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As we approach this year’s Labor Day, workers find themselves in a steady, slow decline in wages for their work. According to the Economic Policy Institute, since 1979, worker productivity has increased by more than 69% while wages have only grown 11.6%. Over the last 40 years, workers have been working harder, but not getting ahead.

Many workers today do not know the world of our parents and grandparents, where jobs were plentiful and paid life-sustaining wages. They also do not know a world of a vibrant labor movement that drove up wages and benefits for all workers and helped create the middle class. Corporate attacks against unions have been attacks on workers who want to provide for their families and who hold out hope for a piece of the American dream.

In addition to corporate attacks on workers, bad governmental decision making, technological changes and changing forces in our national economy have forced a majority of our workers to their economic knees. In Central New York, we have watched job loss after job loss, the latest being 150 AT&T workers here in Syracuse. A report by the Pew Research Center showed that the Syracuse middle class has shrunk since 2000, and our manufacturing base has decreased in the same time period. Many of those entities were unionized facilities.

But it isn’t solely these attacks that have weakened the labor unions. Much like other organizations, we have flaws that are reflected in our larger community: a suspicion of those who are different from us, petty rivalries, not always holding each other accountable, and eschewing innovation in favor of tradition. These flaws have limited our reach, but our core values hold true: justice, equality, promoting the general welfare and most of all, solidarity. At our core, we do believe that all workers are in it together, and that we all do better, when we all do better.

We continue to fight for fair wages and benefits that not only lift our members up, but also workers throughout our community. We advocate for larger issues in our society, such as a $15 minimum wage, healthcare for all, and for racial justice. We want to build a community where we all can benefit and have an opportunity to thrive.

This Labor Day, it’s time for our community to get up from our knees. We need to take control of our future. We must acknowledge where we can make changes and make good decisions. Instead of waiting for a big company, like General Electric or Amazon, to be our salvation, we need to focus our own resources on creating jobs with local businesses for local residents. We need to hold accountable those employers who wantonly violate their employees’ rights to organize a union, and ensure that workers have a voice in their workplace. We need to have our leadership reflect our community. Syracuse is now a “majority-minority” city, and a union member is more likely to be a woman and/or a person of color. It is time to lift up these voices and leaders who don’t fit the usual demographic profile.

In the past, unions provided the backbone to build the middle class, and it’s time to strengthen this backbone again for a better future.
As A New School Year Begins, NYSUT Urges Stakeholders To 'Refocus Their Efforts On Serving Our Students'

NYSUT - September 3, 2019

(ALBANY, NEW YORK) - As the new school year begins this week, the New York State United Teachers (NYSUT) Union and its Local Affiliates will continue their fight for State and Local policies that ensure all New York students have access to a high-quality education.

“Throughout my career as an Educator, a new school year has represented an opportunity to renew my commitment to my students and implement new ways to engage them with the curriculum they need to learn to succeed,” NYSUT President Andy Pallotta said. “As the 2019-20 school year begins, I challenge everyone with a hand in steering Public Education - from School Board Members to State Education Officials and Legislators - to consider how we are currently serve our children and set sincere goals for how together we will improve educational outcomes for every New York student in the coming year.”

With the release of Grades 3-through-8 State Test Results in August showing small gains, NYSUT has renewed calls for the State Education Department to roll up its sleeves and finally Correct the Tests. That includes: Fixing the invalid scoring benchmarks that have mislabeled our children; Creating shorter, developmentally appropriate tests; and Addressing the issues with computer-based testing that officials have repeatedly promised, but failed, to fix.

“While testing may be federally-mandated, there is no mandate that our students face stress, anxiety and, in far too many cases, tears,” NYSUT Executive Vice President Jolene DiBrango said. “There are seven months until students in (Grades 3-through-8) will sit for the next round of exams. That’s more than enough time for the state Education Department to make real progress toward correcting the tests.”

Looking ahead to the 2020 Legislative Session beginning in January, Pallotta urged State Elected Officials to take time to carefully review the difficult budgetary decisions many school districts and colleges have been forced to make and consider how New York will boost Public Education in the next State Budget.

“Recent increases in State aid for our schools have helped us make gains, but there is much work left to be done,” Pallotta said. “Many schools have basic needs like new computers, some need additional Staff and others are facing multi-million-dollar infrastructure project costs. All students deserve the best public education New York can provide them and providing proper funding is essential to having great schools and colleges.”

NYSUT represents more than 600,000 Members across New York State in education, human services and health care. NYSUT is affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the National Education Association (NEA) and the AFL-CIO.
(ITHACA, NEW YORK) - The newly-formed GreenStar Workers Organizing Group has begun a public push to Unionize all Employees of the Organic Grocery Store to combat what they say are unfair and unreasonable actions by management and to fight for more equitable workplace practices from the company.

The effort has been ongoing for over a year, including last week as Workers rallied in Ithaca (Pictured Above/Photo Courtesy of the Communications Workers of America Via The Social Network Facebook), as Employees have begun to raise complaints regarding what they feel are instances of discrimination along racial and gender lines, unequal wages and inconsistent personnel policies, to name a few.

These problems, they said, have been exacerbated as their efforts have gained momentum among Staffers.

The Workers also filed charges with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) against GreenStar management (The outline of the case can be read here on the NLRB site). The charges include six instances of what the Organizers allege are examples of Unfair Labor Practices (ULPs) and attempts to squash the Unionizing effort; The firing of former Employee (and Organizer) Alessandro Powell; Threats from managers and human resources staffers; A promotion in exchange for withdrawal from Union support; and the Withholding of a promotion for due to Union support - all of which are purported to have happened in June.

Five of the organizers spoke with The Ithaca Times about their experiences and concerns, four of whom (Yarra Berger, Gnu Quintal, Michael Amadeo and Melissa Smith) are still Employees at the locally and beloved Grocery Store Cooperative, which recently announced West End expansion plans.

Powell, as previously mentioned, is now a former Employee - although he is still involved in the organizing efforts. He was recently terminated by GreenStar after just a month of employment, which he believes was a result of his open Unionization sympathies and his work with the organizers.

Powell said GreenStar’s stated reason for firing him was a discrepancy on his resume, although he is convinced it is because of his organizing.

His situation, they say, illustrates the precarious nature of GreenStar Workers’ employment status, another grievance the Workers hold that they hope Unionizing can cure.

The Workers say they are At-Will Employees, which mean they can be fired without cause.

The Organizers said those marginalized face discrimination and poor treatment from management and customers without sufficient help from within GreenStar to properly deal with those situations, another thing they intend to address during any further Unionization and subsequent negotiation effort.
Are millennials saving labor unions?
Membership increasing in Ithaca, nationally
Matt Steecker - Ithaca Journal - September 4, 2019

Genevieve Rand, a 22-year-old woman who worked at Nikki Green in downtown Ithaca when it was still open, said she noticed there were several problems at the restaurant before she and her coworkers decided to take action.

"Our wages were very low, below the minimum wage of New York, and had stagnated for a long time," Rand said. Neither were any employees promoted after working for a year, Rand said.

"The organization was suffering from people not feeling committed and satisfied with their wages," she said.

The minimum cash wage for food service workers in upstate New York is $7.50.

Because of issues with wages and other problems, Rand and her coworkers tried to organize into a union. Rand's efforts align with a local and national trend.

Younger workers at several local small businesses have tried to organized recently, and the largest increase in union membership nationwide is by people under the age of 35.

Youth movement in unions
Labor unions are pretty much one of the things millennials actually haven't killed so far.

There were close to 400,000 more union members under the age of 35 in 2017 than in 2016, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Seventy-six percent of the union membership increase in 2017 was workers younger than 35.

Out of 858,000 net new jobs for workers under age 35 that year, almost one in four (23%) was a union job, according to the Economic Policy Institute.

"We all noticed problems as lower-level laborers, and so we decided to come together and join collectively to figure what the issues were and to send a letter to management to explain what we needed and why," Rand said of Nikki Green.

The business owner, Jacky Falkenberg, moved to California before operating the store for a year, and operated it remotely before closing, Rand said.

So Rand and her coworkers reached out to the Tompkins County Workers Center.

"I'd say that (what is occurring with) workers at these small businesses locally is related to the spirit of organizing that's been happening locally and happening recently, partially because we're really out there encouraging workers to organize," said Pete Meyers, coordinator for the Tompkins County Workers Center. "And there's a larger spirit out there across the country around such organizing, especially with younger workers, from what I can see."

New policies were introduced to make the business more like a café and less like a restaurant, Rand said. However, the policies did not make work easier for employees. It just gave them additional work.
"We felt that our voice would have helped adapt to changing business needs ... It would help the business adapt to problems it was facing day to day and not just problems on a spreadsheet," Rand said. "Being removed from the floor of the business, the owner did not see how morale was affecting the performance of everything. People don’t work as well with each other, they aren’t as efficient, they don’t communicate as well together. We were stuck in the gears of the business and not operating well. We felt that being respected was an important."

After opening in February 2018, Nikki Green closed in May of this year, a few days after workers said they were organizing. However, it would be a stretch to say employees' efforts in organizing were the single reason why the business closed.

The business also had to deal with finance issues, according to a message on Facebook. There were also road closures and noise caused by local construction.

Baristas unite
Baristas who formed a union at Gimme! Coffee, whose workers fall in the demographic of people under 35, also expressed complaints about their wages. Samantha Mason, 27, also said paid sick days and affordable health insurance were not available to her.

In addition, she said she has contended with what she called an insufficient, flawed raise structure and overscheduling.

She still works for Gimme! Coffee and said she has seen unfair disciplinary firings during her employment.

The catalyst for her making the decision to organize was a performance review she received in April 2017, she said.

"We want to have more power at work over our working conditions," Mason said.

Eight baristas wrote a letter to CEO Kevin Cuddeback stating the business could be a better place for workers, and Gimme! Coffee responded by holding meetings. The Tompkins County Workers Center stepped in and told Gimme! Coffee that having an anti-union stance would be a bad idea.

Gimme! Coffee took a neutral stance as pro-union baristas organized and did not interfere with their efforts.

With help from Workers United Rochester Regional Join Board, Gimme! Coffee baristas ratified their first union contract in February 2018.

Their contract included a union grievance and arbitration process to resolve workplace problems, a paid sick day program, wage increases, a union "just cause" clause to protect workers from unfair discipline or discharge, and monthly joint labor/management meetings.

"It definitely helped to have an institutional and legal backing," Mason said.

Mason may be one of many people who share similar experiences in the service industry.

The service sector accounts for 82.9% of total employment in New York and more than 77% of all employment in the United States, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. "We are really screwed when it comes to the economy and what are available are really s----- low-wage jobs," Mason said. "A lot of us have school debt. We don't have access to better living conditions because of low wages, working conditions and school debt. Low-income jobs are what are available."
GreenStar workers begin organizing
GreenStar Cooperative, which employs about 200 workers, is another local business that has had owner-labor conflicts. GreenStar's workers are currently at-will employees, and some pro-union employees have begun organizing.

Brandon Kane, GreenStar's general manager, has denied all claims of unfair labor practices.

Like Gimme! Coffee, there are several pro-union employees at GreenStar under the age of 35.

On July 18, the GreenStar Organizing Committee filed a document with the National Labor Relations Board accusing the business of a violation of a labor act for seven different incidents:

- Discharging an employee for union activity in 2019.
- Threatening employees in front of other workers because they signed a letter to management regarding the discharged employee, and terms and conditions of employment.
- Promoting an employee in 2019 in exchange for that employee rescinding support of the union.
- Ordering employees to stop distributing union materials at the West End location and threatening employees with discipline if they continued to distribute union materials.
- Two managers warning an employee to stay away from negativity.
- Management denying a promotion and discharging for union activity.
- Informing an employee that workplace concerns could not be discussed with other employees without also discussing the same concerns with (redacted).

According to the GreenStar Organizing Committee, the business' Dewitt location has lost a store manager and several employees since March. Over the past five months, two new employees were hired, leaving nearly every shift understaffed since the beginning of August.

"Employees are now experiencing burnout that is affecting our well-being inside and outside of the workplace," GreenStar Dewitt location workers wrote in a letter to the GreenStar Human Resources Department. "We have reached our limits and we want answers."

