laid out by CUNY central administration under the Pathways process, the system-wide overhaul of general education. In English, the natural sciences, foreign language instruction and other areas, many faculty members argued that the rules ignored years of hard-won pedagogical experience. As 80th Street issued memos to clarify what was or was not allowed, some questioned whether the administration was exceeding its authority on curricular decisions. And at Bronx Community College, the school's Pathways committee voted to suspend its deliberations.

A recurring flashpoint has been the general ban on 4-credit courses in the "Common Core Structure" recommended by the Pathways Task Force on December 1 and accepted by Chancellor Goldstein on December 12. A limited exception is made for some Common Core classes in science and mathematics, but there have been faculty objections in these fields as well.

Pedagogy & best practices

Discontent with the 3-credit limit increased after January 30, when CUNY's Office of Academic Affairs distributed a set of "Common Core Guidelines." This document affirmed that "courses must be 3 credits *and 3 hours"* (emphasis added).

At the start of the semester, CUNY's English Discipline Council spoke out against "the recent suggestion that composition courses be revised as 3 contact hours/3 credits. The dominant pattern of these courses across the university is 4 hours/3 credits – both current and past practice as well as best practice."

CONTACT HOURS

Four hours a week are needed "to prepare students adequately for the challenges of academic writing in their undergraduate careers" and thus facilitate transfer, the Council said. "To reduce contact hours would be to deny students the benefits of individualized instruction, to diminish the amount of writing they do during the semester, and to undermine established pedagogic practices within CUNY."

Concerns in English, sciences & foreign languages

In mid-February, the CUNY Council on World Language Study also issued a statement supporting "the preservation of 4-contact-hour/3-credit courses in foreign language classes" currently offered at several CUNY colleges, and their acceptance within the Common Core. "Such a policy respects both the spirit of the Pathways initiative and the tradition of faculty stewardship over curricular matters," the council said.

CUNY central administration has defended the 3-credit limit. "Certainly you can't please everyone with something like a Common Core," said Associate University Provost Julia Wrigley. But given the overall 30-credit limit, the administration contends that the general requirement for 3-credit classes ultimately provides more flexibility to students and colleges alike.

The Common Core is divided into a "Required Core" and a "Flexible Core." The latter totals 18 credits, within which students must take six classes – one in each of five categories, plus a sixth in any one of the five areas.

Wrigley told *Clarion* that an earlier draft of the Pathways structure had some 4-credit classes in the Required Core, but a total of only five courses in the Flexible Core. "That was changed in response to feedback from the colleges," she said.

"Switching from a model with some 4-credit courses to a model with only 3-credit courses made that sixth class possible," said CUNY's Director of Undergraduate Education Policy, Erin Croke.

The credit-hour debate was one of the issues that led Bronx Community College's Pathways Steering Committee to vote to "suspend our deliberations" on Pathways implementation. "The restriction that all courses are to be 3 hours, 3 credits, was never agreed upon by the Board of Trustees resolution and negates sound and widely accepted pedagogical practices [that] are the purview of the faculty," the committee said in a January 31 statement. It argued that the "Common Core Guidelines" on implementation, distributed the day before, were internally inconsistent and that the document "circumvents faculty governance." The statement was unanimously endorsed by BCC's Faculty Council on February 2.

BARELY PASSING

"I'm hopeful," said a member of the BCC's Pathways committee. "Across CUNY, people agree that it makes no sense for central administration to be dictating the number of hours a class should have – especially when faculty at so many colleges, through experience with their own students, have come to a different conclusion."

CUNY science faculty have also objected to the 3-credit, 3-hour limit, and those concerns sparked an exchange with the chancellor. The Common Core Structure allows for

uage study?

In Pathways' defense, Associate University Provost Julia Wrigley noted that not all CUNY students are currently required to take a foreign language. City Tech, for example, does not have a language requirement, nor do many individual degree programs – for example, some BS degree programs at Hunter or AAS programs at BMCC. "So it's a more complex picture," said Wrigley, "and it will remain complex according to what colleges decide to offer." The design of the Common Core, she said, is intended to maximize colleges' flexibility.

Foreign languages foster a 'breadth of perspective.'

OPEN LETTER

In an open letter last fall, Distinguished Professor John Brenkman, then chair of Baruch's English department and now the school's acting provost, pointed out that CUNY Board of Trustees Chair Benno Schmidt agrees that foreign language study is essential – at least, for students at Avenues, an expensive private school that Schmidt leads.

Brenkman, who also teaches in the English and comparative literature programs at the Graduate Center, cited this passage from the Avenues website: "Modern students must have more than a passing understanding of other cultures, speak other languages fluently and appreciate other histories." The school, which opens later this year, promises that "Avenues students will become fluent in a second language, which is fundamental to being a truly global citizen." Schmidt is the K-12 school's founding chairman and the first person listed on its leadership team. Annual tuition at Avenues is $39,750.

In its pitch to prospective school parents, Avenues emphasizes that "learning a second language provides thinking advantages" and that students who study two languages "have an advantage in cognitive processing." It notes that in Germany, "fluency in two additional languages is expected of public school students."

"Mastery of languages other than one's own," the school argues, "opens doors to other countries and other cultures. It sparks curiosity and invites travel. It erodes stereotypes and fosters peace. It builds both self-confidence and self-knowledge. All are essential outcomes of an Avenues education."

"There seems to be a double standard here," commented Antonella Ansani, chair of the Foreign Languages and Literatures Department at QCC. "If you think it's important for kids who are privileged, you should think it's important for everybody."

Many CUNY students from immigrant households already speak a language other than English, and QCC provides special courses for these heritage speakers. Ansani maintains that such classes are essential: "They need to learn that language just like American kids learn English in school."

This Spring, academic departments across CUNY are to submit courses they would like to see made a part of the new General Education Framework. Each college must then evaluate these proposed courses and decide which will go in its own general education plan, to be submitted by April 1. Those college plans will be scrutinized by a Course Review Committee selected by administration, which will have the authority to decide whether a given course complies with the new Pathways rules. The UFS and the PSC have criticized the fact that, like the Pathways Task Force itself, this Course Review Committee is not elected. Its decisions must be finalized by December 2012, and the General Education Framework will go into effect in the Fall 2013 semester.

DE FACTO

Under the new Pathways rules, a college could create a de facto language requirement by offering only language classes under the category of World Cultures. Some language faculty have discussed pushing for this at their own schools – but competition from other subject areas may make this a long shot.

Alternatively, CUNY administrators have said, a college could establish a separate language proficiency requirement, under which students who could not demonstrate this proficiency would be required to use their World Cultures class for language study. (The sixth class in the Flexible Core could also be restricted in this way.) While this may be more achievable, language faculty say, it still puts foreign language study into competition with other disciplines over a scarce number of credits.

