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#WeAreUnionStrong
‘We’re organizing to improve lives’:
New York fast-food workers push to unionize
Steven Greenhouse - The Guardian - October 1, 2019

The Fight for $15 low wage movement has long had two goals: winning a $15-an-hour wage for low-paid workers and a union for fast-food workers. On wages it has been a major success – seven states have enacted minimum wage laws scheduled to reach $15 – but so far it has made little progress unionizing fast-food workers. That could soon change.

A Manhattan-based union local that works closely with the Fight for $15 has launched an effort to unionize Chipotle and McDonald’s workers, getting workers at more than 50 restaurants to sign pro-union cards. “We’re running a campaign for workers in an industry that has been abusing its workers,” said Kyle Bragg, president of the local carrying out the unionization drive, Local 32BJ of the Service Employees International Union. “These workers want a union. We’re organizing in order to lift workers and improve their lives.”

Until now, the Fight for $15 – which was underwritten by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) – hadn’t begun a formal unionization effort at fast-food restaurants. When Fight for $15 began in late 2012, its original strategy was to exert so much pressure on McDonald’s that the fast food giant would agree to sit down and discuss wages and other matters and perhaps promise not to resist unionization efforts. But McDonald’s has refused to talk with the Fight for $15’s leaders.

With its latest effort, Local 32BJ, a powerful local union with 175,000 members, hopes to make clear to Chipotle and McDonald’s that it is intent on unionizing their restaurants in New York, and they shouldn’t oppose that effort. Union officials say a majority of the hundreds of fast-food workers organizers have approached have signed cards supporting a union.

Jeremy Espinal, who works at a Chipotle in Greenwich Village, said he supports unionization because managers often treat workers with little respect. “The managers try to dehumanize you and try to beat you down mentally as much as they can so they can overwork you and make you feel you’re never doing enough,” said Espinal, a junior at Hunter College.

Espinal said the work includes lots of lifting and is far harder than he had anticipated. “I tore my achilles heel at Chipotle,” he said. “I cut off part of my thumb. I have burn marks on my arm.” He also complained that after managers learned he was an outspoken union supporter, his hours were cut from 25 a week to 11.

Princess Wright backs unionization at her McDonald’s in downtown Brooklyn. She said the managers “make it seem like they’re for you, but there’s a lot of wage theft and playing around with our hours. If we start at 11, they’ll say we started at 11.15. Sometimes you work 48 hours a week, and they pay you for only 40.” She complained that managers want employees to be available to work any time of the week, and that they sometimes scheduled her to work certain hours even though she had told managers that those hours conflicted with her college classes.

Workers at various Chipotles and McDonald’s said managers sometimes failed to comply with New York City’s new Fair Workweek Law, which requires giving fast-food workers two weeks’ advance notice of their work schedule and paying them premiums when their hours are changed with little notice or they are called in at the last minute. Helped by Local 32BJ, more than 30 current or former Chipotle workers filed complaints with the city about not receiving premium pay for schedule changes, prompting the city’s office of consumer and workplace protections to file a lawsuit against Chipotle, seeking more than $1m in restitution for violating its Fair Workweek Law.
With Chipotle having adopted the motto “food with integrity”, Bragg said, “Chipotle has branded itself to be this different fast-food chain that strives for excellence with their workers, but you can’t achieve that if you treat your workers like trash. We want to help that company achieve what they want to be.”

Laurie Schalow, Chipotle’s chief reputation officer, said: “Chipotle has been working cooperatively with the city to ensure we have systems and processes in place to comply with” the Fair Workweek Law. She added that the company’s employees “know that Chipotle is committed to complying with all laws, rules and regulations”.

One obstacle to unionizing fast-food restaurants is that many are run by franchisees, and it could be labor-intensive and expensive to seek to unionize and secure union contracts from franchisees that have just a few restaurants. Then even if the Fight for $15 got a majority of workers at dozens of restaurants to vote to unionize, the fast-food companies and their franchisees might drag their feet for years before agreeing to a first contract.

The more than 40 Chipotle restaurants in New York where Local 32BJ has begun organizing efforts are all owned and run by the parent company. That makes it easier to pressure an image-conscious parent company and secure union contracts covering more restaurants.

“We haven’t assigned any one strategy to get a union,” Bragg said. “The goal is to get the employer to the table and bargain in good faith.”

Chipotle officials declined to address the unionization push, but said Chipotle gives workers “industry-leading benefits such as tuition reimbursement up to $5,250 per year, competitive health benefits and quarterly bonuses for all employees”.

The McDonald’s Corporation said: “Together with our independent franchisees, we pride ourselves on building a workplace that supports crew members and their ambitions.” McDonald’s added that it “recognizes the rights under the law of individual employees to choose to join – or choose not to join – labor organizations”.

McDonald’s said it has begun an ambitious program to train more than 2,000 franchisees and 850,000 employees to make sure workers are treated with dignity and to combat bullying, discrimination and sexual harassment.

Jahaira Garcia, a union supporter who works at a Chipotle on Second Avenue in Manhattan, said sexual harassment was a problem at her restaurant. “The men are too touchy,” she said. Garcia, a senior at City College, said she has talked to many workers “my age, 17, 18, 19, 20” and gotten them interested in the union, and they “started to talk to an older group in their 40s. The younger group has motivated the older people to join.”

“One reason I want a union,” Garcia continued, “is a lot of people don’t have papers, and they’re really scared to talk about not being paid fairly and sexual harassment and not getting enough hours and being treated badly.”

Espinal agreed that unionization can be a powerful tool for workers who feel powerless. “A majority of people who work at Chipotle” in New York “are minorities or immigrants or children of immigrants”, he said. “They are groups that never felt empowered. The most difficult part is to change the mentality that these people have. This effort is about educating them and letting them see this is stuff that’s been done before and this is something we have to do with each other to help each other because the company isn’t looking out for us.”
State Attorney General Letitia James, City Council Speaker Corey Johnson and Councilman I. Daneek Miller of Queens, last week, came out in support of three unions representing FDNY EMS workers who charge they are being shortchanged in their struggle for pay parity.

“Equal pay for equal work is a basic human right,” James said on the steps of City Hall. “Our EMS and EMT workers dedicate their lives to supporting us, and it’s past time we give them the support they deserve.”

Local 2507 Uniformed EMTs, Paramedics & Fire Inspectors Union, Local 3621 Uniformed EMS Officers Union and the EMS Superior Officers Association have all claimed in a lawsuit that emergency technicians receive $8,000 less in base pay compared to other first responders — despite providing lifesaving care and putting themselves in precarious situations.

“Our members put their lives on the line every day to protect New Yorkers just like every other first responder,” said Oren Barzilay, president, Local 2507 Uniformed EMT’s, Paramedics, and Fire Inspectors. “They should not have to sue the City of New York just to receive the equal pay and benefits they have earned and that they deserve.”

They may not put out fires or stop criminals, but EMTs received 1.8 million calls for the FDNY and have been at the scene of dangerous fire emergencies for 80 percent of those requests, they have braved shootouts to help save victims, and have been assaulted by patients in the ongoing opioid crisis, according to elected officials.