"Young people need to get involved in the labor movement because labor politics affects us and everyone who comes after us," Rand said. "Labor situations are getting worse, and there is no sign of them getting better for the working class. Young people have the energy to do something."
(BUFFALO, NEW YORK) – In a joint statement, the New York State Nurses Association (NYSNA) and Erie County Medical Center (ECMCC) have announced the ratification of a new four-year contract that calls for continued quality health care services for patients and fair wages for Nurses.

The ratification vote took place at the end of August and ECMC’s Board of Directors unanimously approved the new contract on August 30th.

Highlights of the four-year contract include: 3% wage increases in each year of the agreement; Maintenance of current health care coverage with a 15% contribution; The addition of 45 new Nursing positions with a structure to give NYSNA input into Staffing Units throughout the hospital.

“This contract is a huge win for the patients of the Erie County Medical Center and the Nurses who work day and night to care for the community,” Registered Nurse (RN) and NYSNA Member Chiqkena Collins said. “The agreement ensures fair wages and benefits. It gives Nurses a significant role in staffing decisions. We commend hospital management for their partnership in negotiating this contract.”

NYSNA - New York’s largest Union and Professional Association for RNs, represents 42,000 Front-Line Nurses across the State.

“Thanks to the leadership and advocacy of NYSNA Representatives and the hard work of ECMC’s negotiation team, this contract provides our exceptional Nurses with competitive wages and incentives that will enhance our ability to recruit in the marketplace, while continuing ECMC’s financial stability and growth,” ECMCC President and CEO Thomas J. Quatroche Jr. said. “Most importantly, both NYSNA and ECMC focused throughout the negotiations on providing increased staffing, which will ultimately benefit our patients. Thanks also to ECMCC’s Board of Directors for their steadfast support throughout this process and for their unanimous approval of the contract.”

Established as a New York State Public Benefit Corporation, ECMC is an advanced Academic Medical Center with 573 inpatient beds, on- and off-campus health centers, more than 30 out-patient specialty care services and Terrace View, a 390-bed long-term care facility.

ECMC is Western New York’s only Level 1 Adult Trauma Center, as well as a regional center for burn care, behavioral health services, transplantation, medical oncology and head and neck cancer care, rehabilitation - and a major teaching facility for the University at Buffalo.
Cuomo wants to make New York 'Buy American’ act permanent
By Rikki Reyna and Cathy Burke - NY Daily News - September 7, 2019

Gov. Cuomo wants his “Buy American” intitiative to become a New York fixture.

The governor on Saturday announced his plan to put the law — which is set to expire in 2020 — permanently on the books, touting it as “some of the most progressive pro-worker, pro-labor, pro-middle class initiatives and reforms in the United States period."

He also took a veiled swipe at the Trump administration’s economic strategy.

“What we’ve shown is that we can protect workers, advance workers and grow the economy,” he said at a Labor Day parade in Manhattan. “This has been a false choice that Washington offers — that if you do these pro-worker reforms, you’re going to slow the economy. No, no, no ... An economy that works for the worker is the strongest economy and that’s what we show here in New York.”

Cuomo first announced the “New York Buy American” act in January 2017, and the law was signed the following December. It requires all state road and bridge projects costing more than $1 million to use American-made structural steel and iron.

In a statement Saturday, the governor said making the law a permanent policy would be “at the top of the list" for next year’s budget priorities.

“What Buy America says is the steel that we buy and the iron we buy must be American made. That does two things: it protects and grows New York jobs and it makes sure that we have the best quality steel and iron going into our infrastructure projects," he said.

Those projects include Mario M. Cuomo Bridge, which used 110,000 tons of American-made steel; the first two phases of the Kosciuszko Bridge, which used 6,850 tons of steel; and the Kew Gardens Interchange, which used 11,500 tons of steel, the governor said.

“No state is building what we are building here, over 250 billion dollars in infrastructure, and we want to make sure these projects last 100 years,” Cuomo said Saturday. "To do that you have to know that steel, that concrete, that iron, is top quality material and you only know that if that is made right here in the good ol’ USA.”
If you are looking for the best states for workers, steer clear of “right to work” states, says a new study.

The Oxfam America report reveals that the ten worst states to work in America are the following, which are all “right to work:” Louisiana, Tennessee, North Dakota, Idaho, South Carolina, North Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Virginia.

And the ten best, none of which are “right to work,” are District of Columbia, California, Washington, Massachusetts, Maine, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont, Connecticut, and Minnesota.

Oxfam relied on three indicators for their rankings: wage standards, worker protection, and right to organize. Oxfam also notes that “good ratings on labor policies definitely relate to positive economic and health indicators. For example, states with higher scores have longer life expectancy and lower infant mortality rates.”

For the full report, visit Oxfam here. And for the full list of states, see the ranking below.
NEW YORK, N.Y.—What’s most important for the American labor movement going into 2020? Among 10 union leaders who spoke to LaborPress at the Labor Day parade Sept. 7, the three common themes were solidarity, turning back attacks on workers, and convincing people of the value of unions.

“Unions as a group need to stand together,” says Randi DiAntonio, vice president of the Professional Employees Federation. Sara Nelson, head of the Association of Flight Attendants, says the labor movement needs to work hard to break down “massive, growing inequality,” “the racist, sexist divisions that management has put between us,” and the attitude that “if my neighbor has a good union job, to pull them down.”

The Trump administration is “attacking everything we stand for, from the National Labor Relations Board on down,” says Tony Speelman, president of United Food and Commercial Workers Local 1500, which represents supermarket workers.

“There has never been a greater need to support the middle class and working class,” says John J. Murphy, the United Association of Plumbers’ New York State representative. He sees a “resurgence of the American worker, citing polls that show rising public support for unions.

For 1199SEIU, “organizing the unorganized” is the way to build the power needed to win economic justice, says secretary-treasurer Maria Castaneda. Repealing “all the laws that are preventing workers from organizing” would help that, she adds.

An important step, says Teamsters District Council 16 head George Miranda, would be Congress to repeal the federal law that lets states enact “right to work for less” laws that ban the union shop. Shaun D. Francois, president of AFSCME Local 372, which represents city school paraprofessionals, lunch workers, and other support staff, notes that those laws, like the Supreme Court’s 2018 Janus decision, are based on the attitude that unions shouldn’t ‘force’ employees to pay dues—but expecting a union to run without dues is like expecting the government to function without taxes.

Tiffany Foster, vice president of the American Postal Workers Union’s New York Metro chapter, says people need to remember that unions are what won a decent standard of living for American workers. Before their landmark 1970 strike, she adds, postal workers had as few rights as Walmart workers do today. They were “at will” employees who could be fired at any time without any reason.

Local Concerns

Unions’ more specific and local issues echo those themes, but vary widely. For New York’s building trades, a top concern is “the encroachment of nonunion developers,” says Mike McGuire, political director of the Mason Tenders District Council.

Publicly subsidized affordable housing in the city is built “almost all nonunion,” he adds. The union supports building it—“our members need it too”—but “a lot of developers are getting very rich, and it’s not trickling down to the workers. For public-sector workers, understaffing, outsourcing, and privatization are major problems, say Tiffany Foster, Sean Francois, and PEF contract chair Darlene Williams. “Staffing needs to become contractual language,” says Francois, to guarantee that there are enough workers to do the job.
Low pay is another concern. A lot of Local 372 members make $15 an hour, the city minimum wage. Francois says he’s glad the union worked to raise it, “but you can’t live in New York City off $15 an hour.”

For supermarket workers, says Tony Speelman, it’s organizing while the industry is being threatened by multinational nonunion chains like the Amazon-owned Whole Foods, Trader Joe’s, Aldi, and Walmart. “The little guys have trouble competing,” he adds, referring to unionized local chains such as D’Agostino, Gristedes, and Key Foods.

The Teamsters’ biggest concern is protecting multiemployer pension plans, many of which are facing insolvency because they have too few active workers contributing. “The only way to bail them out is through Congress,” says Miranda. “If it’s not fixed, a lot of retirees are going to take a haircut.” The House has passed a bill to do that—the Butch Lewis Act—but the Senate hasn’t.

For flight attendants, says Sara Nelson, it’s winning equal pay at regional airlines, which averages 45% less than at national airlines. Those carriers, she explains, claim that they can’t afford to pay more because the national airlines award regional routes to the lowest bidder—but passengers pay the same fares as on a bigger airline.

“Climate change,” says 1199’s Castaneda. The SEIU is the largest union supporting the Green New Deal, and 1199 is also backing the “climate strike” protests scheduled for Sept. 20. It’s “organizing our healthcare workers to save the planet… for our survival,” she adds.

The Plumbers’ Murphy, however, calls the “anti-fossil fuel movement” his union’s main local concern. The union is supporting a proposed natural-gas pipeline to Long Island that environmentalists are campaigning to stop. Not having a reliable gas supply could cost up to 10,000 construction jobs on the island, Murphy says.

“We know climate change is real,” he says, but the transition to renewable energy such as offshore wind power “needs to be done intelligently and slowly.”
San Diego — For the ninth consecutive year, Fall Protection – General Requirements is OSHA’s most frequently cited standard, the agency and Safety+Health announced Tuesday at the National Safety Council 2019 Congress & Expo.

The rest of the preliminary list of OSHA’s Top 10 violations for fiscal year 2019 also remained largely unchanged from FY 2018, with only one minor adjustment. Lockout/Tagout, which ranked fifth in FY 2018, climbed one spot to No. 4, trading places with Respiratory Protection.

Patrick Kapust, deputy director of OSHA’s Directorate of Enforcement Programs, presented the list, based on OSHA Information System data from Oct. 1 to Aug. 15. Kevin Druley, associate editor for S+H, moderated the session that took place in the NSC Learning Lab on the Expo Floor.

“Look at your own workplace and see where you can find solutions,” Kapust said during the presentation. “These are common violations. They’ve been around for a while. The answers are out there.”

The full list:

**Fall Protection – General Requirements (1926.501): 6,010 violations**

**Hazard Communication (1910.1200): 3,671**

**Scaffolding (1926.451): 2,813**

**Lockout/Tagout (1910.147): 2,606**

**Respiratory Protection (1910.134): 2,450**

**Ladders (1926.1053): 2,345**

**Powered Industrial Trucks (1910.178): 2,093**

**Fall Protection – Training Requirements (1926.503): 1,773**

**Machine Guarding (1910.212): 1,743**

**Personal Protective and Lifesaving Equipment – Eye and Face Protection (1926.102): 1,411**

“Far too many preventable injuries and deaths occur on the job,” NSC President and CEO Lorraine M. Martin said in a Sept. 10 press release. “The OSHA Top 10 list is a helpful guide for understanding just how adept America’s businesses are in complying with the basic rules of workplace safety. This list should serve as a challenge for us to do better as a nation and expect more from employers. It should also serve as a catalyst for individual employees to recommit to safety.”

Finalized data, along with additional details and exclusive content, will be published in the December issue of S+H.
‘Now This Is Cool:’ Washington, D.C.’s Newest & Tallest Mural Honors A Local Jazz Legend Who Was Also A Union-Represented Mailman
Mikaela Lefrak - WAMU - September 11, 2019

(WASHINGTON, D.C.) - A man in a U.S. Postal Service uniform leans against a brick wall at 14th and U Streets NW. He’s playing a tenor saxophone, with his mailbag resting at his feet. He’s also nine stories tall.

The 70-foot-tall mural of Buck Hill is D.C.’s newest and tallest outdoor portrait.

City officials dedicated it this week as Hill’s family members, historians, property developers, jazz musicians and members of the City’s Letter Carriers Union stood by.

Hill was a native and lifelong Washingtonian who died in 2017 at the age of 90.

He began performing in jazz clubs along the U Street Corridor in the 1940s when the area was known as “Black Broadway.”

He played with jazz greats like Dizzy Gillespie and Miles Davis, but passed up offers to perform in other cities and countries in favor of staying close to home.

Hill also spent more than 40 years as a Mail Carrier with the Postal Service and his dedication to his dual careers earned him the nickname “the Wailin’ Mailman.”

Fittingly, the mural of Hill is kitty-corner to the U.S. Post Office in the Reeves Municipal Center.

It’s one of six new murals by MuralsDC, which is funded by the D.C. Department of Public Works and works with the Commission on the Arts and Humanities.

The painting of Hill presides over one of the city’s most culturally rich neighborhoods, as well as one of its most gentrified.