For example, CUNY administrators have told both language faculty and science faculty that they can ask their colleges to require that students use the sixth course in the Flexible Core in a particular way. But if both groups of faculty follow this advice, only one will prevail.

Under Pathways, specific disciplines get less attention than the achievement of "learning outcomes" that prioritize critical-thinking skills. For courses to be included in the World Cultures and Global Issues category within the Flexible Core, they must produce learning outcomes such as the ability to "evaluate evidence and arguments critically or analytically" or "produce well-reasoned written or oral arguments using evidence to support conclusions." Members of the CUNY Council on World Language Study expressed concern that introductory language courses may not be seen as a priority under these guidelines, as first-year language students can hope at best to learn to speak and write their new language in simple sentences.

LEARNING

Eckhard Kuhn-Osius, associate professor of German at Hunter, noted that a first-year language student who can speak in basic sentences has learned hundreds of vocabulary words and dozens of grammatical structures that require applying principles and distinctions not paralleled in English. "The learning of a language is definitely a higher-order thinking activity," Kuhn-Osius said. Other CUNY language faculty point to studies on the broad cognitive benefits of second-language acquisition (an argument also made by Avenues).

Language faculty are also concerned that the Common Core's structure, built around 3-credit classes, will curtail the 4-credit language courses that many departments have adopted for specific pedagogical reasons.

At Bronx Community College, students are required to take eight foreign language credits. "If we are forced to give up the fourth hour, we will simply have to choose what gets cut from instruction," said Rex Butt, interim chair of BCC's Modern Languages Department. BCC faculty determined that the fourth hour was needed for students' success, to provide a solid base of more contact time as they learn a new tongue. "Three hours means that students will leave with far less command of the language," said Butt. "If they take only one course they may retain little or nothing."

At campuses like Hunter and Brooklyn College that have strong foreign language requirements – 12 credits at Hunter, 9 at BC – faculty hope to convince their school to use its College Option credits to maintain foreign language study as an integral part of general education. But that may be a tough sell: for example, for Hunter to continue its current language requirement would require 100% of the maximum 12 additional credits that can be required under the College Option. "We feel that the Pathways rules are a challenge to four-year schools like Brooklyn College that proclaim themselves standard-bearers of the liberal arts tradition," said Bonaffini.

GENERAL EDUCATION

The foreign language requirements now in place at CUNY colleges have fulfilled one key function of general education: many students who major or minor in a language decide to do so only after taking a required course and discovering that they enjoy it. Kuhn-Osius told *Clarion* that at Hunter, one-third to half of the students who major in German decided to do so after they were exposed to it in a required language class. The same is true of many Spanish majors at Baruch said Elena Martínez, chair of the college's Modern Languages Department.

"Language is one of the most complicated cultural goods we have," Kuhn-Osius said, "and we need to give it its proper place in the educational process."

some 4-credit classes to be offered in the Required Core for math or science. However, a college can do so only if alternative 3-credit classes are also available to fulfill these parts of the Required Core.

Allan Ludman, chair of the geology department at Queens College, wrote to Chancellor Matthew Goldstein and other top administrators asking that they reconsider this limit. "The most common model for introductory geology courses required for general education purposes throughout the country is a 4-credit course involving 3 hours of lecture and either 3 or 2 hours of laboratory," Ludman wrote.

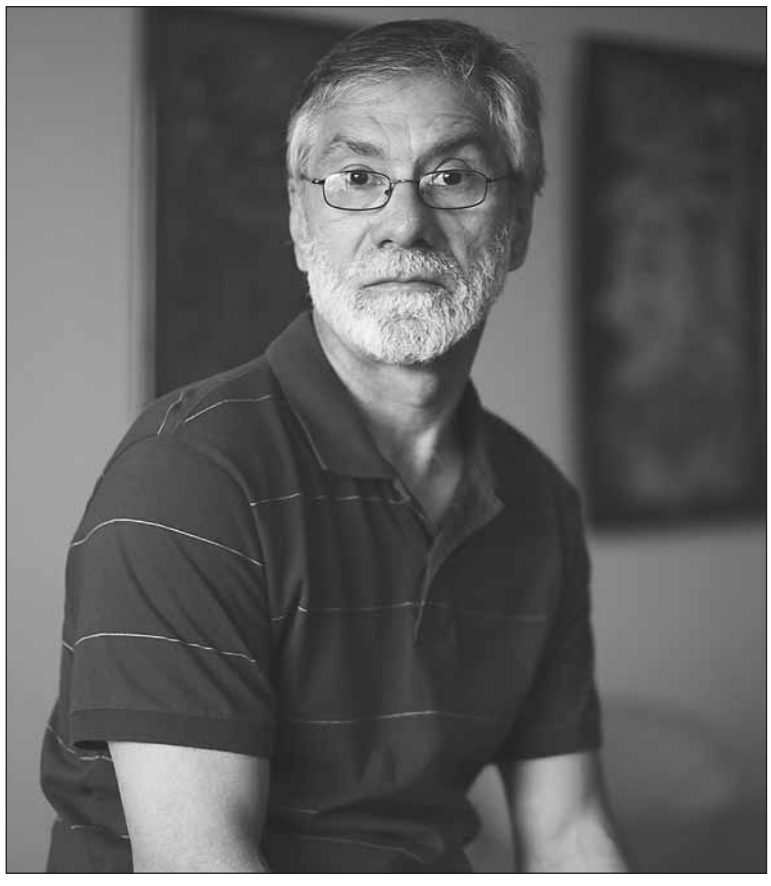
Ludman took aim at 80th Street's insistence that the number of hours and credits be equal. "There is a reason why laboratory hours are not equated with lecture or recitation hours," he wrote: students are expected to do much less work outside of class to prepare for a lab. "Following Carnegie and federal financial aid guidelines…we expect two hours of out-of-class student preparation for every hour of lecture or recitation," but only 20 to 45 minutes preparation for each hour of lab.

If the Pathways requirements reduce the amount of time spent on lab work, this would have a damaging effect, Ludman wrote: "Any experienced science educator knows that after one hour, a lab class is just getting started." (William Hersh, former chair of the chemistry department at Queens, wrote in his own letter that chemistry classes require three hours for effective lab work: "time for set-up, cleaning, letting a reaction proceed.")

Ludman asked that the 3-credit/3-hour limit be reconsidered, as it would force a significant decrease in class time that "will seriously erode both teaching and learning success."