The base pay for an FDNY EMT worker ranges from $34,000 to a little over $50,000, according to Glassdoor. com. Paramedics, who have similar training, but more technical skills, make between $41,000 to $73,000.

Firefighters in New York City have a base pay that ranges from $41,000 to $117,000, according to Glassdoor. com. Base pay for police officers ranges between $54,000 to $105,000.

The pay gap will only continue to widen by the thousands of dollars within the next four years, according to the city and state representatives.

“Discrimination affects all EMS personnel at all levels within the department,” said Joseph Pataky, president of the EMS Superior Officers Association. “While some are hurt more than others, diminishing the respect and value given to the bureau as a whole hurts all of our members, from entry level to deputy chiefs.”

EMTs are overwhelming women and people of color and they have allegedly been disciplined more for minor infractions like taking too long for bathroom breaks, elected officials charge.

“Paramedics and emergency medical technicians save lives every day,” said Johnson. “We need to treat them like the skilled and valuable professionals they are, which means paying them fairly. More than half of this workforce is women and people of color yet they earn thousands of dollars less than firefighters who are predominately white men. Both are FDNY members, both perform life-saving work.”

The 2017 lawsuit filed to the U.S. Equal Opportunity Commission would force the disclosure of demographics in the different fields, pay practices and employment data, especially on disciplinary action to validate claims of discrimination.
Vincent Variale, the president of Local 3621 Uniformed EMS Officers believes it’s time for a change.

‘The biggest ‘difference’ between our members and other first responders is the color of their skin,” said Variale. “The City of New York needs to do better in 2019.”

The lack of pay equity has led to some of the 4,000 EMTs to leave the field altogether, according to Miller, the chair and co-chair of the Committee on Civil Service and Labor and the Black, Latino, and Asian Caucus, respectively.

“Our city’s greatness is owed to the work and performance of its dedicated civil servants, but the municipal legacy system that has suppressed generations of Black and Brown New Yorkers aspiring to serve our city endures in 2019, and that is a tragedy,” said Miller. “Our first responders of color at EMS love their jobs, but don’t get a fair salary that keeps food on their families’ tables, and reluctantly leave for gainful employment as firefighters or sanitation workers.”
Brian Ebertz walks in pink. For the entire month of October he will don pink every day to catch attention: pink ties, pink shirts, pink socks, a pink tie clip, long-sleeve pink T-shirts and pink golf shirts.

He does not yet have a pink hat, though he’s still looking for one.

Ebertz is president of the 1,100-member Greece Teachers Association and a former elementary school teacher. And this year, he is the NYSUT ambassador for Real Men Wear Pink, a male movement to help raise money for the American Cancer Society’s quest to cure cancer, fund research and provide support services to patients.

He is one of 16 regional ambassadors for Real Men Wear Pink for the American Cancer Society.

The ACS set a goal for him of $2,500.

“I blasted through that already,” he said. His new goal is $5,000. Donations can be made online.

Last year, NYSUT had Real Men Wear Pink activists in Rochester and in Buffalo. The Rochester campaign netted $9,193, and the Buffalo campaign raised $36,144, with support from NYSUT headquarters, according to Amy Delia, marketing director for ACS Northeast. She said Real Men Wear Pink raised $633,332 in New York State.

The 2019 ambassadors had a networking event to brainstorm ways to raise money and attention, and Ebertz will be working events in a barnstorming fundraising tour this month:

Oct. 1 — Ebertz did a guest bartending event at a Rochester-area craft brewery. Ebertz had some help from education colleagues serving the specialty pink brew. 100 percent of the proceeds will go to ACS.
Oct. 9 — Ebertz and other RMWP ambassadors will be making food for patients staying at the Rochester Hope Lodge to serve to patients and families. The ACS lodges provide housing to patients and their caregivers who have to travel for cancer treatment; there are two lodges in New York State.
Oct. 25 — Ebertz is working another social fundraising event; this one at the Clutch restaurant and pub in Greece.
He’s already purchased 1,200 pink “Real Men Wear Pink” bracelets and he is figuring out a way to use those for fund-raising. One of his three teenaged sons, whom he said are “super gung ho” for the campaign, already swiped one of the bracelets to wear.

Sales of clothing to raise money for the cause of curing cancer are going strong. The Greece TA has an online ordering site for pink apparel — sweatshirts, T-shirts, golf shirts — with their union logo. A portion of the proceeds from that will also raise money for ACS during October.

JOIN A NYSUT TEAM
On the last Friday in September, Ebertz was in 11 different school buildings dropping off the goods to colleagues who ordered pink items.

“I ran all around the schools delivering pink,” he said.

The exercise is a warm-up, of course, for the Making Strides Against Breast Cancer walk he will again take part in with family and friends. This year it is Sunday, Oct. 20 in Rochester.
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“I believe it’s a responsibility of a person in position of leadership to use that role to make a pretty big impact … and help out.” he said. The American Cancer Society is a good cause because the disease of cancer affects so many families — including his own.

Making Strides 2019
Oct. 12: Buffalo
Oct. 13: Syracuse, Jamestown
Oct. 20: Albany, Bronx, Plattsburgh, Hudson Valley, Brooklyn, Jones Beach, Central Park, Utica, Queens, Staten Island, Rochester, Westchester
Oct. 27: Riverhead, Glens Falls
As any educator knows, learning is a lifelong process. As an ambassador, what has he learned?

“This year they’re expecting 4,000 men to be diagnosed with breast cancer,” he said.

Even when pink season has passed, the Greece TA will still be flush with unionists who support giving. On its site, any GTA items that are blue or gray go toward its ongoing social justice campaign. The TA has a Greece Teachers Community Programs 501(c)(3) that supports different charity projects. Next month, they will purchase 500 winter coats, hats and gloves for students in need — as they have each year for the last five years. They also sponsor food shelves in schools so students can load backpacks for the weekend with food; and sponsor a college and career savings program.

“Unionism is so important. People have to understand the good that power in numbers can make,” Ebertz said. “How much we can impact the community is amazing.”
New York, NY – Dozens of JFK Airport workers contracted by Eulen America rallied on the steps of City Hall this week, in support of a pregnant co-worker who was injured after being tasked with a strenuous job she was ill equipped to handle and could have threatened the life of her unborn child.

Hacheler Cyrille, a wheelchair attendant and an expectant mother with a 6-year-old boy at home, requested a less strenuous position at Eulen America, an airport contracting firm, so that she could have less stress during the remainder of her pregnancy. According to supporters, she was, instead, designated to work at a conveyor belt as a bag runner lifting heavy luggage.

“It was my first time working there,” Cyrille said on Tuesday. “The luggage was really heavy and I did not know how to handle it. They didn’t tell me anything about what I should do. But I had to work.”

On May 8, the then 17-week expectant mom from Brooklyn ended up falling onto the conveyor belt and being carried away by it. Cyrille had a doctor’s note approving her need for a chair, which Eulen America allegedly rejected.

“Can you stop the belt? Please help me!” Cyrille remembers screaming as she was tossed from one conveyor belt to another.

32BJ SEIU is actively helping Eulen America workers organize, and maintains that Cyrille’s case is just example of the many workplace violations employees are expected to endure.

Cyrille was reportedly taken to Jamaica Hospital after falling onto the conveyor belt and was treated for contusions and bruises all over her body.

