

UCATS Momentum

Union of Clerical, Administrative & Technical Staff at NYU, Local 3882, NYSUT, AFT, AFL-CIO

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We'll miss you!



Trudy chairing a Local 3882 International Women's Day meeting in 1996. (Left) Trudy with co-organizer, Greg Succop at her going away party.



Trudy Rudnick, leader in our union for over 20 years, is leaving Local 3882 to organize education and healthcare workers in the state. We'll miss her leadership and dedication.



After 21 years Trudy Rudnick says goodbye to Local 3882.

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John Sweeney, President, AFL-CIO, and Local 3882 Bargaining Team members at a union rally, 2000.

Union participation = career success

■ Stephen Rechner, Vanderbilt Hall



The theme of this issue of *Momentum* can best be described as “transitions.” First, we say farewell to Trudy Rudnick, our lead organizer and past president. Trudy has been my friend and mentor for over 18 years, and I would not be the president of UCATS today if not for her support and encouragement. I first met Trudy when our union was on strike in 1988. During my years on the executive council, we worked together on three contracts and multiple issues.

In building Local 3882, Trudy has contributed significantly to the national labor movement. It was under her presidency that our union was one of the first in the nation to negotiate a child care fund, as well as domestic partner benefits for same-sex couples.

Although Trudy will be profoundly missed, I am delighted that our state affiliate, NYSUT, has recognized her years of hard work and commitment with our union by offering her a challenging new position with career growth opportunities. I know she will continue to contribute to our success by advocating for higher-education locals like ours at the state level.

Search committee formed

On a practical note, as soon as we learned that Trudy would be leaving, the executive council formed a search committee, and we began interviewing applicants on March 29. In addition to replacing Trudy, we are also hiring a third organizer organizer to work with us through the settlement of our next contract. This transition is an opportunity for us to examine all of

the work we must accomplish and distribute it more rationally between the organizers and the executive council members.

Happily, the news in this issue is not all about departures. Our remaining organizer, Greg Succop, has accepted our offer to promote him to lead organizer, and he is assuming many of Trudy’s responsibilities. Joy Young, serving her first term as shop steward, has written her first article for this issue of *Momentum*, and she is also coordinating with NYSUT our first ever defensive driving course for UCATS members. Vice president, Luz Contreras, is working with me to oversee the daily finances of the local, and Rob Lesko, our other V.P., will be taking on more office duties.

The newsletter staff also welcomes Nicholas Taylor as a new contributor. He has written the “Know Your Rights” piece for this issue. Nicholas volunteered in response to my president’s letter on the topic of member participation in the last issue. In that letter I focused on why your involvement is crucial to fulfilling the needs of the union, and on successfully

negotiating our next contract. Trudy’s departure, however, gives me an opportunity to revisit the issue of member participation with a focus on what you can gain from the experience.

Volunteer to get ahead

While reminiscing at her farewell reception, Trudy reminded me that she started at NYU as a room assignments clerk, and was promoted to administrative aide, before coming to work for UCATS full-time. Hearing that, and having worked with her on the executive council when she was our chief steward, secretary, and president, it brought to mind that one of the best ways to get promoted, or prepare for a new career outside of NYU, is through volunteer work on the executive council. What better

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A goodbye to Local 3882

■ *Trudy Rudnick, 21 years with Local 3882*

Leaving Local 3882 is one of the hardest things I've ever done. I grew up with this local — it's been my heart and soul for many years. And it's a great union. We've grown so much, and won so many things in our 25 years. Even when others were facing cutbacks and layoffs, we stayed strong and were respected by others in the labor movement for our militancy and resolve. I came to NYU in 1983 and was immediately recruited into action. We almost went out on strike then, and we did, in 1988 — that was a life changing experience for me and the local. When you walked down every street where there was an NYU office, there we would be picketing — women, men, young and old. We felt like we owned the streets. 1,000 strong.

The beginning of a new era

That strike changed our relationship with NYU. Instead of being viewed as just a bunch of girls (referring to all of us) who didn't have much power, we were a force to be reckoned with, and after the strike, we started winning stronger contracts. In 1993, NYU had me and other union leaders arrested when we refused to give up the sound system in a rally to preserve our health benefits. And guess what? We preserved our health benefits with no givebacks. NYU went from being a workplace where in 1987 a grade 7 qualified for food stamps, to a union that today has one of the highest pay scales and benefits among universities around the country.