GOLDSTEIN'S RESPONSE

Chancellor Goldstein's response argued that the Pathways structure was flexible, designed "to give campuses considerable latitude in these matters," and recounted ten different ways "that science is, or can be, included as part of CUNY's new general education framework." One was an option that had not been mentioned in previous Pathways documents: "Colleges can link together one or more pairs of courses…making them co-requisites: for example, one could be a 3-credit lab course and the other a 3-credit lecture course." But most of Ludman's specific arguments – for example, the different expectations for student work for lab and lecture hours – went unaddressed.



Dave Sanders

Orlando Hernández dissented from the final Pathways recommendations.

PSC Town Hall Meeting on Pathways

Thursday, March 8

6:00-8:30 PM

Community Church of New York
40 East 35th Street

See psc-cuny.org for updates, or contact
Naomi Zauderer (nzauderer@pscmail.org) for more information.

PSC theater event: 'Call Me Waldo'

By STEVE LEBERSTEIN
PSC Retirees Chapter

This spring's PSC theater party, sponsored by the Retirees Chapter and the union's Women's Committee, will attend the Working Theater's "Call Me Waldo" on Sunday, March 4.

The play comes to New York City after a sold-out run at the Kitchen Theatre Company in Ithaca, and opens February 22 at the June Havoc Theatre on West 36th Street in Manhattan.

"Call Me Waldo" is the latest work by Rob Ackerman, whose play "Tabletop," a workplace comedy about the making of a television commercial, was a hit when Working Theater debuted the play off Broadway in 2000. "Waldo" takes another comic and insightful look at the workplace, upending stereotypes about the working class when an ordinary electrician begins channeling the spirit of Ralph Waldo Emerson.

"Call Me Waldo" was well-reviewed by the *Ithaca Journal,* the *Cornell Daily Sun* and *The Ithaca Times,* which said that the play "makes philosophy pop."

TICKETING

Now in its 27th season, Working Theater is New York's only professional off-Broadway theatre company dedicated to producing plays for and about the working men and women of New York .

This year's PSC theater party will be "Call Me Waldo" on Sunday, March 4, at 3:00 pm, at the June Havoc Theatre in the Abington Theatre Art Complex, 312 West 36th Street. For PSC members, the ticket price is $20. Please buy your tickets now by sending a check payable to Working Theater for $20 per ticket and a self-addressed stamped envelope to Marcia Newfield at the PSC, 61 Broadway, 15th floor, New York, NY 10006. People who send in their money soon enough will have tickets mailed to them. Otherwise, tickets will be available for pick up on the day of the event at Abington Theatre. To purchase your own ticket and attend with other PSC members, please e-mail sleberstein@gmail.com.

RSI: How to protect yourself

Avoid repetitive strain injury

By DAVID DIAMOND, M.D.

February 29, 2012, is International RSI Awareness Day, dedicated to helping workers avoid repetitive strain injuries. Originally organized in Canada in 2000, RSI Awareness Day is observed on the last day in February – which, thanks to leap years, is the only "non-repetitive" day on the calendar.

For university employees, it's a good time to assess whether the way you use a computer may put your health at risk – and if so, to make some changes.

RSI & COMPUTER WORK

Use of a computer keyboard and/or mouse can lead to persistent muscle aches, tendon inflammation, nerve compressions, and subsequent impairments that in some cases may be long-standing. At a large university, hundreds of people a year may be affected by such problems due to overuse and/or misuse of computer workstations.

The musculoskeletal system is built to have periods of activity alternating with periods of rest that allow recovery and renewal. Working at a computer long hours subjects certain parts of the body to static postures while other parts move incessantly. Both static postures and constant activity can cause first microscopic and then macroscopic damage to biologic tissues.

There are four keys to RSI prevention: pacing, position, technique, and exercise.

PACING

Introduce breaks in your typing to permit recovery and restoration, and do this at a frequency that does not allow pain or discomfort to develop. No schedule of typing and rest breaks is universal, but as a general guideline:

- Take a 1 or 2 minute "micro break" every 10 to 15 minutes.
- Take a 5 to 10 minute "mini break" every hour.
- Every few hours, get up and do some alternative activity.
- Using a timer or other automatic reminder is helpful to make sure that you take breaks at these intervals rather than waiting for fatigue or discomfort. During breaks, do stretches to relax muscles. Consider using typing break software, such as Stretch Break or similar programs.

When you know you are overdoing it.

POSITION

Adjust your workstation to minimize the awkwardness and stress involved in keyboard activity:

- Use a telephone headset instead of cradling the phone between ear and shoulder.
- Rest feet on the floor or on a footrest, support thighs with a soft chair, and support the lower back.
- Let upper arms hang loosely from the shoulder, extend forearms horizontally toward the keyboard, lower and angle keyboard slightly away (negative pitch) so the wrists are in a neutral position, with mouse next to the keyboard at the same level. Do not lean wrists on any surface (including a wrist rest) while typing or using the mouse.
- Center yourself in front of a glare-free monitor; keep at a comfortable distance from the monitor, looking down at a 10 to 30 degree angle.

TECHNIQUE

Use a typing technique that does not traumatize the fingers and wrists but rather involves movement of the arm as a whole. Typing technique should emphasize fluid movement of the arms to avoid angling the wrists forward, back, or side-to-side. Press the keys lightly. When not actively typing, rest hands, thumbs up in your lap ("neutral posture") rather than resting them on a pad or the keyboard edge. When a command requires key combinations, use two hands to avoid contorting the hand. Use software programs allowing "sticky keys" and macros whenever possible. An alternative keyboard and/or pointing device (to replace the standard mouse) may benefit some individuals.

EXERCISE

General aerobic exercise, done regularly, will sustain strength, improve cardiovascular conditioning, and quicken recovery from sedentary computer use. Also learn to do a series of stretches during rest breaks that restore health and vitality to your body. As a general rule, none of these should involve movement outside the range of motion and nothing should be done that hurts. The purpose of stretching is to relax muscles and improve circulation. Arm strengthening should not be emphasized.

WHAT NOT TO DO

Routine use of medication or braces is not recommended. If you have questions about these recommendations or begin to develop symptoms, you should seek further information or medical evaluation. Slight adjustments now may avoid future complications in many cases!

RESOURCES

- tinyurl.com/ATIC-RSI
- ergo.human.cornell.edu [See links in center, under "Computer Workstation Guide."]
- *Repetitive Strain Injury: A Computer User's Guide* (Pascarelli & Quilter, Wiley 1994)
- For medical advice, see your physician or contact the Mount Sinai-Irving J. Selikoff Center for Occupational & Environmental Medicine (tinyurl.com/RSI-clinic).
- The PSC Health & Safety Watchdogs (hswatchdogs@pscmail.org) can arrange a group training on computer use at your campus.