Cyrille still does not know what had stopped the conveyor belt from further injuring her, but she said the incident shook her up and made her fear for her unborn child.

“I’m expecting my baby in a couple weeks so, I’m praying and I don’t want to get too emotional with this tragedy,” she said on Tuesday. “I want to have a safe delivery; carrying a child is good, but it is a lot of work.”

Eulen America allegedly did not file a report with the Federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration and Cyrille has not received any workers’ compensation as a result.

Cyrille remains unsure when, or even if, she will be allowed to return to Eulen America. She has been forced to dip into her 6-year-old’s college fund just to put food on the table, and is exploring litigation proceedings against the company.

“She was an employee of Eulen for three years,” said Shirley Aldebol, vice president of 32BJ.

Said Councilwoman Helen Rosenthal [D-6th District], chair of the Committee on Women and Gender Equity, “Women get pregnant, I guess that is new to Eulen. The council member added, “When someone gets pregnant and is not welcomed back to work, that’s [not] the expectation. Well, we will stand with you today, and we will stand with 32BJ to get that message across. We will stand with you every day.”
Federal agencies are now free to implement three controversial executive orders signed by President Trump in 2018 aimed at limiting the power of employee unions. A court injunction against the orders was lifted Wednesday, a week after a federal appeals court declined to rehear a case brought by the unions.

The three executive orders would shorten the length of performance improvement plans to 30 days, exempt adverse personnel actions from grievance proceedings, streamline collective bargaining negotiations, and significantly reduce the number of work hours union members can spend on official time.

Tony Reardon, national president of the National Treasury Employees Union, called it a “sad day for the employees who serve this country.”

“For the first time since our merit-based civil service was created, we now have a series of presidential fiats—directly in conflict with the law—that are designed to marginalize the voices of federal workers, weaken their due process rights, and severely limit their elected union representatives’ ability to represent them and ensure that our civil service system is based on merit, not favoritism or patronage,” Reardon said.

In August 2018, U.S. District Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson found that Trump’s executive orders, taken together, effectively “eviscerated” federal employees’ collective bargaining rights. But in July, a three-judge panel on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit overturned that ruling, which blocked agencies from implementing the orders. In overturning the lower court’s decision, the panel did not weigh in on the merits of the case, but rather ruled that federal employee unions must first seek redress through the Federal Labor Relations Authority’s administrative review process. The full court last week declined to rehear the case as the unions had sought.

NTEU and other federal unions will continue to fight the executive orders “through whatever means available,” Reardon said.

When the appeals court ruling was issued last week, American Federation of Government Employees National President J. David Cox said he was outraged by the court’s ruling.

“While we review our options, hundreds of thousands of federal government workers will suffer as their access to union representation at the worksite is stripped away by the implementation of President Trump’s union-busting executive orders,” Cox said.
After more than a year of tense negotiations, the Social Security Administration and the American Federation of Government Employees have finally reached an agreement on a new, six-year contract.

The new collective bargaining agreement, which SSA management and AFGE representatives signed late last week, settles months of disagreements between the two parties and offers both some stability days before the injunction on the president’s May 2018 executive orders was lifted.

“The new contract reflects the agency’s priority on public service and will become effective on Oct. 27,” an SSA spokeswoman said in a statement to Federal News Network. “The agency thanks both the AFGE and Social Security negotiation teams for their many months of effort and success in reaching the new agreement.”

The Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service (FMCS) in September brought AFGE representatives and SSA management together to begin discussing how the two parties would move forward after a June decision from the Federal Service Impasses Panel.

In total, the impasse panel ruled on four provisions for management, six with slight modifications for management, one provision for AFGE and another for the union with slight modifications.

SSA wanted to allow five days for negotiations with the union. AFGE proposed four weeks, the union said.

Both parties struggled to agree on a bargaining process — specifically how long they could negotiate and what specifically they should negotiate over.

In the end, the union faced a decision: drop all ongoing litigation related to the SSA bargaining agreement, which included two court cases and nine grievances, and negotiate with the agency — or have the impasses panel rule on the remaining articles of the existing AFGE contract. SSA, meanwhile, said it would begin to implement the provisions of the president’s workforce executive orders under the second option.

The U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit last week denied federal employee unions a chance for a rehearing on the merits, a decision which came during the SSA-AFGE negotiations.

“We had two options available to us. Neither option was particularly good,” Rich Couture, president of AFGE Council 215, which represents employees at SSA’s Office of Hearings and Appeals, said in an interview.

“One was a choice between a certain annihilation of representation at SSA, as well as long-held employee rights and benefits and privileges, versus a chance at continued survival.”

In the end, the union decided to negotiate a new deal with the agency.

“It would have stripped us those areas in the panel order where the union prevailed, specifically those areas such as protection of employee rights to file grievances over performance appraisals, performance actions, severe disciplinary actions and other matters,” Couture said.
Official time hours cut in half, but more than EOs
The new agreement gives a bank of 125,000 hours of official time — half of the official time bank AFGE representatives had under the previous contract but 75,000 more hours than what the impasses panel granted in its recent decision.

Under the president’s workforce executive orders, AFGE representatives would have received a bank of 45,000 hours, one hour per employee in the SSA bargaining unit.

The agreement allows 20 union representatives to use no more than 840 hours of official time a year, meaning those employees could spend about 40% of their time on union activities and the remaining 60% of their time performing the functions for which they were initially hired.

All other union representatives have a limit of 400 hours of official time a year, meaning these employees can spend as much as 19% of their time on union activities. Both of these scenarios give AFGE representatives more official time to work with than what’s described in the president’s executive orders.

Under Trump’s EO on official time, all employees must spend 75% of their time “performing agency business or attending necessary training.”
“The fight is not over, but at least we will have some time and resources to conduct a fight,” AFGE wrote in a summary of its new contract to its members. “There will no longer be any union officials who on 100% official time, 75% official time or even 50% official time. Every union official will be doing production work and we will be feeling, first hand, the same pains and abuses that every other worker feels.”

Couture, who has met with new SSA Commissioner Andrew Saul twice since he took office this summer, said he and other union representatives explained why preserving more official time would allow union representatives to devote their time to resolving employee concerns, which leads to a safer, more productive workforce.

“The commissioner had stated to us that he wanted to have a strong and positive relationship with the unions at SSA, that he wanted to improve working conditions for employees,” Couture said. “Everybody is pretty well aware that SSA’s Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey scores for the last few years are pretty poor. Also, the commissioner wanted to really bring in employee ideas and engage employees in labor in finding ways to address, tackle and solve a lot of SSA’s service delivery issues.”

Beyond the changes to official time, AFGE also managed to score some agency office space, another contrast to the president’s workforce executive orders and the June decision from the impasses panel.

In addition, the bargaining agreement allows the union to file grievances on disputes related to an employee’s performance appraisal or other matters — another activity that the president’s workforce executive orders would have prevented.

FMCS was congratulatory of the agency and union for the agreement the two parties reached.