Our union has also been active in the fight against injustice — in the U.S. and abroad. Several of us were arrested, along with hundreds of NYC union leaders and activists, in the struggles against apartheid in South Africa and the shooting of Amadou Diallo. We went to Yankee Stadium to see Nelson Mandela in his first trip to the U.S. after being released from prison. We went to Washington to march for abortion rights and have marched in every Labor Day Parade since our union started. We marched against the war in Iraq and in support of union sisters and brothers who are teachers in our sister union, the UFT, and those on strike at Yale University.

All of this is what I'll remember about Local 3882. But, especially, I'll remember all of the members — everyone who's walked into the office, called on the



Trudy Rudnick and union president, Steve Rechner, receive an award for *The 3882 Local News* at this year's NYSUT RA. They were given the award by NYSUT President Thomas Hobart and NYSUT Vice President, Toni Cortese.

phone, come to our great holiday party, marched on the picket lines, folded leaflets in mailings, and helped play some part in making this the best union there is. I'll remember that when my life partner (and former union president), Margarita and I had our daughter, Shana, we were accepted by the workers here, unlike Bush, who is supporting a vile, anti-gay marriage constitutional amendment.

A promising future

And there are such great things that lie ahead for our union. We have always stood up to NYU in their attempts to minimize us, push us back and make us invisible. That's impossible, though, because it's the clerical and technical staff who really run this university and its Local 3882 UCATS that makes NYU know that — all the time. There is a strong experienced leadership in Local 3882 officers, a group of smart, committed and energetic new stewards, and your other organizer Greg, who follows in the strong Local 3882 tradition. Soon, there will be new organizers who, along with the 3882 leadership and membership, will continue our forward movement.

I will be moving on to spread all that I have learned at Local 3882 to the thousands of workers around New York State who need unions. Because I truly believe that every woman and man in this country needs a Local 3882 in their life.

Thank you, Local 3882 members. I will miss you. 🌸

Overtime – above and beyond

■ *Nicholas Taylor, 838 Broadway*

There is a widespread perception that if you are not coming in at 8 a.m. and leaving after 6 p.m., then you are somehow a worker lacking in both commitment and ambition. Working above and beyond the normal nine-to-five day is seen as a way of showing your energy, work ethic, and dedication to your employer. An employee should want to have so much work that they can't possibly finish by five o'clock: anything else is seen as laziness. This prevalent cultural assumption is simply untrue, and we, as members of a union, cannot be duped by a pernicious workaholic culture into not being paid for the extra work that we do.

Bush's agenda

In last month's issue of *Momentum*, we reported on President Bush's proposed changes to the rules governing overtime pay, which threaten to deny overtime protections to millions of office and clerical workers. In light of that proposed legislation, which is being fought vigorously by organized labor around the country, members of our local should be apprised of the overtime protections that we fought so hard to have included in our current contract with the university.

According to article 7, section C of our collective-bargaining agreement, "employee[s] must be paid

at the rate of time and one-half for time worked in excess of 35 hours." What this means for workers in our local is that we cannot be forced, coerced, or pressured to put in one minute more than the 35 hours a week without being paid overtime. This is a privilege for which we have fought hard and won, so we should be sure to exercise it proudly.

Many employees are often reticent to speak up for their rights. If their division is at a very busy time of the year, some may feel that it is their duty to pitch in extra hours in order to get the work done. Others fear putting the relationship with their supervisor in jeopardy by requesting overtime pay. Since we are all conscientious people, many of us feel bad about asking for extra money from the university, so we wind up working the extra hours without utilizing the protections afforded us by our contract. Put in extra hours? Certainly, but be sure to get paid time and a half, which

is your right as a union member.

A strategy for protection

For an employee who feels that he or she is being asked to do more than they possibly can in their 35 hours a week, we recommend the following procedure. Arrange a meeting with your supervisor and explain that you will not be able to complete all the work on your plate in the span of your normal work hours. Explain to your supervisor that they can either arrange to pay you overtime for the extra hours you put in, adjust your deadlines or priorities so that you can pick up where you left off the next day, or delegate some of this work to someone else. Understand that you are not being lazy or refusing to be a "team player." You are simply making sure that your right to be paid for the time you work is being upheld.