The city brought in Tucson-based Artist Joe Pagac for the project. He’s painted two MuralsDC projects before, and he worked with local historians and the city to come up with the design.

“I’m just really thankful to have been able to be a part of commemorating Buck in a neighborhood that was, you know, one that he really loved so much,” Pagac said at the dedication.

He also thanked his wife, Arielle Pagac-Alelunas, who helped him operate the scaffolding.

“She had to get over her fear of heights,” he said.

At the end of the dedication, Hill’s daughter Robin accepted a certificate officially declaring the day “Roger Wendell ‘Buck’ Hill Day.”

“I’m very proud,” she said. “He would have loved it.”“No one is prepared to raise a child who becomes an addict,” she said.
Union ‘Sheds Light’ On Addiction
Lisa Frennette - NYSUT Communications - September 11, 2019

(WAPPINGERS FALLS, NEW YORK) - Over the past several years, members of the Wappingers Congress of Teachers (WCT) have tried to grapple with the loss of two educators to addiction.

Some are upset they didn’t notice the signs or weren’t sure what to do when they noticed their peers arriving late for school or being irritable.

Others are stunned to know the truth.

“Shocking” is how Diane DiChiara, Special Education English Teacher, described her feeling about the death of a fellow Teacher to addiction. She shook her head in dismay. “You ‘have to look in their eyes and see how distraught they are,’” WCT President Pasquale Delli Carpini said of his colleagues.

In response to members’ concerns, the WCT decided to blow out the hush-hush of shame that often accompanies life-threatening problems of addiction and talk about what it means, how it affects families, and what resources are available.

This week, the Local Union, together with School Administrators and the Council on Addiction Prevention and Education of Dutchess County, co-hosted a half-day conversation-changing assembly on the drug addiction epidemic.

Speakers, a documentary and a series of workshops for 1,200 Educators, Administrators, Union Leaders and State and Community Representatives charged the air with facts and emotion.

“It’s ‘all about’ the ‘stigma.’ ‘We wanted to reduce the stigma, so people aren’t afraid to get help,’” said DiChiara. That includes taking the time they may need to enter treatment without fear of losing their job.

“Addiction ‘is a disease, not a disgrace,’” said a brave Sue DeCosta, a keynote speaker who stood at the podium with her husband, Mike, to talk to Educators. Just nine days before, they had lost their 29-year-old son Michael to the disease after years of struggle. “It is a ‘medical condition masquerading as a physical choice.’ ‘It wrecks families,’” she said. Removing the stigma and shame can correct common misperceptions, she said.

She also noted that although she and her husband are active, involved parents who gave their four children many tools, they had not made it safe for him to talk about his addiction.

When they first realized there was a problem, she said they had “no idea of the ‘beast’ we just encountered.”

In the hushed auditorium, clutching her prepared speech, DeCosta asked Teachers and School Health Professionals to understand the disease enough to suspend judgment of students who are struggling with addiction.

“No one ‘is prepared to raise a child who becomes an addict,’” she said.

In the hushed auditorium, clutching her prepared speech, DeCosta asked teachers and school health professionals to understand the disease enough to suspend judgment of students who are struggling with addiction.

“No one is prepared to raise a child who becomes an addict,” she said.
The language attached to the disease fuels more stigma, explained Elaine Trumpetto, executive director of CAPE of Dutchess County. Addicts are described as either “clean” or “dirty.” Her organization has contracted with the Wappingers district for decades to provide information for educators and students on prevention, education, counseling and recovery services.

The addition of two district-wide programs geared specifically to educators — in 2018 and this week — was about taking action after two educators died from addiction. Teachers are already filling out surveys after this week’s event to help union organizers meet their needs to direct the next event.

DiChiara said that with the union-led workshops and training from Employee Assistance Program for administrators, “We have changed our behaviors” in addressing addiction.

Change the narrative
Speaker John Shinholster of the Virginia McShin Foundation said schools should create an environment where a student grappling with addiction could feel free to openly talk to a teacher or school health care professional, “like you send a kid with a cold to the (school) nurse.”

“Are we ready to be supportive? Are we ready to love them?” he asked.

The stigma of breast cancer has been greatly reduced, he noted, by fundraising walks and open conversations — the same can be done for addiction and alcoholism.

Several speakers spoke about addiction as a disease that changes the pathways in the brain and makes it difficult for people to stop using the drugs. Stopping drugs and getting treatment can help reroute those pathways.

“We need to educate people about the impact (of drugs) on the brain — it changes the brain chemistry … it’s now defined as a chronic brain disorder,” said Rena Finsmith, special education social studies teacher, in a conversation before the assembly.

The impact on the family is also staggering — emotionally, mentally, financially and physically. Wappingers educators screened “The Anonymous People,” a documentary on addiction and recovery, and heard from the filmmaker and an actor.

“This is our black plague,” said Kristen Johnson, an actress and advocate in recovery. Many speakers in the film and on stage talked about how society often imprisons addicts rather than provide recovery treatment.

The illness does not have a cure — but it has a solution.

“Addiction lives in darkness,” Greg Williams, filmmaker, told the group.

NYSUT and its local unions can help light the way to change that.

“With the foundation you’ve laid, we will bring this around the state,” pledged a somber Andy Pallotta, NYSUT president.
'Urging GM To Do The Right Thing & Negotiate A New Deal,' NYS AFL-CIO Stands With Striking UAW Workers, Including Those Walking The Line In Buffalo, Rochester & Rochester

NYS AFL-CIO News - September 16, 2019

(ALBANY, NEW YORK) - Urging General Motors (GM) to do the right thing and negotiate a new deal, New York State AFL-CIO President Mario Cilento says the 2.5 million Member State Labor Federation is standing with Striking United Auto Workers (UAW) Workers, including those walking the line outside GM Plants in Buffalo, Rochester & Rochester

"The (2.5 million) Members of the New York State AFL-CIO stand with our Brothers and Sisters of the UAW across this country, including here in New York State at Local 774 in Buffalo, Local 686 in Lockport (in Niagara County) and Local 1097 in Rochester, in their fight for a fair contract," Cilento said in a released statement.

"These dedicated men and women work hard every day and are the reason GM has been able to make record-level profits. The decision to Strike comes with many hardships and is never taken lightly. We strongly urge General Motors to do the right thing and quickly resolve the issues so the tens of thousands of GM Workers, including more than 3,500 at Western New York Plants, can get back to work.

The Labor Movement speaks with one voice and will stand shoulder to shoulder in support of our Union Brothers and Sisters for as long as it takes to get a fair and equitable contract.

Our UAW Brothers and Sisters will have the full resources of the New York State AFL-CIO at their disposal throughout this fight," Cilento said. At that point, Mr. Wynder had brushed off the claim that action was taken because of his lengthy delay in supplying the reports, saying in an interview, “I admit it: I’m late. So what?”
Workers Need To Know Their Rights
By NYC Comptroller Scott M. Stringer - September 16, 2019

As many of you may know, my office enforces state and local prevailing wage laws.

That means that if you have done construction work on a New York City public work project or have been employed in a building service job through a city contract or in a building with an affordable housing property tax exemption, then you may be entitled to prevailing wages and benefits, regardless of your immigration status.

Often, workers are unaware that our office has collected money on their behalf. Other times, the workers are afraid to come forward because of fear of retaliation by their employer or because of their immigration status.

If you believe you were underpaid on a City-funded job – no matter who you are, or where you’re from – let us know. We work to recoup unpaid wages with interest, and we collect money for workers regardless of their immigration status or whether they still live in New York City or have moved to another state or country.

Because informed workers are their own best advocates, my office has started a new initiative to fine contractors that fail to provide written notice to their employees of their right to receive prevailing wages and benefits.

Workers that know their rights are less likely to be exploited by unscrupulous employers.

Since taking office in 2014, we have assessed more than $28 million against City contractors in unpaid prevailing wages with interest and penalties, returned more than $13.5 million to workers, and barred over 50 contractors who took advantage of workers from State and City public work contracts.

And we’ve done it because people came forward. No New Yorker should be exploited, and no New Yorker should be illegally underpaid, regardless of their immigration status.

Together, we can make an honest day’s pay for an honest day’s work a reality on City-funded jobs. Workers who believe they may have been underpaid on City-funded jobs can call the Comptroller’s Labor Law hotline at (212) 669-4443, send in inquiries via email to laborlaw@comptroller.nyc.gov or check the Comptroller’s website.
(NEW YORK CITY) - Uber will begin logging its New York drivers out of the App if they don’t get to a “high demand zone” within 30 minutes of dropping off a fare, the company announced in an e-mail to Drivers.

“If you’re trying to drive in an area where there isn’t enough rider demand at that time, you will not be able to go online,” the message said. “However, you’ll be able to access a map (coming to your App soon) that will give you real-time information indicating where there is higher rider demand.”

The news drew ire from the two rival Unions representing App-based Drivers in the City.

“Uber and Lyft deactivate Drivers, permanently, every day without notice. Only when they want to scare Drivers into opposing necessary regulations does Uber stage a public announcement of its intent to log off Drivers,” New York Taxi Workers Alliance (NYTWA) Executive Director Bhairavi Desai said in a statement. “Just as the company did in California, Uber is now spreading fear and disinformation to New York Drivers, attempting to convince Workers that rules protecting their livelihoods are to blame for Uber’s greedy policies.”

Meanwhile, the Independent Drivers Guild (IDG) accused Uber and Lyft - which began a similar policy in June - of “manipulating access to its App for New York City Drivers, in a move that violates the intent of the City’s pay rules, including blocking access to the App for some Drivers and requiring them to drive to areas with more demand in order to log on.”

The IDG has scheduled a “slow vehicle procession over the Brooklyn Bridge and up to Gracie Mansion” for today (Tuesday, September 17th) to demand City Government “stop the Apps from violating the pay rules.”

An Uber spokesperson told LaborPress the move was intended to increase occupancy rates, because the City’s Minimum Wage of $17.22 an hour after expenses is based on fares being pegged to the percentage of time the cab is occupied. That “creates an incentive for us to keep our vehicles utilized as much as possible,” and an unintended consequence is that “it creates an incentive for App companies to limit access to Drivers.”

He said the company believed that 30 minutes was enough time to drive to a busier area.

The company’s hand was forced, he added, by Lyft’s logging-off policy. If that increased Lyft’s occupancy rates, he explained, it would lure customers by lowering fares, and if disgruntled Drivers then switched to Uber, that would lower Uber’s occupancy rate and drive up fares. “This is exactly what we told the Taxi and Limousine Commission would happen,” IDG Executive Director Brendan Sexton said in a statement.

“If an App Company simply stops counting the miles and minutes when a Driver is waiting for dispatch or traveling to their next pick up location by logging Drivers out of the App,” it said in a letter sent last June, “Drivers are still driving those miles and waiting those minutes” - but if they’re “not counted toward the utilization rate, it means Drivers aren’t getting paid.” “Until we took needed action last year, it has been Uber and Lyft’s business model to over-saturate the market while promising Drivers that they could succeed despite these companies’ stacking the deck against them,” TLC Acting Commissioner Bill Heinzen responded in an e-mail to LaborPress. “TLC and City Council put in place smart policies to address the problems these companies created, and they are finally being forced to experiment with ways to run their businesses in an environment of accountability. These companies must be reminded that Drivers are crucial to their continued success.”
TONAWANDA, N.Y. (WIVB-TV) – As the United Auto Workers continues its strike against General Motors, the chairman of the Democratic National Committee (DNC) was in Buffalo Wednesday to cheer workers on.

Tom Perez, a Buffalo native, told UAW workers he stands with them.

General Motors employees are still striking for fair wages and benefits after the union and company couldn’t reach a contract agreement late Sunday night.

On Wednesday, many workers on the picket line said it’s energizing and creates momentum to have the support Perez, a national power player with local roots.

“You will have what you have earned because you have earned it all,” Perez told picketers, who clapped and cheered at his message.

Perez was also the former labor secretary under President Obama. He says General Motors is playing dirty.

“They got a bailout, and they got a massive tax cut. You need to share that with your workers,” Perez said.

Connie Johnson, a GM worker of six years, said she’s glad he’s reminding the nation that workers stood by GM during tough times.

“They don’t realize that after the bailout, so many concessions we’re made, and pretty much everything was given up,” Johnson said. “And it’s our feeling now that GM should be giving…restoring all of that.”