Dr. David Diamond is an internist, a specialist in occupational and environmental medicine, and an instructor at Harvard Medical School. Prepared in conjunction with the Assistive Technology Information Center; more information at tinyurl.com/ATIC-RSI.

Medicare B reimbursement & TIAA-CREF

The December *Clarion* article on reimbursement of Medicare Part B premium payments explained how new retirees can sign up – but the print version only described the procedure for members of the Teachers Retirement System (TRS).

CUNY retirees in TIAA-CREF who are enrolled in Medicare Part B should fill out a reimbursement application form, available from your campus HR office or online at psccunywf.org/PDF/MedicarePartBApplication.pdf. Send the completed form, plus copies of both your Medicare card and your retiree health plan card (GHI, HIP, etc.) to: University Benefits Office/CUNY, 395 Hudson Street, 5th floor, New York, NY 10014. For further details, see the updated *Clarion* article at tinyurl.com/ClarionMedB.

CALENDAR

SUNDAY, MARCH 4 / 3:00 pm: The PSC Retirees Chapter and the Women's Committee are sponsoring a theater party to see the Working Theater's "Call Me Waldo." For tickets and details see article on this page, left, or online at theworkingtheater.org. For more info, contact Steve Leberstein (sleberstein@gmail.com).

MONDAY, MARCH 5 / 1:00 pm: PSC Retirees Chapter meeting. Please join us as we hear from Jared Herst, PSC Coordinator, Pension & Health Benefits. PSC Union Hall, 61 Broadway, 16th floor. For more information contact Jim Perlstein at jperlstein@bassmeadow.com.

THURSDAY, MARCH 8 / 6:00 – 8:30 pm: PSC Town Hall Meeting on Pathways (see pp.6-7). Community Church of New York, 40 East 35th St. (between Park & Madison Aves). For more information contact Naomi Zauderer at nzauderer@pscmail.com or call 212-354-1252.

FRIDAY, MARCH 9 / 6:00 pm: Labor Goes to the Movies screens *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (Amy Heckerling, 1982), starring Sean Penn, Phoebe Cates and Jennifer Jason Leigh. *Fast Times* subverts the generic formulas of teen coming-of-age movies and rectifies the sexism of *American Graffiti* by constructing the movie for the female spectator, but uses humor to avoid alienating the male audience. PSC Union Hall, 61 Broadway, 16th floor. $2 suggested donation.

TUESDAY, MARCH 27 / 6:00 – 8:00 pm: HEO Cross-Campus Chapter Meeting. Graduate Center Room C198, 365 Fifth Avenue between East 34th and 35th Streets.
For more information contact Alisa Simmons at asimmons@pscmail.org.

What are the best forms for 21st-century peer review?

By SCOTT JASCHIK

Discussion at the MLA

Photo illustration: Margarita Aguilar

City Tech's Aaron Barlow, associate professor of English and a critic of traditional blind peer review, spoke via Skype at an MLA panel in January.

"Blind peer review is dead. It just doesn't know it yet." That's the way Aaron Barlow, an associate professor of English at City Tech, summed up his views on the future of the traditional way of deciding whose work gets published in the humanities, at the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association (MLA).

Barlow didn't dispute that most of the top journals in the humanities continue to select papers this way. But speaking this January at the MLA's annual meeting in Seattle, he argued that technology has so changed the ability of scholars to share their findings that it's only a matter of time before people rise up against the conventions of traditional journal publishing.

RADICAL CHANGE

While others on the panel and in the audience argued for a reformed peer review as preferable to Barlow's vision of smashing the enterprise, and some questioned the practicality of simply walking away from peer review immediately, the idea that the system needs radical change was not challenged. Barlow said that the system might have been justified once when old-style publishing put a significant limit on the quantity of scholarship that could be shared. But in a new era, he said, the justifications were gone. (Reflecting the new technology era, Barlow and one other panelist spoke via Skype, to an audience that included two tables and wireless for bloggers and Twitter users – and this journalist – to write about the proceedings as they were taking place.)

GOING DIGITAL

To many knowing nods in the room, Barlow argued that the traditional system of blind peer review – in which submissions are sent off to reviewers, whose judgments then determine whether papers are accepted, with no direct communication with authors – had serious problems with fairness. He said that the system rewards "conformity" and allows for considerable bias.

He described a recent experience in which he was recruited by "a prestigious venue" to review a paper that related in some ways to research he had done. Barlow's work wasn't mentioned anywhere in the piece. Barlow said he realized that the journal editor figured Barlow would be annoyed by the omission. And although he was, Barlow said he didn't feel assigning the piece to him was fair to the author. "It was a setup. The editor didn't want a positive review, so the burden of rejection was passed on to someone the author would not know."

He refused to go along, and said he declined to review the paper when he realized what was going on. This sort of "corruption" is common, he said.

Barlow has a long publishing record, so his frustrations with the system can't be chalked up to being unable to get his ideas out there. But he said that when one of his papers was recently rejected, he simply published it on his blog directly, where comments have come in from fans and foes of his work.

Can new media provide a better alternative?

"I love the editorial process" when comments result in a piece becoming better, he said, and digital publishing allows this to happen easily. But traditional peer review simply delays publication and leaves decision-making "in the dark." Peer review – in the sense that people will comment on work and a consensus may emerge that a given paper is important or not – doesn't need to take place prior to publication, he said.

"We don't need the bottleneck or the corruption," he said. The only reason blind peer review survives is that "we have made appearance in peer reviewed journals the standard" for tenure and promotion decisions. That will change over time, he predicted, and then the traditional system will collapse.

PEER REVIEW PLUS

While Barlow noted the ability of digital publishing to bypass peer review, the idea of an intense, collaborative process for selecting pieces and improving them came at the session from the editor of *Kairos,* an online journal on rhetoric and technology that publishes work prepared for the web. *Kairos* has become an influential journal, but Cheryl Ball, the editor and an associate professor of English at Illinois State University, discussed how frustrating it is that people assume that an online journal must not have peer review. "Ignorance about digital scholarship" means that she must constantly explain the journal, she said.

Kairos uses a three-stage review process. First, editors decide if a submission makes sense for a review. Then, the entire editorial board discusses the submission (online) for two weeks, and reaches a consensus that is communicated to the author with detailed letters from the board. (Board members' identities are public, so there is no secrecy about who reviews pieces.) Then, if appropriate, someone is assigned to work with the author to coach him or her on how to improve the piece prior to publication.

As Ball described the process, thousands of words are written about submissions, and lengthy discussions take place – all to figure out the best content for the journal. But there are no secret reviewers, and the coaching process allows for a collaborative effort to prepare a final version, not someone guessing about how to handle a "revise and resubmit" letter.