“The dedication and commitment of everyone involved in these difficult negotiations were the reason a deal was achieved,” Richard Giacolone, an agency commissioner and the president’s nominee to serve as FMCS director, said Monday in a statement. “This resolution is a testament to the power of good faith bargaining, where both sides are willing to come to the table, put aside their differences and get to work on a mutual agreement that addressed the interests of both sides. I commend the leadership of SSA and AFGE for their commitment to resolving these difficult issues in the spirit of constructive engagement.”
Future of telework in question
Maintaining the status quo with telework was one of the top priorities for the union, Couture said, but it was one of the few areas where AFGE and SSA couldn’t compromise.

Referencing stories from six SSA managers, the panel said it agreed the agency “needs maximum flexibility to ensure its functions can be performed in a timely and efficient manner.” A program manager for SSA’s IT operations said there were issues at 12 field offices after the agency rolled out telework in 2012, according to the FSIP decision.
Three field office managers also noted several offices with increased wait times due to a lack of in-person availability.

The June decision from the impasses panel allows each SSA deputy commissioner to determine whether employees who currently telework should be allowed to continue.

AFGE wanted to keep existing telework policies in place.

“It was a priority for us to try to keep what we had, recognizing that in this environment, achieving gains was not likely to occur,” Couture said.

The union said it’s concerned SSA component leaders may make their own changes now to existing telework policies. The Agriculture and Education Departments, along with a component within the Department of Health and Human Services, have limited telework to one day a week.
You’ve probably noticed that Hollywood doesn’t turn out many movies about unions. But, says film buff and labor historian Toni Gilpin, there are some overlooked movies out there that depict working people and their lives on the job even though they might lack scenes with picket lines. This is her latest installment in an occasional series of viewing suggestions.

American Factory is a rarity: an acclaimed documentary about workers that’s being widely seen (it’s streaming on Netflix). The film centers on the great expectations, and grimmer realities, that accompany the 2016 reopening of a shuttered GM facility in Ohio by the giant Chinese glass manufacturer Fuyao.

The Rust Belt residents who land jobs at the retooled plant confront low pay and unsafe conditions, while employees transplanted from China are achingly lonely. Mutual hostility might have seemed inevitable, but instead, in often touching sequences, American Factory depicts American and Chinese workers haltingly reaching out to one other.

But viewers—at least, those who aren’t Labor Notes readers—might not take anything away from the film beyond the simple notion that “in tough times, people can still get along.”

Favorable reviews have praised the film’s emphasis on “storytelling” and its “balanced” and “apolitical” tone. That may explain why Barack and Michelle Obama’s new production company is distributing it.

Why has GM closed U.S. plants while Chinese businesses are now investing here? There’s little context addressing corporate offshoring or our disastrous trade policy. We learn that Fuyao’s American workers make $12 an hour (in what had been a union shop), while in China, its employees put in such long hours that they rarely see their families. But just who benefits is left vague.

Chairman Cao Dewang of Fuyao, whom we see a lot of, obviously does, but he’s not alone. Wall Street is underwriting Fuyao’s intercontinental exploitation of workers while American CEOs are cashing in on it. Goldman Sachs is a key Fuyao investor, and Fuyao supplies American car companies—including GM—with cheap glass; these facts are left unmentioned in the movie.

American Factory does provide a candid look at how Fuyao quashed a United Auto Workers organizing drive. While the film notes the recent rise in union avoidance firms, those who don’t know better might think union-busting was a Chinese import, rather than standard management practice in the U.S.

In American Factory the only clear villains are inhuman ones. In the final moments, out of the blue, we’re told that advancing automation puts all jobs at risk. But this isn’t science fiction, where workplaces are commandeered by an unstoppable robot army. Very real people in corporate suites—here and across the globe—hungry for profits, choose to cut wages and speed up production and replace workers with machines.

Ultimately, therefore, American Factory simply feels dispiriting. So after you’ve seen it, consider re-watching Michael Moore’s 1989 classic Roger and Me.

Moore’s wickedly funny film not only gives us wrenching portrayals of the Flint workers devastated by GM’s plant closures but also points a finger directly at the elites benefiting from their suffering. Roger and Me is intended to infuriate and fire up a working-class audience. Now that’s the ticket.
TWU, MTA Clash on Whether Asbestos Poses Hazard in Brooklyn Bus Depot

Bob Hennelly - The Chief Leader - October 7, 2019

After the disclosure last month of the presence of asbestos at the East New York Bus Depot in Brooklyn, Transport Workers Union Local 100’s Safety Committee is conducting a systemwide evaluation based on tips from rank-and-file members about other potential asbestos locations.

Asbestos has been widely used in the construction and transportation sectors. If exposed, it can generate fibers that have been linked to serious diseases including cancer.

Common Locales

According to the National Institute for Cancer, it is used to “insulate boilers, steam pipes, and hot water pipes. The automotive industry uses asbestos in vehicle brake shoes and clutch pads. Asbestos has also been used in ceiling and floor tiles; paints, coatings, and adhesives; and plastics.”

With the passage of the Clean Air Act in 1973, sprayed asbestos fireproofing and insulating products were banned. In 1989, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency banned all new applications of the material. The Federal Government also required school systems to inspect their “buildings for the presence of damaged asbestos and to eliminate or reduce asbestos exposure to occupants by removing the asbestos or encasing it,” according to the NIC Fact Sheet.

“The most common way for asbestos fibers to enter the body is through breathing,” according to an Oregon State University Environmental Health and Safety fact sheet. “In fact, asbestos-containing material is not generally considered to be harmful unless it is releasing dust or fibers into the air where they can be inhaled or ingested. Many of the fibers will become trapped in the mucous membranes of the nose and throat where they can then be removed, but some may pass deep into the lungs, or, if swallowed, into the digestive tract.”

The fact sheet continued, “Asbestos is most hazardous when it is friable. The term ‘friable’ means that the asbestos is easily crumbled by hand, releasing fibers into the air….Asbestos-containing ceiling tiles, floor tiles, undamaged laboratory cabinet tops, shingles, fire doors, siding shingles, etc. will not release asbestos fibers unless they are disturbed or damaged in some way. If an asbestos ceiling tile is drilled or broken, for example, it may release fibers into the air. If it is left alone and not disturbed, it will not.”

Members’ Suspicions

“Our rank-and-file members are bringing us their suspicions about asbestos being at various work locations, particularly the older buildings,” said Local 100 Secretary-Treasurer Earl Phillips, who also chairs the union’s Safety Department. “We have been investigating and will continue to investigate these reports.”

On Oct. 1, he confirmed the presence of disturbed asbestos at the MTA’s Concourse Rail Yard at 3119 Jerome Ave. in The Bronx.

The issue surfaced Sept. 23 when the Daily News reported the material was found at the East New York Depot. Close to 1,000 bus operators, maintenance workers, dispatchers and clerical workers are based at the facility, which was built in 1947.
“Nearly all the vents that pump air into the first three floors of the sprawling depot are lined with asbestos-laced cloth,” The News reported. “The cancer-causing material was discovered earlier this year, but sources said transit officials have turned a blind eye to the potential health crisis.”

Workers Not Warned

The paper reported that employees at the depot had “not been alerted to the problem since MTA officials learned about it earlier this year. “Asbestos was also found in the depot’s boiler room in 2017, emails from high-ranking MTA officials show,” the paper reported. “The dangerous material was removed by August 2018, records show. MTA bosses have since declined to provide an asbestos monitoring program for some people who worked in the area.”