Asked about narrowing down the long list of Democratic presidential candidates, Perez said the DNC will get there with its nominee by next spring, but in the meantime, he brought the question back to the UAW strike, saying all of the candidates have supporting unions in common.

“They believe that union members should be at the table and not on the menu. Unfortunately, there’s a president in the White House that wants to make sure the labor movement’s on the menu. How do we know that? Look at the two Supreme Court Justices he appointed. Anti-union justices who have made it much more difficult in the public sector to organize a union,” Perez said.

John Orsini, an employee for about 25 years, related to that metaphor.

“When you got someone at that level coming down to talk to us and to get everyone all pumped up about what we got going on here…he was saying if you’re not at the table, you’re on the menu. And that really resonates with us because ever since everything started not going our way, it just seemed like that we were under attack,” Orsini said.

Tuesday, General Motors stopped paying for workers’ healthcare while they’re on strike, shifting that cost to the union.
(AUBURN, NEW YORK) – American Federation of State, County & Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 3124-represented Health Care Workers employed at Auburn Community Hospital have overwhelmingly voted to ratify a new Union Contract after almost a year of difficult negotiations.

In a major win for Workers, the new agreement creates contractual language for the health insurance plan, ensuring management cannot take away coverage or increase out-of-pocket expenses without first negotiating the impact with the Union.

The new contract also provides annual wage increases and a new weekend pay differential.

The new deal benefits more than 300 AFSCME-represented Workers - including Certified Nurses, Personal Care Aides, Food Service Workers, Cleaners and Mechanics - at Auburn Community Hospital and at the Finger Lakes Center for Living.

“Since negotiations began last Fall, ‘it’s been our priority to protect our health coverage by including it in our Collective Bargaining Agreement.’ This will ‘require’ Auburn Community Hospital ‘to negotiate the impact of any future changes’ to its Employees’ health plan with us,” AFSCME Local 3124 President Maureen Coleman said.

When the Union’s last contract expired in January, management unilaterally increased the deductible for the health care plan from $1,500 to $1,700 ($3,000 to $3,400 for family plans).

As negotiations continued, Workers held two well-attended informational pickets to rally the community for a fair contract.

Allied Union Representatives and Workers from the Cayuga County AFL-CIO Labor Council and elected officials from the City of Auburn and Cayuga County provided crucial support throughout this fight.

“We’re ‘incredibly grateful for everyone who stood by us,’” Coleman said. “This hospital and the people who work here ‘are important to this community.’ While this agreement is a ‘big step forward, we’ll continue to use our collective voice to raise concerns because patients and residents deserve the very best level of care.’”
Union And Nonunion Workers Team Up Against Ongoing Exploitation In The Construction Industry

Joe Maniscalco - Labor Press - September 19, 2019

New York, NY – Trade unionists and their counterparts in the nonunion building sector teamed up this week, to demand an end to the ongoing exploitation of vulnerable workers throughout the construction industry — but the de Blasio administration insists that it has already begun enforcing a “new generation of labor standards” aimed at cleaning up the mess.

“How many more [nonunion construction workers] must get told, “You get a break when you go home?’ How many more must be told, ‘We don’t have your check this week, we don’t offer benefits, we don’t offer pensions — and if you don’t like these terms or you don’t like working in these unsafe working conditions — you can just leave,’” Joe Scopo, lead organizer for Cement and Concrete Workers District Council 16, told construction workers rallying outside the 7th Avenue offices of New Line Structures on Tuesday.

New Line Structures is the latest nonunion contractor the Cement and Concrete Workers District Council 16 and its Building Trades allies have singled out for its relentless pursuit of so-called “open shop” development — a corrosive building trend that not only torpedoes good middle-class jobs and creates a race to the bottom — but costs nonunion construction workers wages, benefits and even their lives.

According to the New York Committee for Occupational Health & Safety [NYCOSH], 93-percent of construction workers killed in 2017 alone, were working on nonunion job sites.

“Almost every single worker who died, died on a site that was nonunion — what does that tell you?” NYCOSH Executive Director Charlene Obernauer told the hundreds of workers rallying between W. 37 and W. 38th streets. “That tells you, first of all, greed kills. Second of all, unsafe jobs are nonunion jobs. And third of all, every time that someone like New Line subcontracts out their work to nonunion job sites — they’re contributing to the deaths of workers.”

City Council Member Francisco Moya [D-21st District], cited the deaths of 69 construction workers since 2017, saying, “We’re done with [nonunion contractors] putting profit over people.”

“The skyline of New York should be built on the sweat — not the blood of its workers,” Moya said. “But [nonunion contractors] think that’s the price of doing business in the City of New York. No more. It’s time to stand up and fight for what’s right.”

Juan Carlos Diaz and other members from NICE — New Immigrant Community Empowerment — said that they spent six months doing electrical work for a New Line Structures subcontractor called PEI Electrical Services, but never saw half the money they are owed.

“We were always told to just keep waiting and waiting — ‘We’re going to finish, and then you’ll get paid,’” Diaz said. “The laws are not enough to protect our rights. We’re here to ask for stronger laws that punish contractors who are cheating workers.”

City Council Member Ben Kallos [D-5th District], co-chair of the Progressive Caucus, called on guilty contractors to make restitution or face a lawsuit.

“We need to make sure that when we are building our city’s skyline, we’re doing it at prevailing wage [and] we’re not making the affordable housing crisis worse,” Kallos added.
Despite the proliferation of nonunion construction, a spokesperson for Mayor de Blasio once again told Labor-
Press that New York City remains a “union town” and that the administration continues to “fight to uplift all
workers, both union and nonunion alike.”

“This Administration has taken unprecedented steps to address workplace safety, from implementing a first-
of-its-kind safety training program for the city’s construction workforce to adding 250 additional inspectors to
stepping up our enforcement against bad actors and conducting more proactive safety inspections of construc-
tion sites across the city,” the spokesperson said in an email.

City’s stats indicate construction-related accidents and construction-related injuries are down 14.3-percent and
13.2 respectively over the last year. The same stats also show 11 construction workers killed so far this year, as
opposed to 16 killed last year.

The mayor’s spokesperson continued, “In addition, our Office of Labor and Policy Standards — the largest mu-
nicipal labor standards office in the country — enforces a new generation of labor standards for a stronger city
and educates workers, employers and the public about workplace laws so that all New Yorkers have access to
information on their rights. We encourage any worker in need to reach out by calling 311 to get connected with
resources.”

Those efforts, however, in addition to the administration’s stabs at doing other things like quadrupling fines for
safety lapses, increasing safety supervision on thousands of additional sites across the city, demanding new edu-
cation requirements on the job site, conducting targeted citywide construction safety sweeps, as well as creating
a Construction Safety Compliance Unit, are all viewed as little more than Band-Aid approaches to those con-
vinced so-called “open-shop” development is killing New York City in more ways than one.

“We want to make sure that people on the job know what they’re doing, that they have the chance to learn on
the job through apprenticeship and they have the training they need to make sure they are safe — everyone else
is safe, and they have a shop steward who can keep them safe when they get asked to do something that is dan-
gerous,” Kallos added on Tuesday.

Local Law 196 does require all workers on major construction sites to have at least 30 hours of site-safety
training with supervisors needing at least 62 hours of training. But the measure was passed two years ago, after
a beating from the Real Estate Board of New York and its allies, and has yet to be fully enacted.

“If a product is cheap, it doesn’t work right, and nonunion contractors are an example of that,” Scopo said.
“They are a cheap product that doesn’t work right. [Unions] are the best to take care of working people, [non-
union contractors] can’t say that in their sector. We do it right, and we deserve all the work.”
Across the world on Friday students and union members walked out and went on strike. The strike is not against one company, but rather a larger call for action on climate change.

The Global School Walkout and Strike is an event that was organized largely by high school students who were following in the footsteps of the 16-year-old Swedish environmental activist Greta Thunberg. The call to action is simple. Young people are demanding that governments around the world take action to reverse the effects of climate change before it is too late. By the time the rallies are over, millions are expected to have taken part.

While young people may have organized the event, many unions have mobilized their members in support. Unions like the CWA, AFT, and UNITE HERE mobilized members for the rallies. In a message to his membership, CWA District 1 Vice President Dennis Trainor pointed out that young people were “Pointing to the inspiration of the labor movement, young people are calling to "stop business as usual" and demand action from our elected officials.”

In New York City, AFT President Randi Weingarten was spotted marching alongside members of the UUP (United University Professions) and many New York City students. While NYC allowed students to have an excused day off from school to attend the march, public school teachers were informed that they must report to school, but were allowed to teach about climate change and the strike today in class.

Other unions like UNITE HERE marched in cities around the country. They called on their employers, which are some of the largest hotel chains in the world, to do better in terms of their climate impact. The union called out hotels like Marriott for not taking real action and instead instituting “greenwashing” programs that look good to the public but do little to reduce their carbon footprint.

Of course, these policies, like Green Choice which give extra points to guests who refuse housekeeping services, often hurt workers, pad CEO wallets, and fail to reduce the pollution caused by the hotel. Tying in with their “One Job is Enough” campaign, UNITE HERE members chanted “One Planet Should be Enough” and called for a just transition to a green economy.

“From warehouse pickers to delivery drivers, workers on the front lines of climate change are the ones who are forced to work under extreme weather conditions, like wildfires, polar vortexes and the type of extreme heat that sent workers in warehouses across the country to hospitals this summer,” said the International Brotherhood of Teamsters in a written statement supporting the strike. “And as the ones who are so often the first and worst impacted by environmental changes, it is essential that working people have a voice in the conversation about how we address these challenges.”

With millions of people taking their cue from labor unions, actions like these could signal a turning point in the fight against climate change. Perhaps these actions will inspire politicians to take action as they see workers and environmentalist uniting for a common goal. They might even make some meaningful steps towards reducing emissions and creating a just transition for the workforces into the new green economy.
The GM strike is about us all: What the walkout means for the country
Steven Greenhouse - NY Daily News - September 20, 2019

The United Auto Workers’ five-day-old strike against General Motors is hugely important because it involves so many of the key concerns that American workers writ large are worried about: from factory closings to wage stagnation to jobs moving overseas to corporate America’s increased use of low-paid temps. These are many of the economic factors, we are told, that got Donald Trump elected three years ago. Ever since the walkout began Sunday night, UAW leaders have said the strikers are fighting not just for themselves, but for the larger interests of American workers — and taxpayers. They’re right.

The federal government arranged a $50 billion rescue package for GM a decade ago; that hinged on labor accepting major money-saving concessions. The strikers are saying there’s something wrong that so soon after, the company, despite earning $35 billion in profits in North America in the past three years, has laid off thousands of American workers and closed assembly plants in the U.S. while opening plants in Mexico.

The strikers are simultaneously angry about another big issue, one they say shows, to use a Trumpian term, how rigged the economy is — a sentiment shared by millions of Americans. Despite those massive profits racked up by GM, the company offered the UAW a raise totaling just 4% over four years.

Meanwhile, many workers ask why GM is demanding they pay more for health coverage after the company made $14 billion in stock buybacks in recent years. With corporations increasingly using temps, freelancers and independent contractors, making the American workplace less stable and secure, the UAW is demanding that GM use fewer temps. Seven percent of the company’s factory workers are temps, who earn $15 an hour; some temps have worked for GM for three years. The strikers are demanding that the temps be given regular jobs with pay commensurate to the far higher pay of the regular GM workers they work alongside.

It’s not as though these would be the first concessions workers are being asked to accept. To help keep GM afloat, the UAW agreed in 2007 to a two-tier wage, with the top tier making $28 an hour and the lower tier $16 to $19 an hour. That system remains in force (with the second tier ultimately rising to $29 an hour), but with GM so profitable, its workers want the two-tier system ended.

The current strike is the latest in a long line of confrontations between a union that had long been America’s most powerful union and an automaker that had long been America’s largest corporation, showdowns that played a huge role in shaping the nation’s economy.

In my new book, I write of earlier, historic UAW strikes against G.M. In the Flint sit-down strike of 1936-37, 2,000 workers, furious about poor treatment and production speed-ups, sat down in their plant for 44 days and got GM to finally recognize and bargain with the union. That labor victory sparked the tremendous wave of unionization that took place in the late 1930s.