The process is quite detailed, but also allows for individual consideration of editorial board members' concerns and of authors' approaches, Ball said. "Peer reviewers don't need rubrics. They need good ways to communicate," she said. Along those lines, *Kairos* is currently updating its tools for editorial board consideration of pieces, to allow for synchronous chat, the use of electronic "sticky notes" and other ways to help authors not only with words, but with digital graphics and illustrations.

LEARNING FROM LAW REVIEWS

Allen Mendenhall, a PhD student at Auburn University who is also a blogger and a lawyer, suggested that humanities journals could take some lessons from law reviews. Mendenhall is well aware of (and agrees with) many criticisms of law reviews, and in particular of the reliance for decisions on law students who may not know much about the areas of scholarship they are evaluating.

But he offered the law reviews as an example of how a new web service could challenge the traditional ways of doing things. Many law reviews now use ExpressO to allow authors to submit a paper to multiple law journals at the same time. Once a journal accepts a piece, the author has a set time to reply – and during that time can notify other law reviews that participate of the chance to accept the piece on an expedited basis, in which case the author will place the piece there.

"The author is rushing journals the way college students rush a fraternity or sorority," he said.

POWER FOR AUTHORS

Obviously this system deviates in all kinds of ways from the norms of humanities scholarship, Mendenhall said, in that most journals expect to be the only place considering a piece. But he argued that this system forces journals to stop sitting on pieces. "Everyone is competing and that speeds up publication process," he said.

Recently, Mendenhall had four pieces published in journals – one through ExpressO and three through traditional peer review system. The traditionally vetted pieces appeared seven months, nine months and two years after he submitted the articles. The ExpressO article appeared two and a half months after he submitted it.

A speedier process, he said, helps scholarship by getting ideas out there. But it also helps junior faculty members – and that's a legitimate reason to consider changes, he said. "Why should we wait months or years for a response?" he said. "Speed can help untenured professors add to their CVs and build a reputation. It's more power for authors."

Scott Jaschik is editor of Inside Higher Ed. *Reprinted with permission from www.insidehighered.com.*

What do you think?

Debates on peer review and alternative approaches to the dissemination and evaluation of research and scholarship (see left) are not confined to the humanities. In mathematics and the natural sciences, Internet-based alternatives to traditional academic journals, such as the Public Library of Science (PLoS), MathOverflow or ResearchGate, are playing a growing role – and that role is the subject of active debate. Similar discussions are unfolding in the social sciences.

Clarion welcomes letters or proposals for op-eds on the future of peer review and publication in the digital age. Letters (see page 2) should be 200 words or less; for op-ed proposals contact the editor, Peter Hogness, at phogness@pscmail.org.

LABOR IN BRIEF

Union numbers grow slightly

Union membership grew slightly in 2011, a change from steep declines that occurred in the previous two years. According to a January report issued by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, total union membership increased last year by 49,000 to 14.8 million workers. The number of unionized private sector workers grew by 110,000, while public sector unions lost a total of 61,000 members. The overall percentage of unionized workers dipped a bit, from 11.9% to 11.8%. At the onset of the Great Recession in 2008, there were 16.1 million union members or 12.4% of the workforce. At 24.1%, New York continues to have the highest rate of unionization of any state and the second largest total number of union members (1.9 million) after California.

Cablevision workers plug into union

Cablevision workers based in Brooklyn made history Jan. 26, when they voted to join Communication Workers of America. The 180-86 vote capped a 13-year campaign and marks the first time that workers at the cable TV giant have successfully unionized. Organizing under the slogan of "Stand up for the Cablevision 99%," the workers gained extensive media coverage as well as the support of local officials such as Public Advocate Bill de Blasio. Sparks from the Jan. 26 victory caught fire elsewhere: 120 Bronx technicians who work for one of Cablevision's contractors briefly went out on a wildcat strike on Feb. 2, demanding higher pay and union representation after their pay was cut by 30%.

CUI BONO

Disappearing pensions

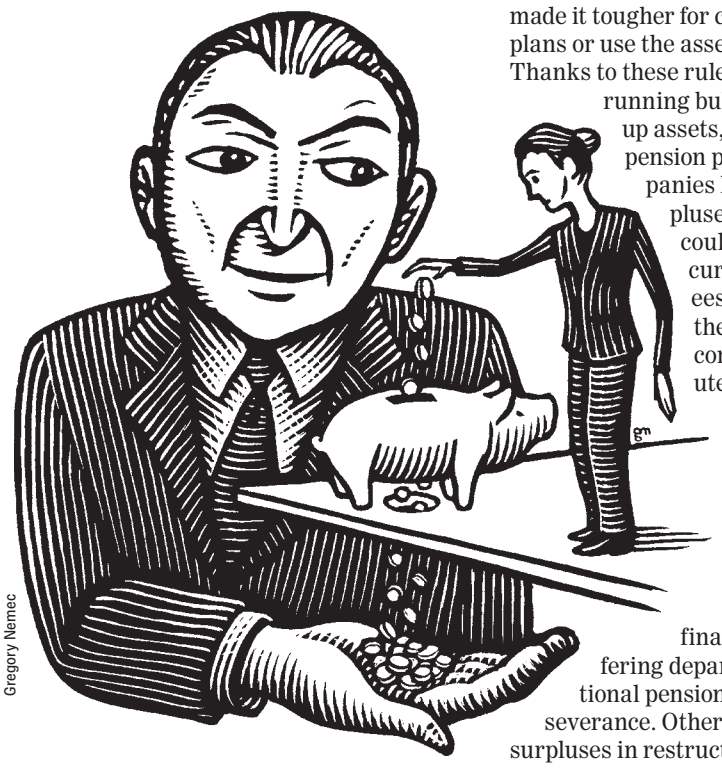
By ELLEN SCHULTZ

Editor's note: In New York state, anti-union pundits and politicians are demanding pension cuts for new public employees (see page 2). They argue that private-sector workers don't have pensions this good, so in fairness, public-sector benefits must come down to the private-sector level.

But as former Wall Street Journal *reporter Ellen Schultz details below, the erosion of private-sector pensions didn't "just happen." It is the result of a deliberate transfer of wealth from workers to corporate executives and shareholders – a "pension heist," to borrow the title of Schultz's new book. The excerpt below summarizes her conclusions and details the recent case of General Electric; the book is filled with detailed accounts of similar maneuvers by other corporations.*

The same corporate interests that attacked private-sector pensions yesterday are leading the charge to slash public-sector pensions today. For example, General Electric's GE Asset Management is part of the Partnership for New York City, a corporate lobbying group that is one of the loudest voices calling for cuts in the pensions of public workers (see Clarion, *April 2011).*

Meanwhile, GE's top executives have seen their pensions grow richer than ever.