A Metropolitan Transportation Authority spokesperson said the agency was being proactive in addressing the issue, kept employees briefed through their managers and had commissioned third-party independent air testing that confirmed there was no airborne contamination at the Brooklyn facility.

“There is no health risk to workers in the building. Claims to the contrary are false and irresponsible,” spokesperson Shams Tarek said in a statement. The MTA is developing a plan to deal with the asbestos materials flagged in its investigation, he said.

According to the agency, on March 5 a “limited survey” was done in the fan room and the “results affirmed” that while there was some material containing asbestos, “it posed no hazard to the workplace.”

On Aug. 15, according to the MTA’s timeline, there was testing done and “air samples did not indicate any asbestos issues. Subsequent testing has continued to “show that there is no exposure hazard at this facility.”

‘Gamble With Lives’

At a Sept. 25 press conference in front of the East New York Bus Depot, Council Member Rafael Espinal, Brooklyn Borough President Eric Adams, Mr. Phillips, Local 100 Vice President J.P. Patafio and several union members criticized what they claimed was the MTA’s delayed response.

“We don’t gamble with people’s lives,” Mr. Phillips told reporters. “The MTA themselves did not know what they were dealing with. It was our workers who said you need to get this done. They did not bring the right people in to do a real abatement and have this material tested.”

“This is workers’ health and safety—it’s the community’s health and safety,” Mr. Patafio said. “They gotta get off their ass and they gotta fix it.”

Union officials were particularly concerned about the potential health impact on Oscar Delgado, who worked at the World Trade Center immediately after 9/11 for five days helping to set up the temporary generators underground on the Number 1 subway line.

“He survived 9/11, survived cancer and for 15 years, after he transferred here, has been breathing this toxic air,” said a co-worker.

In an interview, Mr. Adams said he felt that asbestos exposure needed to be part of a “larger conversation” about environmental issues and how the MTA operated in poorer communities of color as opposed to places where gentrification was taking off.
He said he was “alarmed” that despite the well-documented asthma problems in places like East New York, “other areas that did not have the same asthma crisis were given an upgrade in their buses.”

MTA Denies Charge

In a statement, the MTA said there was “zero truth” to Mr. Adams’s assertion that the “deployment of buses is influenced by any consideration of income, race or other demographic measure…Buses are replaced throughout the system on a rolling basis on multiple factors, including fleet age, type of service, and propulsion type.”

The agency said 1,100 new buses would be rolled out citywide under the current capital plan.

Mr. Adams, who is considering a run for Mayor, said the contrast was particularly sharp between subway stops even within his own borough.

“A few blocks down from that bus depot with the asbestos we have the Broadway Junction subway station that’s dilapidated, dark, dreary and constantly smells of urine,” he said. “Then take a look at the Nostrand Ave. Station on Atlantic Avenue and you can see the difference in how the capital plan serves gentrification. It’s not how much green we spend but how much white traffic there is.”

In its response, the MTA denied there was any disparity between locations based on race or socio-economic criteria, asserting that the station cleaning was solely “dictated by ridership numbers and customer traffic at stations.” It said that the largest rosters of cleaners were at the Broadway Junction, Parsons/Archer and Stillwell Ave. stations.
The union representing three New York City Transit Supervisors who were hit with multi-day suspensions for failing to properly advise the agency of unsafe track conditions is vowing to fight the sanctions.

New York City Transit Supervisors John Beckles and Daniel DeSanctis received 15-day suspensions while Jackie Ferguson was banished for five days.

Railroad Ties Fell

The penalties were the result of an NYCT investigation into the circumstances leading up to chunks of rotted railroad ties falling from the elevated portion of the B and the Q lines that run through the Ocean Parkway station in Brooklyn June 14 at 4 a.m.

No one was injured.

Subway Surface Supervisors Association President Mike Carrube said his members were being scapegoated because the union went public about the agency’s record of ignoring dilapidated track conditions.

“We went back a couple of years and we found that our members had submitted on their track inspection reports that these tracks were very dangerous,” he said in a phone interview. “Those track reports were submitted to their superiors and they submit them to someone higher. It went all the way up the chain, and nobody did anything about it.”

Following the Ocean Parkway incident, Mr. Carrube publicly complained about what he said was the lack of follow-up by management on the reports being generated by his members.

“Like everything in the Transit Authority, when their managers are culpable for a problem, they try to pass the buck down the ranks on working people, like our three members here.”

Warned of Ties Hazards

According to NY1, “a database of inspection reports shows a May 2017 inspection that warned of ‘danger of debris from deteriorating ties striking pedestrians/vehicles’ and another inspection report from June 4 stated ‘rotten ties presents a hazard of falling to the street.’”

The union leader said there was also a flaw in the reporting system that may mask issues like the Ocean Parkway track conditions.

“There is a memorandum out there from the Superintendents that tells our people not to duplicate any safety issue that already exists,” he said. “In other words, if you go out there and spot a safety problem and you report it, if the following guy goes out a month later and finds the same condition on the same track, he is not supposed to put it on his report because it’s already there on a previous report.

They say don't duplicate.”
“NYC Transit takes track maintenance very seriously and will never compromise safety,” MTA Communications Director Tim Minton said in a statement. “We investigated an incident involving debris falling from elevated tracks during the summer in Brighton Beach, for which disciplinary action is pending. Given the number and roles of those employees involved, the matter was also referred to the MTA Office of the Inspector General.”

Mr. Carrube said he planned to fight the suspensions through the internal hearing process. “But if we can’t get these three cases tossed out completely, it is definitely going to arbitration,” he said.

Not the First Time

Ten days before the Ocean Parkway mishap, NY1 reported metal debris from a train running on a portion of elevated track of the Number 7 line in Queens narrowly missed a pedestrian.

“It’s at least the third time this year debris has fallen from elevated tracks in Queens” reported the cable-news outlet. “In February, a rotted wood plank impaled the windshield of an SUV beneath the 7 line on Roosevelt Ave. near 65th St.”
Former Vice President Joe Biden accidentally “came out.” Elizabeth Warren wanted to "have some fun."

The two leading contenders in the Democratic presidential primary were among nine top candidates who took questions from voters at an LGBTQ town hall in Los Angeles on Thursday hosted by CNN and the Human Rights Campaign.

But while there is little separation between Biden and Warren in recent national polling and their positions on LGBTQ issues, Thursday’s event provided a clear contrast between their approaches to a key campaign issue and voting bloc.

Story Continued Below

Charlotte Clymer, a transgender woman who works for HRC and tweeted throughout the town halls, gave both candidates high marks for their performances.

“Joe Biden was very impressive tonight, particularly in his candor on Saudi Arabia,” she said, alluding to his comments about it having “very little social redeeming value.”

“As a proud trans woman,” she added, “I trust Elizabeth Warren entirely, and I am confident she is a warrior for the rights of my community.”

After recalling his early support for same-sex marriage, Biden’s segment included him swearing that President Barack Obama kissed him, mistakenly using a phrase to suggest Biden himself is gay and invoking the phrases “gay bathhouses” and “round-the-clock sex.”

An energetic Warren, meanwhile, walked on stage remarking that she was ready “to have some fun tonight.” And she did.