If, however, your problem is not only too much work, but new and complex responsibilities that were

not part of your job description when you were hired, it is important to know that our contract gives us the right to have our job and pay-grade reclassified by the university. According to article 10 of our contract, the union has the right to request that a member's job classification be re-evaluated by the university. If the university denies the employee's request, their reasons for doing so must be given to the union and

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UCATS receives an A

■ Joy Young, Sliver Center

Report of a first year steward

When I decided to run for stewardship, I was reluctant because I did not have any experience or knowledge of union activities. I did not even know what a grievance was. I heard a lot of negativity toward the union and I let that discourage me from participating in any of the events. I felt the union only fought for members' jobs when they were laid off and collecting dues.

What the union has to offer

So I went to a meeting to see for myself how the leadership was "leading" the union. I saw the faces of the union leadership at that time, and I saw how close they were to the members. I saw how they laughed and related to members at the meeting. My perception of the union was wrong. From that meeting, they encouraged me to become a steward. I was told in detail what



Shop steward, Joy Young, encourages members to get more involved.

the role of a steward is and tips on how to campaign my self for the election. Any question I had, and I had plenty, was answered with patience. They gave me tips on what to say to co-workers and how to spread the word. I was amazed by the support I received from my co-workers during my campaign. (You know who you are in the Silver Center) I was very encouraged and

it was due to the help of the union. I would like to thank my co-workers for their support. I am now in a position to help union members with any job related issues thanks to the union.

The union is involved in all kind of activities. To name a few: contract negotiations; steward training; celebrating black history month; community service; marches/rallies; helping other unions across the city; unsafe work environments; FMLA inquiries; worker's compensation; grievances; arbitrations and so much more. The leadership does all this and maintains the duties and responsibilities of their jobs within NYU departments. The union encourages members to contact their steward to voice their concerns and situations.

Getting involved

What the union needs is for more employees to take the steps to have an accurate knowledge of the activities within the union. Furthermore, we need more people to become stewards to help communicate that knowledge to members in the districts where they work. Stewards are the voice of the union members. If more members are involved, then more changes for the better can be implemented. Do not be how I was: ignorant to rules and regulations. Know what policies are formed/or violated and how it affects or relates to you. And here comes the corny punch line: If I can become more involved, so can you.

UCATS, keep up the good work. And thanks for informing and changing the mind of a once ignorant person, to a UCATS Steward. You guys get an A from me. 𐄂

Overtime – above and beyond

(Continued from page 4)

the worker has the right to appeal the decision. Just as we should not do work for which we are not being paid, we also should not take on greater and more complex responsibilities without the concomitant increase in pay that should accompany them.

Stand up for your rights

Remember, your time is just as valuable as anyone else's. Our contract gives us the protections that allow us to balance our work and personal lives. We know that

we cannot be forced to work extra hours without overtime pay or forced to take on more responsibilities without a pay increase. It will always be in management's best interest to get the most work out of us for the least money, but since we are organized and we are strong, we have the power to avoid such exploitation. Remember, prior to the passage of the Fair Labor Standards Act in 1938, ten- or twelve-hour work days were the norm: if we are not vigilant in protecting our rights, we could very easily return to having to weather such indignities and abuses. 𐄂

UCATS fighting for a healthy workplace

■ Greg Succop, Organizer

As readers of *Momentum Extra!* and *New York Teacher* (see cover story) are aware, a worker at NYU's Dental Center has been exposed to levels of formaldehyde that have permanently disabled her. They also know that NYU chose inaction rather than prevention of the tragedy.

NYU closes ranks

Both the Dental Center and the university have closed ranks, then in meetings with union organizers blamed the victim by claiming that the first person the effected worker called "was an attorney." Publicly the university has defended its actions (or rather lack of action!) by saying that "no one forced her to work in the lab" (John Beckman to New York Post reporter Sam Smith.) Despite the best efforts of the university and the EPA to cover up the incident including claims that "there were no EPA violations" (Jane Kenny Region 2 EPA Director to New York Post reporter Sam Smith), ongoing investigations by the union and OSHA continue to uncover and document the university's calculated disregard for the health and well being of staff, students, and faculty.

Local 3882 filed a 24-count complaint with OSHA. This investi-

MY CAREER IS OVER: NYU worker Michelle DePaola was exposed to dangerous levels of chemicals. NY Post: Susan May Tai

NYU furor over toxic lab fumes

By SAM SMITH

A worker at New York University's Dental School has been left with a permanent breathing disability after handling toxic chemicals used to preserve cadavers for anatomy courses, according to the state Workers' Compensation Board.

