



Building a Multifaceted Campaign for Public Higher Education

The Professional Staff Congress Contract Struggle at the City University of New York

Michael Fabricant and Stephen Brier

In their new book, Austerity Blues: Fighting for the Soul of Public Higher Education, Michael Fabricant and Stephen Brier trace the waning support for public higher education and its deleterious effects on students, faculty, and American society at large. Here, they reflect on what helped the Professional Staff Congress at the City University of New York win the most recent round in the fight for public higher education at a time when greater access to public universities is sorely needed to help reduce inequality.

In the spring of 2016, about 50 members of the Professional Staff Congress (PSC) of the City University of New York (CUNY) were arrested in front of Governor Cuomo's office.¹ The spirit of PSC members, both the hundreds rallying across the street and the 50 who participated in the "die-in", was somber but steadfast. Participants understood that both the affordability and quality of a CUNY education was being undercut by government policies of disinvestment. This crisis was rapidly eroding the working conditions of faculty and staff and the learning conditions of students who are disproportionately from the poorest communities across the city. Questions of justice and the survival of a meaningful public higher education animated the actions of those present at the rally. Every part of the bargaining unit was represented. Students and community groups also lent their support. This action was part of a larger campaign waged by the PSC to defend the fiscal viability and historic mission of the City University of New York.

Over the past six years, public higher education has suffered from extreme cuts in public revenue. Across the country, state support for public higher education has declined on average by 20%² between 2008 and 2014. In New York State, the per-student investment was cut by 14% during the same period. These dramatic declines have been accompanied by spikes in tuition for those students least able to afford it. At the City University of New York, the largest urban public university in the United States, the average family income for 57% of students is less than \$30,000.

The climate of austerity has resulted in a revenue chokehold for public services in general and public higher education more specifically. Policies of austerity have been especially harsh for the faculty and staff represented by the Professional Staff Congress of CUNY. The members of the PSC were without a new contract or salary increase for six and a half years. This past June, a settlement agreement was reached and nearly three quarters of members voted on the contract—a 20-percentage-point increase in voting participation from the prior contract settlement six years ago—and 94% voted to approve it. The contract campaign, which was waged over a six-year period, escalated intensely between the fall of 2014 and the spring of 2016. Four basic elements of the

¹ See: www.nytimes.com/2015/11/05/nyregion/cuny-faculty-members-arrested-after-staging-protest.html.

² On the basis of full-time-equivalent student investment.

campaign, in retrospect, resulted in the settlement agreement: membership mobilization, community participation, media engagement, and a lobbying strategy.

The first element was mobilizing the membership of the PSC to make the relatively hidden decline of working and learning conditions at CUNY a public issue by organizing escalating and militant actions to produce political leverage. Over the course of 2015 and 2016, PSC and its allies held mass actions to settle the contract, a number of which resulted in arrests of union members. During this period, a cross section of noted authors also wrote about and publicized their discontent with the continuing contract impasse, as well as more general disinvestment in CUNY. A strike authorization vote in the late spring of 2016 revealed that 92% of the PSC membership supported a work stoppage if leadership deemed it necessary. This outcome can in large part be traced to the thousands of one-on-one conversations leading up to the vote that increased the power of the PSC.

A second component of the campaign was building common cause with students, other unions, and community groups through the formation of the CUNY Rising Alliance³ in the fall of 2015. The Alliance has approximately 25 organizational members, including—but not limited to—the Working Families Party, New York Communities for Change, Make the Road by Walking, the New York Public Interest Group, the CUNY University Student Senate, the Hispanic Federation and AFSCME DC 37.⁴ Its leaders envisioned both free tuition and significantly increased public investment in CUNY to assure high-quality education. It held a series of press conferences, a rally in front of the Governor’s office, a teach-in at a church, and CUNY students organized a march across the Brooklyn Bridge. Full membership meetings occurred once a month, while planning or subcommittee work occurred weekly. The Alliance blossomed over eight months in the heat of the contract campaign. It helped advance a dual agenda of an affordable and quality public higher education. In the aftermath of the contract struggle, the CUNY Rising Alliance has initiated a citywide petition campaign to support a Student Bill of Rights.