She shot down men who oppose same-sex marriage on religious grounds with a well-received one-liner, sang a children’s church song and also earned applause for targeting Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and Education Secretary Betsy DeVos while still communicating her policy positions.

Biden referenced his 2012 “Meet the Press” interview during which he expressed support for same-sex marriage. Biden told CNN’s Anderson Cooper on Thursday that he had already expressed his position to Obama and simply answered a question honestly on the Sunday show, but “everybody thought that I had jumped the gun on the president.”

“I went in on Monday, and all the national press is saying Biden’s gonna really get nailed when he walks in and sees the president every morning. He got up, and he walked over to me. He said, ‘Well, you told me,’ and he gave me a kiss,” Biden said, walking toward Cooper to embrace him and leaning in as if he were going to give him a kiss on the cheek. “I swear to God.”

At another point, the former vice president almost used the “coming out” phrase.

“When I came out and …,” he began saying before correcting himself. “When I publicly stated ….”
“That would be news,” Cooper said as the crowd laughed. A smiling Biden joked to Cooper that he had something to tell him as he moved closer and put his arm around him.

“I kind of figured it out a while ago,” Cooper quipped.

In Biden’s final comments before exiting the stage, he tried to make the point that most Americans are afraid, not homophobic. They don’t understand LGBTQ people, he said, or know them.

“It’s not strange. That’s the generic point,” Biden said. “And the more people know that, the more they understand it. Remember, Anderson, back 15, 20 years ago? We talked about this in San Francisco. It was all about, well, you know, gay bathhouses. It was all about round-the-clock sex. Come on, man. Gay couples are likely to stay together longer than heterosexual couples.”

“We’re gonna leave it there, Mr. Vice President,” Cooper said, ending the segment.

“Biden needs better coaching on this — he’s gone off the rails,” tweeted civil rights activist DeRay Mckesson, who is openly gay. “Warren is on fire. It is clear why she is rising in the polls.”

Asked what she would do to ensure passage of the Equality Act in the Senate, where Republicans currently hold the majority, Warren stressed that voters have to elect more Democrats into the upper chamber because LGBTQ protections are a priority for the Democratic Party and she wants to send a message to her GOP colleagues.

“We believe that equal means equal everywhere,” Warren said of Democrats. “I also say it because I want our Republican friends to hear that in the United States Senate. I want them to know that people vote based on LGBTQ issues. So I’m willing to continue to push Mitch McConnell right now, but my No. 1 goal is to make sure that he is not the majority leader come January 2021.”

Warren maintained her support for eliminating the Senate filibuster, telling the crowd that Senate Republicans “can’t have a veto” if Americans want to see change on an issue that has a vocal minority of opposition.

And while some past education secretaries have been “better” using their authority over public schools, the rules and their enforcement, “We’ve had one that’s been a whole lot worse,” Warren said. “Her name is Betsy DeVos. So when I’m president, she’ll be gone.”

Warren was also asked about how she would respond on the campaign trail if a supporter told her that his or her faith says marriage is between a man and a woman.

“Well, I’m gonna assume it’s a guy who said that,” Warren said. “And I’m gonna say then just marry one woman. I’m cool with that — assuming you can find one.”

It was yet another applause line for Warren, who also drew cheers from the audience for pausing her comments to acknowledge that she loves saying “as president” and vowing to “do what a president can do all by herself” to end the AIDS pandemic.

Though Warren grew up in a conservative household and was a registered Republican before becoming a Democrat, the Massachusetts senator said that while she doesn’t “have notes from when I was a little kid,” she also doesn’t remember having a different position on same-sex marriage. “I mean, to me it’s about what I learned in the church I grew up in,” she explained. “First song I ever remember singing is: ‘They are yellow, black and white. They are precious in his sight. Jesus loves all the children in the world.’”
“The hatefulness, frankly, always really shocked me, especially for people of faith because I think the whole foundation is the worth of every single human being,” she said. “And I get people may make decisions for themselves that are different than the decisions other people make, but by golly, those are decisions about you. They are not decisions that tell people what they can or cannot do.”

Warren said she regrets criticizing a judge’s ruling that granted transition-related surgery to a transgender inmate during her 2012 Senate campaign but failed to take a strong position on whether she believed crimes against transgender people should be charged as hate crimes.

“I think we could if we think that’s going to be the most effective way to make change,” she said.

Nine candidates participated in the marathon series of town halls, which lasted until midnight, including Sens. Kamala Harris of California, Cory Booker of New Jersey and Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota, former Texas Rep. Beto O'Rourke, former Housing and Urban Development Secretary Julián Castro, billionaire environmental activist Tom Steyer and South Bend (Ind.) Mayor Pete Buttigieg.

Sen. Bernie Sanders of Vermont pulled out of the event after recently suffering a heart attack, but his campaign released a statement Thursday afternoon expressing support for the LGBTQ community.

Buttigieg, the only openly gay candidate in the 2020 field, spoke between Biden and Warren in personal terms about what it was like for him to come out and whether he believes God made him gay.

"There is no right or wrong way to be gay, to be queer, to be trans," Buttigieg said.
New York, NY – Board members of the New York Committee for Occupational Safety and Health (NYCOSH) unanimously elected a new NYCOSH Board Chair, Jessica Garcia, Assistant to the President at the Retail Wholesale and Department Store Union. Ms. Garcia was named upon the retirement of former Chair, NYSUT Safety and Health Specialist Wendy Hord.

Ms. Hord was a board member for more than three decades and stepped down after her retirement on September 20, 2019. She served as board chair for two years. In her leadership role, she led NYCOSH’s creation of its 2019-2024 Strategic Plan, which sets the stage for the organization’s future strategy.

“I’m honored to have been elected as NYCOSH’s new board chair. I have big shoes to fill in succeeding Wendy Hord, whose leadership and expertise I found invaluable on the board,” said Jessica Garcia.

“I look forward to working with the NYCOSH board and staff to implement a visionary and bold strategic plan to make New York’s worksites safer and healthier spaces for all workers.”

“We are grateful for the leadership of Wendy Hord as Board Chair and longtime NYCOSH board member. Her contributions to our work over the years have been tremendous and we are ever so grateful to her for her service and dedication,” said Charlene Obernauer, NYCOSH executive director.

“We are also excited about Jessica’s new leadership role. With the tireless, passionate leadership of our new Chair, we are excited and prepared for the years ahead.”
ALBANY -- The Albany-based Alliance for Quality Education, a statewide organization that advocates for increased state school funding, named Jasmine Gripper as the organization's new executive director.

Gripper, who previously served as the group's legislative director, is set to take charge of the group in January, replacing Billy Easton, who led the organization since 2005.

The group has advocated on behalf of families and students for nearly 20 years, lobbying lawmakers, visiting schools across the state and working in communities to highlight funding disparities, limited programming and other shortcomings in the state's education system.

The organization in the past has worked closely with Schenectady school Superintendent Larry Spring, who has opened district schools to AQE fact-finding missions and for press events aimed at promoting increased funding to low-income districts that serve large populations of minority students.