Gregory Nemec

Private-sector pension pirates

In December 2010, General Electric held its Annual Outlook Investor Meeting at Rockefeller Center in New York City. At the meeting, chief executive Jeffrey Immelt stood on the *Saturday Night Live* stage and gave the gathered analysts and shareholders a rundown on the global conglomerate's health. But in contrast to the iconic comedy show that is filmed at Rock Center each week, Immelt's tone was solemn. Like many other CEOs at large companies, Immelt pointed out that his firm's pension plan was an ongoing problem. The "pension has been a drag for a decade," he said, and it would cause the company to lose 13 cents per share the next year. Regretfully, to rein in costs, GE was going to close the pension plan to new employees.

The audience had every reason to believe him. An escalating chorus of bloggers, pundits, talk show hosts, and media stories bemoan the burgeoning pension-and-retirement crisis in America, and GE was just the latest of hundreds of companies, from IBM to Verizon, that have slashed pensions and medical benefits for millions of retirees. To justify these cuts, companies complain they're victims of a "perfect storm" of uncontrollable economic forces – an aging workforce, entitled retirees, a stock market debacle, and an outmoded pension system that cripples their chances of competing against pensionless competitors and companies overseas.

What Immelt didn't mention was that, far from being a burden, GE's pension and retiree plans had contributed billions of dollars to the company's bottom line over the past decade and a half, and were responsible for a chunk of the earnings that the executives had taken credit for. Nor were these retirement programs – even with GE's 230,000 retirees – bleeding the company of cash. In fact, GE hadn't contributed a cent to the workers' pension plans since 1987 but still had enough money to cover all the current and future retirees.

And yet, despite all this, Immelt's assessment wasn't entirely inaccurate. The company did indeed have another pension plan that really was a burden: the one for GE executives. And unlike the pension plans for a quarter of a million workers and retirees, the executive pensions, with a $4.4 billion obligation, have always been a drag on earnings and have always drained cash from company coffers: more than $573 million over the past three years alone.

So a question remains: With its fully funded pension plan, why was GE closing its pensions?

A look at what really happened to GE's pensions illustrates some of the reasons behind the steady erosion of retirement benefits for millions of Americans at thousands of companies.

RETIREE PENSIONS UNFAIRLY BLAMED

No one disputes that there's a retirement crisis, but the crisis was no demographic accident. It was manufactured by an alliance of two groups: top executives and their facilitators in the retirement industry – benefits consultants, insurance companies, and banks – all of whom played a huge and hidden role in the death spiral of American pensions and benefits.

Yet, unlike the banking industry, which was rightly blamed for the subprime mortgage crisis, the masterminds responsible for the retirement crisis have walked away blame-free. And, unlike the pension raiders of the 1980s, who killed pensions to extract the surplus assets, they face no censure. If anything they are viewed as beleaguered captains valiantly trying to keep their overloaded ships from being sunk in a perfect storm. In reality, they're the silent pirates who looted the ships and left them to sink, along with the retirees, as they sailed away safely in their lifeboats.

The roots of this crisis took hold two decades ago, when corporate pension plans, by and large, were well funded, thanks in large part to rules enacted in the 1970s that required employers to fund the plans adequately and laws adopted in the 1980s that made it tougher for companies to raid the plans or use the assets for their own benefit. Thanks to these rules, and to the long-running bull market that pumped up assets, by the end of the 1990s pension plans at many large companies had such massive surpluses that the companies could have fully paid their current and future retirees' pensions, even if all of them lived to be 99 and the companies never contributed another dime.

But despite the rules protecting pension funds, US companies siphoned billions of dollars in assets from their pension plans. Many, like Verizon, used the assets to finance downsizings, offering departing employees additional pension payouts in lieu of cash severance. Others, like GE, sold pension surpluses in restructuring deals, indirectly converting pension assets into cash.

To replenish the surplus assets in their pension piggy banks, companies cut benefits. Initially, employees didn't question why companies with multibillion-dollar pension surpluses were cutting pensions that weren't costing them anything, because no one noticed their pensions were being cut. Employers used actuarial sleight of hand to disguise the cuts, typically by changing the traditional pensions to seemingly simple "cash balance" pension plans, which superficially resembled 401(k)s.

Cutting benefits provided a secondary windfall: It boosted earnings, thanks to new accounting rules that required employers to put their pension obligations on their books. Cutting pensions reduced the obligations, which generated gains that are added to income. These accounting rules are the Rosetta Stone that explains why companies with massively overfunded pension plans went on a pension-cutting spree and began slashing retiree health benefits even when their costs were falling. By giving companies an incentive to reduce the liability on their books, the accounting rules turned retiree benefits plans into cookie jars of potential earnings enhancements and provided employers with the means to convert the trillion dollars in pensions and retiree benefits into an immediate, dollar-for-dollar benefit for the company.

EXEC PAY THRIVES

With perfectly legal loopholes that enabled companies to tap pension plans like piggy banks, and accounting rules that rewarded employers for cutting benefits, retiree benefits plans soon morphed into profit centers, and populations of retirees essentially became portfolios of assets and debts, which passed from company to company in swirls of mergers, spin-offs and acquisitions. And with each of these restructuring deals, the subsequent owner aimed to squeeze a profit from the portfolio, always at the expense of the retirees.

The flexibility in the accounting rules, which gave employers enormous latitude to raise or lower their obligations by billions of dollars, also turned retiree plans into handy earnings-management tools.

Unfortunately for employees and retirees, these newfound tricks coincided with the trend of tying executive pay to performance. Thus, deliberately or not, the executives who green-lighted massive retiree cuts were indirectly boosting their own pay.

As their pay grew, managers and officers began diverting growing amounts into deferred-compensation plans, which are unfunded and therefore create a liability. Meanwhile, their supplemental executive pensions, which are based on pay, ballooned along with their compensation. Today, it's common for a large company to owe its executives several billion dollars in pensions and deferred compensation.

These growing "executive legacy liabilities" are included in the pension obligations employers report to shareholders, and account for many of the "growing pension costs" companies are complaining about. Unlike regular pensions, the growing executive liabilities are largely hidden, buried within the figures for regular pensions. So even as employers bemoaned their pension burdens, the executive pensions and deferred comp were becoming in some companies a bigger drag on profits.

WORKERS CONTINUE TO LOSE

With the help of well-connected Washington lobbyists and leading law firms, over the past two decades employers have steadily used legislation and the courts to undermine protections under federal law, making it almost impossible for employees and retirees to challenge their employers' maneuvers. With no punitive damages under pension law, employers face little risk when they unilaterally slash benefits, even when promised in writing, since they can pay their lawyers with pension assets and drag out the cases until the retirees give up or die.