In 1945, frustrated that wages were not keeping up with inflation, 175,000 GM workers walked out in a 113-day strike. Concerned that such strikes undermine efficiency and production, the company agreed to a landmark five-year contract several years later that gave its workers huge pay increases as well as the best health coverage and pensions in industrial America. That contract set a pattern that was instrumental in creating America’s great middle class. The UAW and GM are not the mighty giants they once were. But both remain important, iconic players in America’s economy. The results of the current strike could, like the UAW-GM battles of old, have big ripple effects across the economy.

In other words, this fight isn’t just about them. It’s also about us.
Grad student unions dealt blow as proposed new rule says students aren’t ‘employees’

Katie Langin - Sciencemag.org - September 20, 2019

Graduate students are not “employees” with a right to unionize, according to a rule proposed today by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), an agency that’s tasked with enforcing U.S. labor laws. If implemented, the rule would undercut a recent wave of grad student unionization efforts at private U.S. universities. The NLRB will be accepting public comment on the announcement for 60 days.

The NLRB has traditionally made these kinds of decisions on a case-by-case basis—not through rulemaking—notes Risa Lieberwitz, a professor of labor and employment law at Cornell University and general counsel for the American Association of University Professors. “But this current NLRB has a strong majority of very conservative board members; … [it’s] shown itself to be extremely political and quite focused on overruling precedent that had expanded employee rights to unionize.”

In 2016, the NLRB decided that students at Columbia University who receive compensation for teaching and research could be considered employees with a right to unionize. Prior to that though, in 2004, the board ruled that students at Brown University did not have the right to unionize—overturning a 2000 ruling that grad students at New York University (NYU) could unionize. The back and forth is because NLRB members are appointed by the presidential administration. Pro-union decisions were made under Democratic Presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama; the anti-union Brown decision was made under Republican President George W. Bush.

The crux of the argument boils down to whether the teaching and research that graduate students undertake is a form of training that is part of their education—or if they are “working” for their universities and therefore qualified to be considered employees. In an amicus brief filed ahead of the Columbia decision, nine of the nation’s most prestigious universities argued that “graduate assistants are students whose relationship with the university is primarily academic, not economic.” But in that case, Lieberwitz says, the NLRB ultimately ruled “that you can be both an employee and a student—that that kind of dual status can coexist.” (The NLRB doesn't have jurisdiction over public universities, where grad students are widely recognized to be workers who are permitted to form unions in states that allow collective bargaining by state employees.)

In the wake of the Columbia decision, graduate students mobilized to form unions at Columbia and other leading private institutions. Students at 12 universities—including Harvard University, Brown University, Yale University, and the University of Chicago—have held votes that came out in favor of unionization, and four unions have negotiated contracts with their institutions. Union representatives have pushed for better pay, benefits, and protections for their workers, and in some cases they have called for a formal third-party procedure to deal with sexual harassment and discrimination complaints.

It’s unclear how the NLRB’s proposed rule will impact negotiations that are currently ongoing. “Our university agreed to bargain in good faith after we won an election,” says Annie Wentz, a Ph.D. student in epidemiology at Brown University. “If they decide to stop doing that, I would be upset—but we’re going to work hard to hold Brown to that agreement.”

There’s precedent for universities to come to the bargaining table during periods when the NLRB has ruled that grad students don’t count as workers. Three years before the Columbia decision, NYU voluntarily recognized the right of grad students to unionize and began contract negotiations, even though the Brown decision meant that it wasn’t required to do so.
But for grad students, that hasn’t always been an easy path to follow. After Columbia graduate assistants voted to unionize—by a vote of 1602 to 623—the university refused to come to the bargaining table for more than 2 years, only agreeing to do so after graduate assistants went on a weeklong strike. Contract negotiations are ongoing.

At the University of Chicago, administrators tried to block a union vote in 2017, arguing to a regional NLRB board that graduate teaching and research assistants aren’t truly workers. The NLRB sided with the graduate students, allowing the vote to proceed, and in October of that year they voted in favor of unionization.

Since then, though, the university has refused to recognize the union or come to the bargaining table. “The University believes the NLRB’s ruling in Columbia was wrongly decided,” wrote a university spokesperson, who pointed to an email provost Daniel Diermeier sent to the campus community in June: “Graduate students are students, first and foremost. They come to the University to study, to learn how to teach future generations of students, and to make original contributions in their chosen fields of knowledge.”

Students such as Claudio Gonzáles, a Ph.D. student in math at the University of Chicago in Illinois who serves as the union’s co-president, are frustrated. “The whole point of us [unionizing] is we have very material, very immediate needs that are not being met,” he says—adding that “this place does rely on our labor.”

Gonzáles and his fellow grad students have fought back with walkouts designed to push administrators into voluntarily recognizing their union. But in 2018, they decided to withdraw their petition with the NLRB seeking formal union certification out of fear that that the board—newly refreshed with appointments made by President Donald Trump—would use the petition as an opportunity to issue an antiunion decision. Graduate students at Yale University, Boston College, and the University of Pennsylvania withdrew their petitions at the same time, which left the NLRB with no other option than the rulemaking process to overturn the Columbia decision.

It’s unusual for the NLRB to use rulemaking in this way. Congress has the authority to stipulate who is—and is not—considered an employee under U.S. labor law, notes William Herbert, the executive director of the National Center for the Study of Collective Bargaining in Higher Education and the Professions at Hunter College, part of the City University of New York system. “This rule seems to be usurping that congressional prerogative,” he says. “Inevitably there will be litigation.”
Humans have created an existential crisis. It’s up for grabs who will live, how and where, which species will survive, and how the big decisions are made.

No exaggeration—we are in the eleventh hour.

Fossil fuel companies, banks, and all those who profit from these industries have exacerbated the warming of our planet, creating a climate disaster.

The climate study released by the United Nations this past October brought scientists to a common understanding that time is not on our side. We must act with great urgency, not at the edges of the crisis, but at its center.

Labor has a choice. We can stay in our narrow lane and focus only on the wages, hours, and working conditions of our current members—though climate change is already harming working conditions in many industries and eliminating jobs in others.

Or we can be part of organizing a movement with young people, elders, communities of color, indigenous people, environmentalists, and public health advocates to change the rules of the game for the benefit of all people.

In Washington state, labor joined with these allies to push a ballot initiative that would have been a game-changer. We were defeated by the fossil fuel companies this time, but we believe that our coalition can and must prevail.

IF EARTH WERE A BANK...

Participating as an AFL-CIO representative at the Paris climate talks in 2015 was eye-opening. Though a historic accord was reached, the carbon reduction commitments made by nations fell far short of the accord’s laudable goals.

At the alternative People’s Climate Summit in Paris, a young transit worker named Clara said, “If the planet were a bank, we would have already saved it.”

Clara identified an ugly truth. Corporations and their political servants will do anything to protect their economic power, even if it spells the end of the world. Since the Paris Agreement was signed in 2016, the world’s 33 largest banks have financed another $1.9 trillion in fossil fuel projects.

Their goals are to profit from fossil fuel as long as they can, to leave as few fossil fuel assets in the ground as possible, and to be compensated for those that are left in the ground.

To succeed, they have to keep people divided on the extent of the problem, and on how quickly the transition away from fossil fuels can be practically accomplished. They pit global North countries against the global South. They pit building trades against public sector workers.

They pit white workers against workers of color. They pit communities against immigrants and climate refugees. They pit deindustrialized areas against more prosperous ones.
Those in power sow doubt, anger, and confusion to prevent working people from understanding our common interests and building the power necessary to create a sustainable future.

Climate disaster poses history’s ultimate divide-and-conquer moment. The question for organized labor is, “Do we fall for it again?”

WE CAN’T DO IT ALONE

No student of history would question labor’s strong record of struggle to make workers’ voices heard. But our history of participating in other social movements has been uneven.

It’s time to be honest. Unions on our own are not strong enough to solve climate change and economic inequality.

Isolated bargaining-table victories and limited promises from “electable” politicians won’t deliver solutions or justice.

Fortunately young people, communities of color, and indigenous people from around the world are calling for a revolution in the way we make decisions about fossil fuels, our planet, and our communities.
The Law Enforcement Employees Benevolent Association, whose members include Environmental Police Officers, Highway Inspectors and Sanitation Enforcement Agents, had its offices raided by FBI Agents Sept. 18, according to three sources, at a time when it is known to owe $500,000 to its longtime dental and prescription-drug providers.

Union President Kenneth Wynder did not return several calls regarding the raid and the state of LEEBA’s benefit funds, which had previously been a source of scrutiny by both the City Comptroller’s Office and the Mayor’s Office of Labor Relations. Last October, OLR began depositing scheduled welfare- and annuity-fund contributions into an escrow account, and subsequently took over responsibility for providing prescription drugs to the union’s roughly 600 members.

‘Cooperating Fully’

Following the raid—which the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the Southern District in Manhattan declined to confirm or comment on—a message was sent to LEEBA members which one Environmental Police Officer told this newspaper came from Mr. Wynder, stating that FBI agents “came to the LEEBA office at 80 Broad Street requesting all records in a form of a [search] warrant dating back to 2012. LEEBA cooperated fully with the request and [supplied] them with all information.”

It continued, “As usual, this is the [city’s] Attempt to intimidate this union into playing along and agreeing with [its] pattern bargain[ing] agenda. Because in the end this [is] what this is all about, somebody standing up to the city and telling them no. As more information become[s] available I will inform the membership.”

Mr. Wynder previously sent an Aug. 29 letter to his members regarding what he described as cancellation of their dental coverage under Emblem Health effective Sept. 1. He denied that the city took this action because of his failure to provide records known as Directive 12s to the Comptroller’s Office concerning union benefit funds. He said that LEEBA had continued to “exhaust its remaining funds” to pay for optical coverage as well as dental and prescription-drug benefits and life insurance.

“I am aware of the hardship this is to you,” the letter continued, “but that is why OLR is attacking you the members. They can’t make LEEBA fall in line and sign the pattern like every other union is doing. They chose their strategy of Economic Apartheid to stop funding LEEBA and break its members…It is repulsive that LEEBA’s fight for your contracts has caused OLR to target you in its attempt to get back at LEEBA.”

Acted at Stringer’s Urging

Top OLR officials declined to comment. In an interview late last year after the problems that led the city to take control of LEEBA’s benefit funds came to light, then-Labor Commissioner Robert W. Linn said that contrary to Mr. Wynder’s claim that he had “breached” the union’s contract of his own accord, OLR “acted at the request of the Comptroller” and supplied documents showing both repeated requests by Scott Stringer’s aides for the required audit reports and, when Mr. Wynder failed to provide them, a request that OLR and the city Corporation Counsel intervene.

At that point, Mr. Wynder had brushed off the claim that action was taken because of his lengthy delay in supplying the reports, saying in an interview, “I admit it: I’m late. So what?”
Persons familiar with the situation said that in April Mr. Wynder indicated he was filing Directive 12s for 2016 and 2017, but “what they had filed was missing some significant information.”

One of them said that city officials were exploring a way to reinstate dental coverage for LEEBA members.

While one source said it was the Comptroller’s Office that had contacted Federal prosecutors about the problem, culminating in the FBI raid and the convening of a grand jury to consider possible criminal charges, a spokeswoman for Mr. Stringer issued a Sept. 25 statement saying, “Our office is involved in ongoing litigation to acquire the records we need to complete our audit. We cannot comment further at this time.”

Defaulted on $136G Claim

But documents obtained by this newspaper involving two of LEEBA’s main benefit providers raise questions as to whether the failure to supply reports on the funds are more than a matter of lateness on Mr. Wynder’s part.

A judgment was entered in State Supreme Court in Westchester (LEEBA, according to the document, has offices in Briarcliff Manor) on April 9 awarding $136,161 for services provided, plus interest, to Delta Dental Plan of Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania for nonpayment by the union. It stated that union officials “have failed to appear, answer or move herein, and the time to do so having expired, plaintiff is entitled to a judgment by default.”

The union’s longtime prescription-drug provider, Buffalo-based Independent Health’s Pharmacy Benefit Dimensions, on June 10 sent a letter to Mr. Wynder demanding payment of $363,218 which it said it was owed for the period from Jan. 1, 2014 to Dec. 17, 2018. Virtually the entire period at issue preceded the point at which OLR had ceased making required payments to the union’s benefit funds because of the Comptroller’s complaints about the failure to file the Directive 12s.