A third element of the contract campaign was systematic attention to generating media coverage of both public actions and the largely hidden decline of CUNY. As a result of working carefully with consultants and the PSC communication team, the campaign was consistently covered by local media including the *New York Times*,⁵ and over time became a national story. Such coverage was amplified when Michelle Obama delivered the commencement speech at the City College of New York, one of the best-known colleges in the CUNY system. The hope she spoke to for students attending a historically strong public college was, at least in part, contradicted by the evident erosion of its infrastructure, as featured in a major story in the *New ork Times*.⁶

Finally, the PSC’s lobbying work in Albany produced important legislative advocates who supported the union’s struggle for a fair contract. The support of these legislators peaked when the Governor proposed cutting the budget of CUNY by \$485 million while continuing to resist settling the contract with the PSC. A number of legislative caucuses in the Assembly signed on to alternative budget proposals advocated by the PSC. Equally importantly, they were privately and publicly willing to describe the magnitude of the continuing threat to CUNY students and faculty because of ever starker policies of budget-cutting or austerity.

The steady beat of escalating actions, the growing media coverage that ensued, the validation of CUNY Rising allies, and the support of legislators were the four threads stitched through the whole cloth of a coherent struggle for investment in public higher education. The larger aspirations and synergies of the campaign, not any one thread, accounted for its ultimate success.

The settlement agreement, in large part produced by the campaign, contains a number of provisions. To begin with, members received a 10.4% raise, compounded over an approximate

³ See: <http://psc-cuny.org/sites/default/files/CUNY Platform for Change.pdf>.

⁴ District Council 37 (representing New York City) of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), the largest trade union of public employees in the United States.

⁵ See: www.nytimes.com/2016/05/13/nyregion/cuny-union-votes-to-allow-strike-if-contract-deal-is-not-reached.html.

⁶ See: www.nytimes.com/2016/05/29/nyregion/dreams-stall-as-cuny-citys-engine-of-mobility-sputters.html.

seven-year period. Clearly this rate increase did not crack the austerity ceilings established by either the governor or mayor. It is, however, consistent with other contracts for the State and City workers of New York. Other parts of the settlement do, however, represent a reversal of articulated and unarticulated policy. The State initially indicated that the PSC would receive little if any retroactive cash in a settlement. At the conclusion of both the campaign and negotiations, the State did set aside \$250 million of back pay owed to CUNY employees, including those represented by the PSC and other unions. Perhaps the most striking parts of the agreement, however, are the non-economic provisions, which include a three-year appointment or dramatically increased job security for eligible adjuncts, new opportunities for advancement or professional reclassification for Higher Education Officers, a route to salary increases for staff, and management's commitment to reduce course loads for faculty by three credits to enhance advisement and mentoring for students. A host of other provisions were achieved which benefit librarians, provisional instructors, and graduate assistants.

As with any single campaign and contract, PSC's achievement is incomplete. Much more needs to be done. Lifting the wages of members, particularly part-time faculty, is especially important. That said, this is a contract won by a smart, effective campaign and negotiation. It contains provisions which begin to reverse trends that have contributed to the decline of both learning and working conditions throughout CUNY. Perhaps the most important lesson is that little will be won unless the struggle is waged across many fronts that cohere into a single campaign. Equally important, public higher education campaigns will have to be waged on the basis of student rights to a quality education, and the particular significance of such entitlement to poor students of color. The four components we have sketched in this essay—faculty mobilization, organizing community and student allies, nurturing relationships with the media, and building legislative champions for public higher education—must be at the core of any public higher-education campaign intended not only to preserve but also extend present levels of funding. In this presidential campaign, faculty members must join with students to further pollinate what is already in the air politically as a result of the Sanders and Clinton presidential campaigns: the right to a free public higher education. Importantly, the call for a free public higher education must be joined to campaigns for investment in quality, including increased hiring of full-time faculty. Finally, the fight for public higher education must directly address race, class, inequality, and the need for greater public investment to assure both quality and affordability if it is to have any hope of transformational success.

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