As employers curtail traditional pensions, employees are increasingly relying on 401(k) plans, which have already proven to be a failure. Employees save too little, too late, spend the money before retiring, and can see their savings erased when the market nosedives.

Today, pension plans are collectively underfunded, hundreds are frozen, and retiree health benefits are an endangered species. And as executive pay and executive pensions spiral, these executive liabilities are slowly replacing pension obligations on many corporate balance sheets.

Meanwhile, the same crowd that created this mess – employers, consultants, and financial firms – are now the primary architects of the "reforms" that will supposedly clean it up. Under the guise of improving retirement security, their "solutions" will enable employers to continue to manipulate retirement plans to generate profit and enrich executives at the expense of employees and retirees. Shareholders pay a price, too.

Their tactics haven't served as case studies at Harvard Business School, and aren't mentioned in the copious surveys and studies consultants produce for a gullible public. But the masterminds of this heist should take a bow: They managed to take hundreds of billions of dollars in retirement benefits that were intended for millions of workers and divert them to corporate coffers, shareholders, and their own pockets. And they're still at it.

A former investigative reporter for The Wall Street Journal, *Ellen Schultz covered the so-called retirement crisis for the* Journal *for more than a decade. Adapted from* Retirement Heist *by Ellen Schultz, by arrangement with Portfolio, a member of Penguin Group (USA), Inc., Copyright © Ellen Schultz 2011.*

RESPONDING TO MEMBERS

Contract questions & answers

PSC President Barbara Bowen responds to members' questions on the contract.

What's happening with the contract?

We have begun negotiations with CUNY for a new contract, but CUNY has not made an economic offer. With no money on the table, the PSC can – and has – made progress on non-economic issues, but we cannot negotiate seriously on the big economic items such as salary increases and a more reasonable teaching load until CUNY comes forward with an offer.

Do I continue to go up in salary steps while we don't have a new contract?

Yes. That's one of the most important features of our existing contract, and one we have had to defend. In the last round of bargaining Chancellor Matthew Goldstein demanded that the union give up salary steps and allow steps to be replaced by "discretionary increases" doled out by the college presidents. You can see where that would have led. But the union stood firm. Thousands of you demonstrated your opposition, and we prevailed.

What about the people who are at the top salary step?

People who are already on the top step do not receive an increase until we negotiate one through the contract. That's one reason the union is challenging the claim that public employees in New York have to accept wage freezes. There is no justification for our taking zero-percent "increases" while the richest people in the state continue to pay less than their fair share of taxes. The PSC made a breakthrough for top steps in the last contract, however, and it continues to benefit us. Top steps rose by 13.8% for full-time titles and by 16.7% for part-time titles over the period of the last contract.

But why hasn't the union pressed CUNY for an economic offer?

Because the economic offers currently being made to public employees in New York are disastrous. They call for three years of zeros, along with other givebacks such as furlough days and major increases in the cost of health insurance. While the PSC does not negotiate directly with either the City or the State – we negotiate with CUNY – the economic offer we receive is influenced by the economics of the contracts settled by the City and State.

The PSC's strategy has been to accomplish everything we can through informal negotiations, while at the same time working to change the economic and political policies that underlie these settlements. Rather than limiting our scope to the bargaining table, we are working with allies to shift the ground on which the table stands.

Is there any hope of a decent settlement in these unpromising conditions?

Yes, although I do not want to underestimate how difficult and partial our progress may be. There are a couple of things in our favor, however. First, the union has a powerful membership. As we saw with adjunct health insurance, when PSC members act together in support of each other, we can force a change. Second, the PSC, like the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) and a handful of other unions, should receive a 4% annual increase for the year not covered by our last contract, if the usual pattern of public-sector bargaining in New York City is upheld. Both the UFT and the school principals' union, CSA, are in legal proceedings to claim this increase, and the result of those proceedings may affect us.

Third, there may be a new opening for political change. Occupy Wall Street gave voice to mass outrage about economic injustice, making it harder for Albany to justify giving tax windfalls to the rich while savaging the poor and middle class. Albany's shift on taxes in December, though it should not be mistaken for comprehensive progressive reform, went a long way toward closing the budget deficit that had been the excuse for demanding givebacks from the unions. The Transit Workers Union (TWU) has announced that it will not accept the State's economic package of wage freezes and givebacks, and is demanding at least cost-of-living increases. We directly support our own contract campaign when we support theirs.

Gregory Nemec

But when will I get my raise? Can you tell us the timetable?

I cannot give a timetable because our contract is not a product of negotiations between a single employer and a single union. It is intrinsically involved in the politics and economics of New York City and New York State. We will not shift the economics of our contract until we shift the policies of Albany and City Hall. That's one reason the PSC is such an active political force, and a reason for our growing work in broad progressive coalitions.

It will take more than one union working alone to stop the opportunistic attacks on working people during this economic crisis, and the PSC is a leading voice in the effort.

But the union also has a short-term strategy. Our bargaining team knows that members cannot wait forever for salary increases and advances in our working conditions that would improve our students' learning conditions. There is no reason that New York's public employees should go without even cost-of-living increases. I cannot give you a timetable, but I can report the union bargaining team's sense of urgency and active engagement in informal negotiations with CUNY. We have settled some material issues through this approach and are prepared to move quickly the moment we see an opening for a better economic package.

You mentioned progress away from the bargaining table; what have you accomplished?

The PSC has been able to achieve a surprising number of contractual advances, including some economic ones. Working cooperatively, CUNY and the PSC secured nearly $1 million over three years in additional funding for the PSC-CUNY Research Awards, while maintaining faculty control of the selection process. We also achieved a real landmark, which has already attracted national attention in the press: the establishment of paid parental leave as a permanent part of the contract. The PSC is still the only public-sector union in the state with this benefit.

Progress has been made in other areas, too: we have reached agreement on a revised hourly rate step system for faculty in the College Language Immersion Program, and we are close to an agreement permitting faculty and staff to use CUNY e-mail after retirement. Talks on other issues, such as establishment of a sick leave bank, are also under way.

Are there any other areas of progress?

What may be the biggest breakthrough has been achieved in the budgetary arena. The PSC's long, intense campaign to have CUNY accept responsibility for funding adjunct health insurance paid off in September, when the CUNY Board included this item in their funding request to the State, and in January, when Governor Andrew Cuomo included it in his higher education budget. If our work continues to be successful, the establishment of permanent adjunct health insurance will literally transform the lives of those who receive it and will relieve pressure on the Welfare Fund budget.