The letter from Independent Health detailed repeated delays in payment and failure to pay that prompted it to cancel its contract with the union last December, adding that if the debt was not paid immediately, PBD would “pursue all remedies available to it,” including legal action.

LEEBA: Selective Audits

LEEBA in 2017 filed a lawsuit seeking to compel Mr. Stringer to audit the welfare fund of Local 1042 of the Laborers’ International Union of North America, to which Department of Transportation Highway Inspectors belonged prior to their opting in a representation election to change unions. Mr. Wynder alleged that Local 1042 had improperly commingled benefit payments to the city Highway Inspectors with funds covering the local’s primarily private-sector membership, and said an audit was needed to determine whether millions of dollars should be transferred to his union.

He had previously claimed that the Comptroller didn’t audit some of the larger municipal unions because he valued their endorsements in his political campaigns. He questioned Mr. Stringer’s not auditing the Correction Officers’ Benevolent Association even after longtime President Norman Seabrook was removed from office in 2016 and criminally convicted two years later on charges of investing $20 million in union monies with a hedge fund, which subsequently filed for bankruptcy protection, in return for a $60,000 bribe.

He has also accused OLR of targeting his union because he has ruffled feathers by raiding other city unions, something he has been able to do because LEEBA does not belong to the AFL-CIO and is therefore not covered by its no-raiding clause. He reportedly has a pending petition to gain representation rights for Special Officers at the City University of New York, who are currently part of Teamsters Local 237.
New York City Art Teacher ‘Puts A Face’ On The Loan Forgiveness Debacle
by Sylvia Saunders - NYSUT Communications via WNY Labor Today- September 25, 2019

(WASHINGTON, D.C.) - In painstaking detail before a Congressional Committee, New York City Art Teacher Kelly Finlaw explained how the federal Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) Program has failed her - like so many others - and desperately needs to be fixed.

“I am here today so that you can ‘see the face of a person who has been impacted by the gross mismanagement of PSLF,’” Finlaw told members of the House Education and Labor Committee. “I ‘was misled and lied to.’”

Finlaw, who is one of eight American Federation of Teachers (AFT) Members suing Education Secretary Betsy DeVos and the Department of Education, was the only Teacher on the hearing panel.

In great detail, she explained how she was repeatedly told by loan servicers that she was on track for the PSLF Program, which is supposed to cancel the balance for eligible Public Servants once they’ve made 10 years of monthly payments.

"After ten years of making student loan payments, October 2017 was ‘my’ month – ‘my light at the end of the tunnel,’” Finlaw said. "I remember standing in my living room ‘when the light at the tunnel went dark.’"

She said the reason she was denied, which no loan servicer had ever raised, was that one of the loans was not a direct loan.

“I share my story because ‘there was a promise that was made to me and to millions of other Public Servants.’ ‘That promise is being broken every day,’” Finlaw said.

As of March 2019, the Education Department had forgiven the debt of only 518 Public Servants, fewer than 1% of its applicants.

Congressional Democrats on the panel told Finlaw they want to fix the program.

Committee Chairman – U.S. Representative Bobby Scott (Democrat-Virginia), noted there’s obviously something wrong with the program implementation when 99% of the applicants are rejected.
Labor Rallies In Support Of Universal Retirement Savings Plan
By Naeisha Rose - Labor Press- September 25, 2019

Council Members I. Daneek Miller and Ben Kallos received the support of several labor groups this week at City Hall for their universal retirement savings program, which would support private-sector employees who don’t have an IRA plan through their employer.

Intro. 0888 would establish an individual retirement account for these workers at private firms that have 10 or more employees within the city if the business does not offer a savings plan, and they will be enrolled automatically with the option to opt out if they so choose, according to the bill.

Contributions will be handled through payroll deductions set at a default rate and employees have the opportunity to change the quotient they want to give to the plan, according to the bill. The program would only have savings from the employees, there would be no city or employer contributions included in the plan.

Employers would be required to distribute the program information to their employees or risk a fine, according to the bill.

A supplementary bill, Intro. 0901, would establish a board to facilitate the implementation of an IRA program, minimize fees and costs associated with administering it and conducting outreach and education lessons for employees and employers.

“Our legislation will help more than half of the working New Yorkers who are currently without a savings plan set aside a portion of their earnings so they can lay a foundation for a stable future, and particularly benefit communities of color who saw their average household wealth plummet for over three decades,” said Miller, chair of the Committee on Civil Service and Labor.

There are 3.5 million private-sector workers throughout the city and an estimated 1.5 million do not have a retirement plan through their employer, according to Intro. 0888.

“Every New Yorker should be able to save for retirement,” said Kallos. “It’s hard to imagine that Republicans are all of a sudden against Americans taking ‘personal responsibility’ but stopping retirement savings for all was at the top of the Trump administration’s list in 2017 and even passed the Republican Congress.”

Michael Mulgrew, the president of the United Federation of Teachers, believes the bill must get all the support that it needs.

“Private sector employees need retirement security,” said Mulgrew. “This is an opportunity for the public and private sectors to work together to improve the future for our neighbors and fellow New Yorkers.”

Bob Master, the assistant to the vice president of Communication Workers of America, District 1, shares Mulgrew’s sentiments.

“Too many working New Yorkers face the prospect of getting older with no retirement savings – rather than retiring with the respect and dignity that they deserve,” said Master.” This “new kind of private sector ‘minimum pension,’ analogous to the minimum wage, …will set a floor for retirement security and ensure that more workers can enjoy a decent, dignified retirement. And critically, this program is an important step towards re-establishing the idea that every working person deserves a decent pension.”
NEW YORK, N.Y.—As multibillionaire Bill Gates entered Jazz at Lincoln Center for his foundation’s forum on “fighting global inequality” Sept. 25, about 60 Teamsters picketed outside, demanding that the trash-collection company he owns a third of reduce its workers’ inequality.

Two dozen workers at Republic Services in Marshfield, Massachusetts, in Boston’s southeastern suburbs, have been on strike since Aug. 29. “They’re just not willing to negotiate a fair contract,” Bernard Egan-Mullen, one of several strikers from Teamsters Local 25 who came down for the protest, told LaborPress. Members of 13 New York-area Teamsters locals joined them.

The strike’s main issues are wages, health care, retirement, holidays, and work rules, according to Local 25 officials. The Marshfield workers’ pay ranges from $24.50 to $28 an hour, says Egan-Mullen, while Local 25 members at Republic in the nearby town of Quincy make $28. The Quincy workers get pensions when they retire, while the Marshfield ones only have a 401(k) plan. The company is offering a 2% raise, he added, but wants to increase workers’ health-care costs by 3-5%, and their insurance coverage already has a $5,000 deductible.

Republic, in a statement released Sept. 12, blamed the strike on the union’s “unrealistic bargaining demands.” Egan-Mullen says the company told workers they had “no option” other than accepting its offer.

“Thanks to all the locals at Teamsters Joint Council 16 for their support in this fight,” Local 25 President Sean O’Brien said in a statement. “These workers deserve respect, a fair wage, and health benefits to support their families. Republic Services maximizes profits but treats its employees like trash. But each day, more and more Teamsters are joining the fight by honoring our picket lines. Solidarity is the key to winning fights against greedy national corporations, and Republic Services is learning that when you fight the Teamsters in one location, you fight them everywhere.”

Gates, whose ownership of Microsoft made him the richest man in the world before he was eclipsed by fellow tech magnates Jeff Bezos and Mark Zuckerberg, owns about one-third of Republic’s stock. The Teamsters say he receives over $100 million in stock dividends annually from it. The Phoenix-based company, the second-largest trash collection and disposal company in the U.S., reported $10 billion in revenues in 2018 and about $1 billion in profit. It spent about $700 million on stock buybacks, according to the Teamsters.

He was in the city for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation’s annual Goalkeepers event, which this year focused on “the challenge of fighting global inequality to ensure no one is left behind.” “If we hope to accelerate progress, we must address the inequality that separates the lucky from the unlucky,” Goalkeepers’ 2019 report states, with a graphic comparing the privileges Gates and his ex-wife have with the obstacles faced by a girl growing up in Africa’s Sahel region, the drought-prone lands on the Sahara Desert’s southern edge that are one of the poorest places in the world.

On Sept. 24, it gave a “Global Goalkeeper” award to India’s Hindu-supremacist Prime Minister Narendra Modi, for a program the Indian government says has built 110 million public toilets in the last five years.

City Councilmember Helen Rosenthal (D-Manhattan), who stopped by the rally unplanned on her way to a meeting, said it was hypocritical that Gates was telling other countries what to do when “he can’t see what he’s doing to actual people.”
Local 25 has extended picketing to Republic sites around the nation, with Teamsters locals in the Atlanta area, San Diego, Oakland, and several other California cities refusing to cross their lines. About 7,000 of the company’s 17,000 sanitation workers are Teamsters. On Sept. 21, two locals representing Republic workers in the Los Angeles and San Francisco Bay areas voted to authorize a strike.

“Republic is refusing to pay the area standard and is attempting to nullify worker protections gained in previous contracts,” John Bouchard, secretary-treasurer of Local 350 in the San Francisco suburb of Daly City, said in a statement. “Local 350 is part of a bigger nationwide movement, to fight Republic’s anti-worker negotiating tactics.”

Egan-Mullen says the Marshfield strikers are grateful for the solidarity. The walkout was “the catalyst for a very big picture,” he added. “Corporate America is putting their foot down, saying they don’t want to deal with unions.”

The company has brought in strikebreakers “from across the country” to drive its trucks and collect trash, he says, and it’s paying them more than it pays the regular workers, as well as covering their hotel and transportation expenses.

Republic’s Sept. 12 statement accused Local 25 of harassing strikebreakers with “union-orchestrated violence, stalking, threats and racial slurs, as well as interference with trash collection by moving customer waste receptacles and blocking trucks.”

“We are absolutely telling them they’re scabs,” says Egan-Mullen. “But we’re not threatening anybody. We’re lawfully picketing, and we’ll continue picketing until they’re willing to come back to the negotiating table and have a real conversation.”

When Local 25 went on strike against a Boston-area roofing supplier in 2016, it lasted 18 weeks.
On August 7 the poultry towns of central Mississippi suffered the largest workplace raid in the U.S. since 2006. Some 680 chicken-processing workers from seven factories were detained and incarcerated by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

Ten percent of the population in Morton, Mississippi, was either incarcerated or fired. Parents were detained the same day they had dropped their children off to their first day of school.

The raid instilled fear not only in Mississippi poultry plants but also among immigrants all over the country. Natalie Patrick-Knox of Jobs with Justice (JwJ) described the ripple effect: “workers feeling scared to report wage theft, dangerous work conditions, and other abuses.”

She said that fear “makes it easier for low-road employers to beat their competition by violating labor law.” Then all workers, regardless of immigration status, feel the effects.

Immigrant advocates say ICE targeted these plants because workers were organizing for better conditions. Many were already represented by the Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW).

BILINGUAL VOLUNTEERS

As soon as the raids were announced, labor and immigrant rights groups mobilized. The Food Chain Workers Alliance, a national coalition representing 340,000 workers, raised thousands of dollars that it sent to the UFCW.

National Jobs with Justice took direction from the UFCW and two local immigrant rights organizations, Southeast Immigrant Rights Network (SEIRN) and Mississippi Resiste. JwJ recruited bilingual organizers and sent them to help these groups.

At the Pioneer Valley Workers Center in western Massachusetts and Massachusetts JwJ, we sent Cecilia Prado, one of our volunteer hotline responders, to join the team on the ground in Mississippi. There she volunteered as an organizer and case manager. “Most of us [volunteers] were Latinx and were familiar with the stress surrounding the immigration system,” she said, “so we were able to relate to the community and gain their trust.”

The organizers worked from early morning to late at night. “We would flyer in churches and communities and let people know about the resources,” Prado said. Churches housed legal clinics and distributed humanitarian aid.

In three weeks, the team working with Mississippi Resiste interviewed 468 family members to locate and identify those detained. Many who were not already in immigration proceedings or had no prior criminal charges were released. The 200 still detained are being moved among nine different prisons.

WORKERS PUSH BACK

“There was a lot of shame,” Prado said. “We talked about how this was not fair. We worked building confidence among the community, validating their experience, educating them on what their rights are, and empowering them to lead their own movements.
“Most people who were from the factories not represented by the union thought that because they are undocumented, they had no rights,” she said.