Gripper started her career as a classroom teacher, beginning as a teacher internationally before returning to New York to teach in Brooklyn. But she eventually turned to organizing and activism after she realized that education policy is often forged by people with little or no classroom experience. She has worked at AQE since 2013.
Together, Climate Change Activists & Labor Can Make A ‘Just Transition’ Work For All

Joe Maniscalco - Labor Press - October 10, 2019

New York, NY – Climate change activists with Extinction Rebellion are conducting a series of direct, non-violent actions around town this week that could be a guaranteed game-changer if the full force of organized labor was also brought to bear.

Imagine, the impact of hardhats, teachers, transit workers and other trade unionists joining shoulder-to-shoulder with Extinction Rebellion New York in shutting down traffic at just one or two intersections around midtown.

Imagine, if climate change activists and trade unionists still worried about the possibility of immediate job losses or a degraded standard of living, could get together, put everyone’s mind at ease, and hammer out the truly nitty-gritty details of a “just transition” to a green economy.

Imagine, too, if a few cops with their own families to worry about, also joined in, or, at the very least, lent their support in some capacity during this week’s actions. Far from fanciful or fantastical — everyone convinced that we have as little as 10 years left to quit burning fossil fuels and shift to renewable energy or face the truly catastrophic consequences of global warming — see the radical change that the above represents as vital to our collective survival.

In a letter sent to the New York City Council prior to this week’s schedule of direct, nonviolent actions, the Political Strategy Working Group for Extinction Rebellion’s New York Chapter wrote, “We write on behalf of Extinction Rebellion New York to request to meet with you directly and that you join us in supporting demands we will put forward during the October 7 week of climate rebellion to address the climate emergency.”

The letter goes on to state that despite the City Council’s Climate Emergency Declaration advanced this past June, “not enough is being done to act on and follow up with clear, actionable steps to mitigate the issues identified in the declaration.” Extinction Rebellion got its start in the UK last year, and has quickly gone on to become a worldwide movement with 631 branches in 72 countries. What climate change activists want and the radical strategies they are pursuing to achieve those goals, should be familiar to every American trade unionist out there. “You’re basically holding the economy of a city to ransom,” Roger Hallam, Extinction Rebellion co-founder and researcher at King’s College London, told award-winning journalist Chris Hedges earlier this year. “It’s the same dynamic as a labor strike. You want to get into the room and have a negotiation.”

Labor wants, and must have, a seat at that very same table.

“If young people want labor’s support, they need to be advocating with us for a just transition,” Mason Tenders District Council Assistant Business Manager Mike Hellstrom told LaborPress during last month’s Global Climate Strike actions in NYC. “They have to get this ‘just transition’ down [cold]. Corporate power will shift from blue collar to green collar if we come together to save the planet.” The unrealized potential to instill trade unionism in the hearts and minds of a whole new generation working people, while creating scores of new union jobs with good middle-class wages and benefits, only makes the cost of continued inaction on climate change and the reticence surrounding a “just transition” to a Green New Deal, all the more tragic.

As one longtime trade unionist told LaborPress, “[Organized labor] missed an opportunity with Occupy Wall Street — we should have backed those kids.”

Organized labor still has an opportunity to back the kids and create a better world for everyone.
U.S. Manufacturing 'Sinks To Decade-Low, Stoking Economic Fear'
Bani Sapra/The Associated Press - Via WNY Labor Today - October 10, 2019

(WASHINGTON, D.C.) - U.S. factory activity hit a decade low last month in the face of President Donald Trump's trade conflicts, adding to a weakening picture of the Global Economy.

The Institute for Supply Management, an association of purchasing managers, said this month that its Manufacturing Index shrank for a second straight month to 47.8% in September, down from 49.1% in August. Any reading below 50 signals that the sector is contracting.

Investors on Wall Street responded by dumping stocks, given that the slowdown in manufacturing fanned fears that growth might be slowing more than expected and could squeeze corporate earnings. The Dow Jones Industrial Average, which had been up early in the day, was down about 300 points in mid-afternoon trading.

Trump's nearly 15-month trade war with China and his tariffs on steel, aluminum and other products were intended to help U.S. manufacturers, but his confrontational trade policies have so far had the opposite effect and helped spur the Federal Reserve to cut interest rates in September for a second time this year.

Weakening business confidence and softening global demand have hit American factories hard, prompting pullbacks in production and employment.

This month's ISM measure reported the lowest level of manufacturing activity since June 2009, the last month of the Great Recession.

Manufacturing makes up only about a tenth of the U.S. economy, but analysts see the survey as a warning sign about the trade conflict.

Because the latest round of Trump tariffs on Chinese imports affects many consumer goods, economists say weakening business sentiment could spill over to slow consumer spending, which supports the bulk of the U.S. economy. Fotios Raptis, a Senior Economist at TD Economics, suggested that the U.S. economy could be headed for a downturn if the ISM Manufacturing Index dropped even lower.

And given factory declines overseas as well, the global economy is also at rising risk.

"The U.S. economy is at the precipice of an economy-wide contraction in output," Raptis said.

The World Trade Organization (WTO) expects volumes of traded goods to rise 1.2% this year, its weakest pace since 2009. In addition, surveys of purchasing firms compiled by the data firm IHS Markit point toward declines in manufacturing in South Korea, Japan, Indonesia and Malaysia, all of them export-reliant countries.

The U.K. Factory Sector has also remained in negative terrain for five consecutive months, its longest stretch since the financial crisis. On Twitter, Trump is keeping up his steady attacks on the Fed, which he has regularly criticized for not reducing rates more aggressively.

Trump - in particular, has argued the Fed's Rate Hikes last year had elevated the relative value of the dollar, which makes U.S. goods more expensive overseas.
FDNY Memorial Service Honors 8 Who Lost Lives While on the Job
Bob Hennelly - the Chief Leader - October 11, 2019

The Oct. 11 FDNY Annual Memorial Service at the Cathedral Church of Saint John the Divine celebrated the lives of three Firefighters who died in the line of duty and four firefighters and one Emergency Medical Technician who were on the active-duty roster when they passed.

Those who perished in the line of duty included Firefighter Steven Pollard, Ladder Co. 170, who died responding to a motor-vehicle accident; Firefighter Christopher Slutman, Ladder 27, who was killed while on active duty as a Marine in Afghanistan; and Lieut. Brian J. Sullivan, Squad 41, who died of a heart attack after a grueling 24-hour tour of duty.

Other 5 Casualties

The active members who died in the same year included Firefighter Michael J. Reilly, Engine 79; Firefighter Faisal Coto, Engine 245; Firefighter Stephen J. Brady, Engine 84; EMT Adam Vazquez, Bureau of Health Services; and Captain Michael C. Thomas, Division 8.

In his welcoming remarks to the several thousand Firefighters inside and outside the massive gothic cathedral, the Right Rev. Clifton Daniel III sounded more like a local parish priest thanking his local volunteer fire department for saving his church, rather than the dean of the world’s sixth largest church.

Reflecting on the two fires in the landmark church, one this past Palm Sunday, and a more serious six-alarm blaze in 2001, Reverend Daniel said “90 percent of life is just showing up, and twice in the last 20 years some of you, many of you, have shown up here at this Cathedral,” he said. “And I can’t tell you how grateful I am that you did show up.”