You have always stressed that the union members, not the negotiating team, win the contract. What can I do?

We need every single member if we are to change the political and budgetary landscape that has been used to justify wage freezes and givebacks. The campaign for a progressive tax system is the campaign for our contract.

Right now, you can do two things. First, sign up to be a part of the union's effort to change Albany's economic policy. Speak directly to your representatives about the need for more funding for CUNY and the injustice of a tax structure that leaves the State short of revenue and the rich paying far less than their share. Join me and other PSC members in making our case in Albany, or join a local PSC delegation to meet with your representatives in their home districts. (See page 2 for information on how you can sign up.)

Second, get active in the growing movement for economic justice. As hundreds of CUNY students have recognized, the fight against the hollowing out of CUNY is a pivotal fight for the Occupy movement. How can it be that the richest city in the world cannot afford reasonable class sizes or enough full-time faculty for public university students? Join the CUNY students fighting for more public funding, join the union members who are already in the streets demanding tax reform and a fair contract.

Supporting other unions' struggles or Occupy Wall Street is not charity; it is direct participation in a movement that has the potential to affect our contract in the short term, and a much bigger political shift in the long term.

Points of progress, challenges ahead

Clarion MARCH 2012

Newspaper of the Professional Staff Congress/City University of New York, collective bargaining representative of the CUNY instructional staff. Vol. 41, No. 1. PSC/CUNY is affiliated with the American Association of University Professors, National Education Association, the American Federation of Teachers (Local 2334), AFL-CIO, the New York City Central Labor Council, and New York State United Teachers. Published by PSC/CUNY, 61 Broadway, 15th floor, New York, NY 10006. Telephone: (212) 354-1252. Website: www.psc-cuny.org. E-mail: phogness@pscmail.org. All opinions expressed in these pages are not necessarily those of the PSC.

Professional Staff Congress/CUNY
61 Broadway, 15th Floor
New York, New York 10006

Return Service Requested

NonProfit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
New York, N.Y.
Permit No. 8049

15-MINUTE ACTIVIST

Defend public-sector pensions

Take action against the attacks on public-worker pensions. Call 1-877-255-9417, to tell your legislators and the governor that you oppose a new Tier 6 pension plan that would cut benefits for New York's future public employees, including CUNY faculty and staff. This sixth pension tier is unnecessary, excessive and perpetuates a culture of falsely blaming budget problems on public workers. (See pages 2 & 3.)

New York State and New York City pension plans are fiscally stable and well-funded. The source of State and City budget problems is a generation of tax breaks for the rich, not public employees' pensions.

ROBBING THE FUTURE

'No' to payroll tax holiday

By JOEL BERGER
PSC Social Safety Net Working Group
Vice Chair, PSC Retirees Chapter

In December, Congress voted to extend the so-called "payroll tax holiday" through the end of February, with a vote on a one-year extension scheduled before then. Most members of Congress, both Democrats and Republicans, now say they support the idea, but are arguing over how to pay for it. Supporters say it will put more money in people's pockets, thereby stimulating the economy.

A reduction in the payroll tax by about one-third, for all workers, with an increase in take-home pay of between $1,500 and $2,000 per year? What could be wrong with that?

Plenty. Tinkering with Social Security's funding puts the program at risk, while any benefit to the economy will be small.

TAX TINKERING

As established by law in 1935, Social Security is funded by a payroll tax that is divided between the worker and his/her employer. Revenue from the tax is placed in the Social Security Trust Fund.

The contribution rate for employees was 6.2% until 2011, when it was temporarily reduced to 4.2%. (The employer contribution rate of 6.2% remained un changed.) The tax is applied only to the first $110,100 of annual income; on pay stubs, it is listed as a deduction for FICA, the Federal Insurance Contributions Act.

If Congress votes to extend the current "tax holiday" for another year, it means that the payroll tax will keep putting less money into the Social Security Trust Fund. Supporters of extending the tax holiday say no one should worry: they insist that the shortfall will be made up by transferring money from the government's General Fund, so that there is no net reduction in Social Security funds.

But Congress is currently debating how to pay for those transfers from the General Fund, and that debate shows why a payroll tax reduction is dangerous for Social Security.

What mix of spending cuts or other taxes should cover the money that Social Security is losing through this payroll tax reduction? Democrats and Republicans differ, but both sides have agreed that spending cuts must be part of the answer. For example, Republicans want to cut the maximum for unemployment insurance from 99 weeks to 59 weeks, while Democrats say it should only be cut to 79 weeks.

In other words, Social Security funding is now being put in competition with other public programs for the same pool of funding. It has become entangled with the regular horse-trading of the congressional budget process.

And when this "temporary" payroll tax reduction again expires, Republicans and many Democrats will be reluctant to allow the rates to go back up as promised: there is a risk that the "temporary" reduction will be made permanent. This would certainly increase the pressure to reduce Social Security benefits, raise the retirement age, or make other cuts to the program.

'DAMN POLITICIANS'

Fundamentally, throwing Social Security into the regular budget process violates the program's historic role as a social compact between the generations, with current workers paying the benefits of current retirees. The fact that Social Security is funded through payroll taxes, separate and apart from all other revenues raised by the government, has been key to its success.

Franklin D. Roosevelt understood this when he said in 1941, the payroll tax "give[s] the contributors a legal, moral, and political right to collect their pensions.... With those taxes in there, no damn politician can ever scrap my Social Security program." If Social Security funding becomes dependent on congressional appropriations, the program is undermined.

Social Security is designed to be a self-sustaining program. It does not use general tax revenues to pay benefits. The Social Security Trust Fund had a $2.6 trillion surplus in 2010 and can pay all currently promised benefits until 2038.

Contrary to many pundits and politicians, Social Security faces no immediate financial problems. Common-sense measures like these can ensure its financial stability past 2038:

- Lifting the cap on FICA wages above $110,100;
- Dedicating the estate tax to Social Security;
- Increasing the FICA tax rate by a total of 1%, with lower-income earners being compensated by the Making Work Pay Tax Credit.

As for stimulating the economy, there is wide agreement among economists that tax cuts are less effective than direct federal spending to create or preserve jobs. Congress should be debating a full employment program – not risky changes to the funding of Social Security.

This article is the result of in the PSC Social Safety Net Working Group discussions. For more, contact John Hyland at LagSoc@aol.com.

Social Security put at risk

Corporate "Tax Dodgers"

Paul E. Talbot

The "Tax Dodgers" showed up at GE Headquarters at 30 Rockefeller Plaza in January, then went on to visit Verizon, Goldman Sachs and other loyal fans. The team effort is part of a statewide campaign to close corporate tax loopholes (see page 3).