Besides the hundreds detained, hundreds more were fired. Those still working are afraid they might be next.

To push back, poultry workers have begun organizing committees in their towns—creating roles for each person, such as meeting planner, notetaker, treasurer, communicator, and fundraiser. In Morton, the local leaders organized a huge meeting about immigrant workers’ rights. More than 200 people participated.

Community members directly or indirectly affected by the raids have started to keep track of the labor violations they have experienced at these plants or elsewhere, such as wage theft or sexual harassment, and to seek out labor lawyers. UFCW is also collecting reports of labor violations against its members, offering them humanitarian aid, and putting together a legal team.

Know-your-rights workshops are also critical. It appears that in these raids ICE used a common tactic: agents walk into a workplace and yell, “Everyone with papers over here, and everyone without over there.”

Muscle memory is key in a crisis. Role-plays can help us prepare not to out ourselves or our co-workers.

Have every worker practice saying that they refuse to answer any questions: “I will not speak to anyone, answer any questions about my immigration status, respond to any accusations, waive my legal rights, or consent to a search of my person, papers, or property until I have first obtained the advice of an attorney.”

Rose Bookbinder is a co-director at the Pioneer Valley Workers Center, organizer with Jobs with Justice, and board chair of the Food Chain Workers Alliance.

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Rose Bookbinder is a co-director at the Pioneer Valley Workers Center, organizer with Jobs with Justice, and board chair of the Food Chain Workers Alliance.
New York, NY – Building service workers tasked with keeping Con Edison offices safe and orderly are living lives of quiet desperation, struggling without health insurance, the ability to claim sick days and, in many cases, earning minimum wage salaries despite being on the job for more than a decade. And Con Ed’s response? Not our problem.

This past spring, the ongoing plight of some 2,000 janitors and security officers working at privately-owned utility companies including Con Edison, moved both the NYS Assembly and Senate to pass legislation calling for the workers to be paid the prevailing wage.

That legislation is now sitting on Governor Cuomo’s desk awaiting his signature. On Tuesday afternoon, Assembly Member Yuh-Line Niou [D-65th District], sponsor to the bill in the lower chamber, joined members of 32BJ SEIU and affected building cleaners and security offices in a rally outside Con Ed’s 4 Irving Place HQ, urging Cuomo to sign the bill.

“We need to fight for this bill,” Niou told a vociferous crowd of about 50 32BJ purple-clad demonstrators rallying on the corner of Irving Place and E. 14th Street. “Fair wages result in an increased quality of life for public utility workers. Providing a fair wage also helps companies who will see less turnover and increased worker satisfaction, productivity and efficiency.”

32BJ, the largest property services union in the U.S. with more than 175,000 members in 11 states, strongly supports the bill, arguing that as a monopoly, “Con Edison has refused to reciprocate the public support it receives and has allowed its contractors to pay workers the minimum wage, with few, if any benefits.”

“Con Edison is a monopoly that operates on city property and they have to do better when they’re using their subcontractor Nelson and Imperial,” City Council Member Ben Kallos [D-5th District] told this week’s rally. “They can’t pay just minimum wage, they can’t ignore health benefits.” But Con Ed doesn’t see it that way. The giant utility company subcontracts building services work to two subcontractors: Imperial and Nelson. When asked why Con Ed doesn’t already pay building cleaners and security officers prevailing wages and benefits, Phil O’Brien, Con Ed’s assistant director of Media Relations, curtly told LaborPress, “This is a matter between the workers and their employer.”

“Con Edison is just letting this happen,” Assembly Member Niou said. “Companies like Imperial and Nelson choose to sacrifice their workers in favor of cutting corners and saving more money. And Con Ed just lets it happen.”

Building services worker Carlos Ramirez said that he must work overtime or a second job just to scrape by, and that he hopes with the “Constitution and democracy in this country, we can have a living wage that allows ups to live with dignity.” “Clearly, we have a problem here with Con Edison,” Assembly Member Harvey Epstein [D-74th Assembly District] said. According to Council Member Kallos, Con Ed might even be breaking the law.

“I am horrified to hear on Con Ed sites, workers like Carlos and so many of you here aren’t able to use the Paid Sick Leave law. That’s illegal, and most people get put behind bars for violating the law,” Kallos said. Assembly Member Niou told LaborPress that she is unaware of any issues the governor might have with signing the bill, and hopes that Cuomo does, indeed, sign it soon. “He hasn’t said anything to me yet,” Niou said. “I think that it’s really important that we get the bill signed. We obviously got it passed in both houses, right now there haven’t been any issues or conversations, if there are any comments or changes.”
(NEW YORK CITY) - “We’re building a ‘bolder’ Union,” American Federation of State, County & Municipal Employees (AFSCME) District Council 37 Executive Director Henry Garrido announced regarding the decision to bring AFSCME District Council 1707 under its banner. “It makes sense for us to learn from each other and grow with each other.’”

DC 37, which represents 125,000 New York City Employees, began talks earlier this year with the Union that represents 20,000 Non-Profit Workers in the Early-Childhood Education and Home Health-Care Industries.

The idea was sparked by both Unions’ National Affiliate, AFSCME.

Garrido said that there was a growing trend across the country of Unions consolidating power. There were several reasons it made sense to unify with DC 1707, he said, including a shared interest in the future of the Cultural Institutions Retirement System, which provides retirement benefits to DC 37-represented Staff at organizations such as the Brooklyn Botanic Garden and the American Museum of Natural History.

The pension system, which also provides benefits to Day Care Employees, became underfunded during former Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s Administration after hundreds of early-childhood centers were either privatized or closed.

“We were ‘both in a situation where we were concerned our Members’ pensions would be affected,’” Garrido explained.

DC 1707 Executive Director Kim Medina said another reason to join forces was the U.S. Supreme Court’s Janus decision, which determined Public Employee Unions can no longer collect Agency Fee payments from non-members.

Unions across the country feared the ruling would hurt their funding: in Right-To-Work (for less) States, which have laws that prevent Union Membership and paying dues from being conditions of employment, participation in Unions has declined.

“There’s ‘strength in numbers,’” she said following a tentative deal between her Union and the Day Care Council of New York that ended a decades-long gap in starting salaries between certified Teachers who work at community-based day-care centers and those who work for the Department of Education. DC 1707 had aggressively campaigned for an end to the pay disparity: Certified Teachers who worked at community-based centers had a starting salary of $42,000, $17,000 less than Staff working for the DOE.

Garrido assisted in the negotiations for a deal that would boost 300 Teachers’ salaries by up to $20,000 by October 1st, 2021. Another 3,900 non-certified Teachers and Support Staff would receive a 2.75% wage increase and a $1,800 signing bonus.

“Immediately after we partnered, ‘we’ve already granted the Workers a victory,’” he said. Medina will remain DC 1707’s Executive Director and the Union is staying at its headquarters in Midtown West.
Registered nurses staged a one-day strike against Tenet Health hospitals in Florida, California and Arizona on Friday, demanding better working conditions and higher wages as the nation's labor movement has begun flexing muscles weakened by decades of declining membership amid business and government attacks.

About 6,500 National Nurses United members walked out at 12 Tenet facilities after working toward a first contract for a year in Arizona and under expired contracts in California and Florida, the union said. They plan to resume working Saturday. Members passed out leaflets in Texas, where contracts at two Tenet hospitals in El Paso expire later this year.

The Tenet walkout is one of several strikes and organizing efforts nationwide as unions work to rebuild from a steep membership decline that began 50 years ago. Many are focusing on white-collar, female-dominated and service-sector industries such as health care, teaching and the media, not just blue-collar, male-dominated industries like manufacturing, where the United Auto Workers is striking against General Motors. A recent Gallup poll showed Americans support unions by 2-to-1, up from a near split 10 years ago and nearly the highest level since the 1960s.

About 30 nurses picketed outside Palmetto General Hospital in Hialeah, Florida, during intermittent rain Friday. They waved red flags with a white N and carried signs with such slogans as "Happy RNs = Healthy Patients."

Yajaira Roman, a union leader and neurological intensive care nurse at Palmetto, said while Tenet nurses want higher wages — the company is offering raises of about $12 a week at Palmetto — they particularly want a lower patient-to-nurse ratio to avoid burnout and improve care.

"We are really proud of what we do and we're happy that we're serving the community, but we want to do it in a way where when patients leave the hospital they are extremely satisfied," Roman said.

In Tucson, Arizona, Fawn Slade said she and her colleagues want Tenet to work on nurse retention and lessen their workload so patients get optimal care.

"It's more important that our community recognizes that the nurses are here advocating for their safety," Slade said.

Tenet, which has 65 hospitals and 115,000 employees nationwide, said it has negotiated in "good faith" and it is disappointed the union chose to strike.

"While we respect the nurses' right to strike, patients and their loved ones can be assured that our patients will continue to be cared for by qualified replacement registered nurses," the Dallas-based company's statement said.

According to the U.S. Labor Department, almost 3 million registered nurses are employed nationally, with an average annual salary of $75,510. Florida's average RN salary is $66,210, Arizona's is $77,000 and California's is $106,950, tops in the nation.

Union membership has plummeted in the U.S. since the 1970s. About 10% of American workers are unionized today and only 7% in the private sector, down steeply from 40 years ago when a third of workers were represented, as jobs shifted from manufacturing to the service sector. When adjusted for inflation, the average American's wage has remained stagnant during those decades, according to the Pew Research Center.
Government actions have also hurt unions. With support from business groups, Wisconsin and Michigan, both states with strong union histories, adopted "right to work" laws this decade that prevent private-sector companies and unions from requiring employees to pay union dues or fees. Twenty-seven states, including Texas, Florida and Arizona, have such laws. The Supreme Court ruled 5-4 last year that government workers nationwide can't be forced to contribute to the unions that represent them in collective bargaining.

Jeffrey Hirsch, a University of North Carolina law professor who specializes in labor issues, said such losses may spur unions to be more aggressive, but it also helps that unemployment is low. That makes workers more confident that a strike won't cost them their jobs.

"If the job market is better, they have more leverage because they aren't as easy to replace," he said.

Almost 50,000 General Motors workers went on strike this week as the UAW demands higher wages. It's the first U.S. auto industry work stoppage in a decade. In health care, 80,000 Kaiser Permanente workers plan a one-week strike next month to protest the hospital chain's wages and labor practices. Organizers say it might be the biggest U.S. walkout since 185,000 Teamsters struck United Parcel Service in 1997.

Teachers walked out in several states over the last few years demanding higher salaries and more school funding, including in Oklahoma, Arizona, Kentucky and West Virginia. Unions have also organized at several newspapers, including the Los Angeles Times, and at websites such as BuzzFeed, Slate, HuffPost and Fusion.

Mary Anne Trasciatti, chair of Hofstra University's labor studies program, believes unions will experience a growth period because of their improving public support, particularly among younger workers. She said people are realizing the manufacturing jobs of the 1950s and 1960s paid well because they were unionized.

"You've got people who are really struggling who are saying, 'Look our 'leaders' and our 'status quo' is not serving our needs' and they are pushing back," she said.
New York, NY – New York City Comptroller Scott M. Stringer has released a report outlining the City’s systemic failure to protect children from toxic lead. NYC agencies consistently missed opportunities to prevent lead exposure in children.

From 2013 through late 2018, the Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD), never performed a lead inspection in 9,671 buildings where 11,972 children tested positive for lead exposure.

The City’s lead inspection regime was hit or miss and left as many as 63 percent of all buildings under HPD’s jurisdiction with documented cases of child lead exposure entirely uninspected by HPD lead inspectors.

As many as 2,749 children who lived in the uninspected buildings tested positive for lead exposure. The City’s own Local Law 1 set a goal of eliminating and preventing child lead poisoning but the Big Apple had not developed an effective program to achieve it goals.

“Lead is poison – and no amount of it in a child’s blood is acceptable – period. Yet our investigation reveals how bureaucratic breakdowns and a lethargic approach to enforcement allowed children to fall through cracks and become exposed to toxic lead.

As a City, we are defined by how we treat our children, but the City is failing in its responsibility to use all available means to eliminate childhood lead poisoning across the city.

There has to be top-to-bottom change,” said New York City Comptroller Scott M. Stringer. “Any lead poisoning of our children must be treated as a five alarm fire, but the City isn’t utilizing basic tools at its disposal to extinguish the fires – even in the most problematic buildings it knows about.