He continued, “You put everything out on the line for your fellow citizens you don’t even know, perhaps in a place you have never been before.”

‘No Greater Love’

“The scripture says there is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for a friend,” said Mayor de Blasio. “The members of the FDNY go even further….Every one of you puts their lives on the line, not just for a friend, but even for people you have never met. That’s how deep the call of duty is.”

Throughout the service, the speakers directly addressed the surviving relatives of the eight members of the department whose lives were being commemorated.

“We will never forget your loved ones,” vowed Fire Commissioner Daniel Nigro. He reminded those assembled that the Annual Memorial Day, which commemorates the 1,553 FDNY lives lost in the 154 years of its history, is the department’s “most important day in the calendar.”

That resonated with attendee Michele Peregrin, a financial analyst for the City Council, who was there to support her significant other, Firefighter Stanley Aviles, who is with Ladder 59.

“It was my birthday and we were going to get away and he had taken all the days off so we could,” she said. “And then this was calendared for today, and so I figured I would come here to support him. He is not just committed to his job; he loves his job.”
The City Council is weighing a package of bills that would create a city agency to help senior citizens find jobs and require the city to investigate age discrimination in the workplace.

“We’re tired of being swept under the rug,” said City Council Member Margaret Chin at an Oct. 8 City Hall rally. “Age discrimination creates a toxic workplace culture that results in job loss, financial strain and perpetuates the myth that when you hit a certain age, you are no longer valued in the economy.”

60% Report Bias

More than 60 percent of workers across the country 45 or older reported experiencing or witnessing age discrimination on the job, according to an AARP survey. A report by the Urban Institute and ProPublica using data from the University of Michigan Health and Retirement Study found that 56 percent of respondents 50 or older said that they were pushed out of a longtime job. Just 1 in 10 were able to find another job paying the same salary. Ms. Chin, the bills’ sponsor, noted that addressing age discrimination in the workplace was especially important because seniors increasingly cannot afford to stop working. She also said that the prejudice against older workers disproportionately affected women, who have already had to deal with sexism throughout their careers.

One woman, Regina Matson, described her difficulty finding work after being let go from financial firm Morgan Stanley during the 2008 recession. After being unemployed for the first time in her career since she began working in 1981, she couldn’t find a job for two years.

When she did land a full-time position, she said that she was harassed because of her age, including being teased for using an AOL email account. Although she was spearheading a project, she said she was purposely left out of meetings, and was eventually let go.

“You feel so less-than because you’re not able to find work, I don’t even know who I am sometimes,” Ms. Matson said.

Covers Public, Private Sectors

The proposed legislation, which is being backed by Council Members Mathieu Eugene and Diana Ayala, seeks to prevent age discrimination in both public- and private sector jobs. The age of the average city employee is 44, according to the Department of Citywide Administrative Services, and about a third of the city’s workforce is 50 or older. One bill would mandate each city agency annually provide trainings to identify age discrimination. Last year, the city Commission on Human Rights received 193 claims of age discrimination, and 119 of those were related to workplace discrimination.

If passed, one bill would require the commission to submit to the Council its findings from investigations of claims of on-the-job age-discrimination.

“In government, the absence of data generally goes hand in hand with the absence of policy. That’s what makes this package so smart,” said Paul Nagle, head of the Stonewall Community Development Corporation, which works to provide housing for LGBTQ senior citizens.
The Nobel Prize in Chemistry was awarded Oct. 9 to M. Stanley Whittingham, a distinguished Professor of Chemistry and Materials Science at the State University of New York’s Binghamton University.

Mr. Whittingham, who has worked at Binghamton since 1988, was selected by the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences for his work during the 1970s creating the first functional lithium-ion batteries, which are used in cell phones and laptops and have also enabled the development of electric cars. The battery was too explosive to be viable.

Other Academics Honored

John B. Goodenough, a Professor at the University of Texas at Austin’s Cockrell School of Engineering and Akira Yoshino of Meijo University in Japan were also awarded for their work advancing the technology.

Governor Cuomo noted that Mr. Whittingham’s work “has far-reaching applications, including helping New York reach our goals to reduce carbon emissions and achieve 100 percent zero carbon electricity by 2040.”

SUNY Chancellor Kristina M. Johnson applauded Mr. Whittingham’s decades of work teaching students in the public-university system. “Distinguished Professor Whittingham has worked diligently on his craft for 30 years, and at the same time he has dedicated his time to help others pursue their research through his past work with the SUNY Research Foundation and on campus,” she said. “He shows our students what can be accomplished.”

‘A Shining Example’

Fred Kowal, president of the United University Professions, which represents SUNY faculty members, added that Mr. Whittingham “is a shining example of what makes SUNY great—its people.” The union credited the Distinguished Professor for helping to build the university’s materials science and engineering program. The proposals would also create an Office of Older Adult Workforce Development, which would assist older people who are looking for work or job-training.

“A lot of times when older workers go to the workforce centers, they do not get the special attention they need,” Ms. Chin said. “That’s why it’s important to set up an office just for them so if they need computer training, they can get another job or keep the job they have.”

Mr. Whittingham said that he was “overcome with gratitude at receiving this award.”

“The research I have been involved with for over 30 years has helped advance how we store and use energy at a foundational level, and it is my hope that this recognition will help to shine a much-needed light on the nation's energy future,” he said in a statement.
The Sidney Hillman Foundation, in conjunction with the City University of New York, is launching a training program to familiarize reporters with issues connected to labor and the world of work.

It will begin with a two-day event at CUNY’s Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism Jan. 9 and 10 that will be convened by Tom Robbins, the award-winning reporter best known for his work at the Village Voice, Daily News and New York Times who is the school’s Investigative Journalist in Residence.

Areas Covered

Classes over that two-day period are expected to focus on matters from covering labor relations to the way globalization, technology and climate change are disrupting work. Faculty members, including former New York Times labor reporter Steven Greenhouse; ProPublica’s Michael Grabell, who covers labor, economy and trade; and Sharon Block, the executive director of Harvard’s Labor and Worklife Program, will walk participants through how they covered stories and how to find and use government and corporate data. The curriculum will cover the National Labor Relations Act, the Department of Labor, and newly emerging employee organizations.

Alexandra Lescaze, executive director of the Hillman Foundation, said in a statement, “there is a work lens to nearly every story. Our goal is to give the reporters the expertise to bring this framework to their reporting and to identify these stories and cover them skillfully.”

Mr. Robbins noted, “More and more people labor at jobs without any safety net when it comes to what they are paid and their daily conditions of work. These are rich, important stories that need to be told and we want to provide journalists with some of the tools they need to help tell them.”

‘Strengthen Labor Coverage’

And Sarah Bartlett, Dean of the Newmark J-School, said that “we consider it an important part of our mission to offer in-depth training to mid-career reporters, particularly as business pressures on our industry have virtually eliminated that role for newsrooms. We’re thrilled to partner with the Hillman Foundation to ensure that labor coverage around the country is strengthened.”

The program, which covers all the participants expenses, is being funded by a donation from Jesse C. Crawford, the president and CEO if the Atlanta-based Crawford Media Services Inc.

Applications must be submitted by Nov. 25. For further information, contact Ms. Lescaze at 646-4486413 or at Alex@HillmanFoundation.org.