Nearly 3,000 children tested with elevated blood lead levels after the City was aware of a problem in their buildings.

That is an outrage. The City needs to fully commit to rooting out lead exposure because half measures and haphazard strategies are failing. Fifteen years ago New York City set a goal to eliminate childhood lead poisoning once and for all – and for the health and safety of every single child – we must recommit to fulfilling that promise.”

In response to the investigation’s disturbing findings, the Comptroller called for an across-the-board overhaul of lead exposure mitigation and enforcement, calling on the City to: Proactively inspect all 9,671 buildings that the investigation found to be associated with one or more instances of childhood lead exposure and went uninspected, and do more going forward to coordinate agency responses to identify and remedy lead paint hotspots before more children are put at risk.
Informational Picket ‘May Lead To Eventual Strike’ By 700 1199 SEIU-Represented Niagara Falls Memorial Medical Center Employees ‘If A New Contract Is Not Reached In The Short Term,’ Union Officials Tell WNYLaborToday.com
Western NY Labor Today Saff - September 27, 2019

(NIAGARA FALLS, NEW YORK) – An informational picket that was held Friday (September 27th) outside the Niagara Falls Memorial Medical Center may lead to eventual Strike by the medical center’s 700 1199 Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Healthcare Workers East-represented Employees if new contract is not reached in the short term, Union Officials tell WNYLaborToday.com.

As many as 300 Workers walked a picket line for four hours to publicly demand a fair Union Contract and quality care for their patients. The Hospital Workers have been working without a contract since May 31st, when their previous three-year agreement expired. 1199 SEIU represents Service and Maintenance, Techs, Licensed Practical Nurses (LPNs), Registered Nurses (RNs) and other Health Care Professionals employed at the Niagara Falls Hospital.

Contract negotiations between the Union and hospital management broke off late Thursday with no agreement. Talks were scheduled to resume on Monday and Tuesday of next week, 1199 SEIU Vice-President Jim Scordato told WNYLaborToday.com, who also made it a point to say that he “was not optimistic” a tentative deal could be reached in the coming days.

“Besides a number of economic issues, our Members are ‘concerned about appropriate Staffing levels.’ This hospital is ‘well understaffed,’” Scordato told Your On-Line Labor Newspaper.

That, he added, “could lead to the ‘next step of moving it to a Strike Vote, which I think we could get very easily.’ (If things don’t move more quickly at the bargaining table), we ‘might be forced to issue’ a Strike Notice (to Niagara Falls Memorial Medical Center management).”

1199 SEIU Officials say - what they further described as “inadequate staffing levels and below-market wages” at Niagara County’s only inner-city hospital - cause long wait times for patients and make it difficult to recruit and retain qualified Staff.

On Friday, the 1199 SEIU-represented Workers picketed on their own time - during their lunch, during their breaks and on their day off - in order to alert the Niagara Falls Community of their quality health care concerns and to seek community support in their fight for a new contract.

1199 SEIU United Healthcare Workers East represents more than 400,000 Nurses and Caregivers throughout the States of Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, Maryland, Florida and in Washington, D.C.

Here in Western New York, 1199 SEIU represents nearly 12,000 Nursing Home and Hospital Workers.
Union membership has plummeted in the U.S. since the 1970s. About 10% of American workers are unionized today and only 7% in the private sector, down steeply from 40 years ago when a third of workers were represented, as jobs shifted from manufacturing to the service sector. When adjusted for inflation, the average American's wage has remained stagnant during those decades , according to the Pew Research Center.
Second Nevada State Workers Unit ‘Goes Union’ With AFSCME
Cyndy Hernandez - AFSCME News - September 27, 2019

(LAS VEGAS, NEVADA) – Nevada State Employees who provide a Mental and Behavioral Health Care Services have filed for Union Recognition with the American Federation of State, County & Municipal Employees (AFSCME) with the Government Employee-Management Relations Board of the State of Nevada, becoming the second group of State Workers to do so.

Since winning Collective Bargaining Rights earlier this year, a majority of Members in the Unit -comprised of Developmental Support Technicians, Certified Nursing Assistants (CNAs), Mental Health Technicians, Child Care Workers, Licensed Vocational Nurses and other health care related jobs – are asking to be represented in contract negotiations as AFSCME Local 4041.

“We care for people with ‘severe’ mental disabilities. ‘I love working with our clients, but year after year our employer has made it difficult to do our job safely and provide our clients with the best care possible.’ With collective bargaining, ‘I know my Co-Workers and I can make changes to improve safety in the workplace and the services we provide,’” said Ken Edmonds, a Developmental Support Tech at Desert Regional Center.

Nevada State Employees have been organizing as AFSCME Local 4041 for over 20 years.

This year, AFSCME Members won the right for 20,000 State Employees to bargain collectively over wages, working conditions and resources to improve State services.

State Workers must now file with Nevada as AFSCME based on Bargaining Units determined by job classifications.

This Unit of Health Care Workers followed the lead of a group of State Corrections Officers, who were the first to achieve majority support in their Unit and file for collective bargaining recognition.

After receiving it, Workers in each Unit will select Bargaining Teams to negotiate a contract with the State in the coming months.

“My Co-Workers and I ‘provide valuable services to some of the most vulnerable communities in Nevada.’ As AFSCME, ‘we will be able to advocate for resources to improve mental health services in all parts of the State,’” said Katie Morgan, a Mental Health Tech at Northern Nevada Adult Mental Health Services.

AFSCME represents 1.4 million Public Services Workers across the country and thousands of State Employees in Nevada.
We have cause to celebrate.

Public support for Unions reached 64% in a recent Gallup poll.

Gallup has been asking the public about support for Unions since 1936.

Since 1967, the polling agency observes, the Union Approval Rating “has only occasionally surpassed 60%.

The current 64% reading is one of the highest Union Approval Ratings Gallup has recorded over the past 50 years.

To make sense of this trend, we need to take three factors into account: Wage stagnation and benefits erosion; The Teachers’ Strike Wave; and the rise of Bernie Sanders. The first factor - substandard wages and benefits - only makes sense when you consider it alongside the other two.

Wages are increasingly insufficient to cover skyrocketing living costs and employers continue to slash benefits to increase profits, making life harder for Working People.

This is an obvious source of frustration with the status quo, a basic factor that causes Working People to turn to collective action in the form of Unions.

But worsening conditions don’t automatically juice Unions’ approval rating and they certainly don’t lead directly to increased Union Membership.

On the contrary, wages have been stagnating since the 70s and since then the Union Approval Rating and union Density itself have gone down, not up.

Neo-Liberalism has been ascendant since the mid-70s and in that time its foot-soldiers have been able to both wring more productivity and profit out of Workers without sharing and also convince many Workers that it’s the Unions who are greedy.

So eroded conditions alone are not responsible for the uptick in the Union Approval Rating.

People don’t automatically warm to Unions just because their employers are treating them poorly - they have to be presented with a credible alternative.

Enter the Teachers’ Strike Wave, which started in 2018.

The strikes in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona, California, Washington, and several other states put Unions in the news, making them visible and relevant to large segments of the population for the first time in decades.

And importantly, by “bargaining for the common good” - or connecting their demands to the well-being of communities as a whole - the strikes were successful at impressing on people that what’s good for Unions and Workers is also good for students, parents - and the entire public.

But there’s still a missing piece of the puzzle.
The Detroit Free Press Reports It Might Take Another Week Or More Of Talks For The UAW & GM To Reach A Contract Agreement That Would End A Country-Wide Strike By 46,000 Unionized Workers

Jamie L. LaReau - The Detroit Free Press - September 29, 2019

(DETROIT, MICHIGAN) - The United Auto Workers (UAW) and General Motors (GM) are far apart on several key issues that could take a week or more to resolve before a tentative agreement is reached, two people familiar with the talks are telling The Detroit Press.

That also means the Strike could last at least two weeks longer if the UAW acts on a plan it is considering to keep Members on the picket lines until the GM Rank-and-File votes to ratify the deal, as The Free Press has also reported.

However, other people close to the talks cautioned that breakthroughs can come quickly, speeding a resolution.

In the meantime, UAW Leadership has instructed Regional Directors to meet with the leaders of Union Locals over the next few days to brief them on the talks, said the sources.

The developments came as costs to both sides mount on day 12 of the longest UAW Strike since 1985.

Anderson Economic Group, an East Lansing-based consultant, said late last week that GM probably has lost profits of $113 million so far, and is now losing money at the rate of $25 million a day.

It also said UAW Members and Workers at supplier firms laid off now total $266 million in direct wages.

Early Thursday (September 26th), GM reversed itself on a decision it made early in the Strike that angered the Union. It said it has now decided to pay health care costs of Strikers rather than leaving that to the UAW.

The Union, though, appeared to be unimpressed.

About 46,000 GM UAW Members have been on Strike at GM's plants nationwide since September 16th.

The 2015 contract with GM expired at midnight on September 14th.

GM had made an initial proposal for a new contract two hours earlier, but the UAW turned it down.

“On the major issues, we still have work to do,” UAW Spokesman Brian Rothenberg said.
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.

“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.

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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.
ALBANY — The controversial trash fee will continue as part of Mayor Kathy Sheehan’s proposed 2020 budget, which increases spending roughly 1.4 percent, includes 1 percent raises for the city's white collar workers and adjusts resources to tackle neighborhood concerns like traffic safety.

Sheehan will present the $179.58 million spending plan proposed for 2020 to city leaders at 11 a.m. Tuesday at City Hall, aiming to provide more context to how the budget plays into the delivery of city services.

“When a council member wants to see more services, what does that really entail?” she said during an interview with the Times Union on Monday. “I think there is some interest on the part of council members, particularly with the recreation budget, to be doing some more outreach within their individual wards around what the needs are so we can ensure that we’re matching the needs to the programs we have.”

Overall, the proposed budget maintains the city services and programs, anticipating increases in property tax and sales tax revenue and slight bumps in payments-in-lieu-of-taxes and state aid that will cover salary increases along with rising costs in healthcare and other benefits, the 2020 proposed budget shows.

Albany expects to take in additional $300,000 through the tax levy, with an increased non-homestead tax rate of $85 on a commercial building assessed at $500,000. Homeowner property taxes will remain basically the same compared to last year.

The tax rate for residential homes is poised for $10.85 per $1,000 assessed, while the rate for commercial properties is set at $14.21 per $1,000 assessed.

The budget includes a nearly $3 million reduction in operating expenses while debt service increases over $2 million.

“I think what people can take away is we’ve been able to turn the ship,” Sheehan said of the proposed budget. “Six years ago, the idea that we would be sitting here with a balanced budget and able to provide the services that we continue to provide for, at the service level that is consistent with what our residents are used to and what they expect, is a huge achievement.”

The budget is balanced, once again, on the state providing $12.5 million in what Albany officials call Capital City Funding. The city only received $12 million this year despite requesting $12.5 million to close the deficit in the 2019 budget. Sheehan maintains it’s a structural deficit that cannot be fixed with tax hikes or cuts to services.

Department heads also will focus on community concerns and how current resources will be adjusted to tackle those issues, Sheehan said. For example, the mayor said Albany Police Chief Eric Hawkins will be shifting resources to help focus on traffic safety.

The city also has shifted all mowing duties for parks under the purview of the Department of General Services, rather than some of that work being done under the Department of Recreation, Sheehan said.

The budget also includes the $90 per unit fee for trash removal, a proposal that was set to sunset at the end of the year based on a resolution passed by the Common Council when the fee was first introduced in 2016. The council will introduce a law to extend the fee structure at its next meeting, Oct. 7.
Last year’s budget featured an expansion on the fee to single-family homeowners, but no changes are proposed for next year, Sheehan said.

The city-owned Rapp Road landfill now is projected to close in 2026, buying Albany more time to determine the future of waste removal. In moving forward, Sheehan said there must be a community dialogue about what is the best way to provide that service.

“A future state of where people pay only for what they throw away is something that I’m very open to,” she said. “It makes sense from an environmental standpoint, we just have to make sure it makes sense from a social justice standpoint. That is the conversation that I’m encouraging the council to have.”

Council President Pro Tempore Richard Conti said those discussions are ongoing among councilmembers with an eye toward a system where people pay for how much they throw away.

“We’re not ready to implement something like that at this point,” he said. “Those discussions about how we provide incentives to reduce waste needs to be a continuing discussion.”