Michelle DePaola, a technician who handles bodies prepared for dissection, was exposed to roughly seven times the amount of formaldehyde considered safe during the delivery and processing of bodies last December, according to New York University spokesman John Beckman.

DePaola said the university did not inform her of this overexposure until nearly a month later, and did not reassign her out of the lab until Jan. 27. By then, she said, she had already developed severe respiratory problems, which have left her unable to work in her field.

Today, DePaola said she has to sleep sitting up because the weight of her chest on her lungs is too much to bear. She said she is winded when she walks, and her doctor says her respiratory system is permanently disabled, rendering her unable to work.

DePaola, 27, had recently completed 80 percent of the course work necessary to get her funeral director's license.

"My career is over," she said. "They've taken my life from me."

DePaola's hardship hit as university President John Sexton signed an agreement with the federal Environmental Protection Agency stating the school would police its own environmental and health problems and disclose them to the agency in exchange for the agency's waiving any penalties.

The union representing DePaola and other technical workers at the school protested outside the signing Thursday at NYU's Bobst Library, saying the university was giving a first-class lesson in hypocrisy.

"You can't trust the university with the safety of workers and students," said union President Steve Rechner.

Susan Price, a chemist at the school, said ongoing problems have included broken ventilation systems that allow chemical fumes to build up in labs.

"The smell just punches you in the face," she said.

She said other problems include leaks in the ceiling of a "radioactive station," where radioactive materials are kept and nothing is supposed to be allowed in or out.

Furthermore, Rechner said, the protocol for disposing fluids from cadavers in the dental-school lab is to pour the hazardous substances down the sink — the same sink where students wash their hands, a major violation of EPA rules.

An NYU spokesman said the lab is actually on the Hunter College campus, and he could not comment on the protocol. A Hunter College spokesperson said the removal of hazardous waste is NYU's responsibility.

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gation continues with interviews of all people involved in the events at the College of Dentistry's Anatomy Laboratory, including Deans, Environmental Services Administrators, Dental Center Administrators, colleagues, and individuals from Hunter College where the laboratory was located. Two on-sight inspections have taken place during which additional air monitoring took place. Union organizers have met repeatedly with the assigned

OSHA inspector providing first hand accounts, along with additional documentation. A final determination is some weeks away but it is clear that the university will be found in violation of most, if not all, provisions cited. Fines will be assessed at the conclusion of the investigation.

Looking at all the problems

Union officers and organizers met with lab workers, and representatives from GSOC (Graduate Students Organizing Committee, UAW) to share information and plan strategy around common issues ranging from mold and mildew problems at various buildings university-wide, lab safety, and the university's patterned response.

The union has filed an Unfair Labor Practice and has also filed for arbitration because the university has violated the health and safety provision of our contract (Article 37B). The same individuals that violated our contract have also denied the grievance we filed.

The union has been working with various print media to "get the story out." This includes press coverage in *The New York Post*, *The Villager*, *The Washington Square News*, *New York Teacher*, *Momentum* and *Momentum Extra!* You can check out our website at www.ucats3882.org for the *Momentum Extra*. Follow-up articles are being planned as information continues to come to light documenting the university's policy of "Hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil". ☸

Health and safety quiz

■ Scott Loane, 721 Broadway

1. According to NYU spokesman John Beckman, UCATS member Michelle DePaola was recently exposed to how many times the amount of formaldehyde considered safe?

- a) 1-1/2 b) 3 c) 7 d) 5

C. (*New York Post, Sunday, February 15, 2004*)

2. NYU informed Ms. DePaola of this overexposure.

- a) a day later b) a few days later c) a week later d) nearly a month later

D. (*New York Post, Sunday, February 15, 2004*)

3. The Environmental Protection Agency recently signed an agreement to allow who to police and disclose environmental and health problems at NYU?

- a. UCATS, Local 3882
b. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration
c. The Environmental Protection Agency
d. New York University

D. (*New York Post, Sunday, February 15, 2004*)

4. The protocol for disposing of hazardous fluids from cadavers at the dental school lab is to:

- a. soak them into sponges and send them to a land fill
b. recycle them
c. pour them down the drain where students wash their hands
d. bottle them and return them to the cadaver provider

C. (*New York Post, Sunday, February 15, 2004*)

5. On March 25, 1911, how many people were killed in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire.

- a) 10 b) 50 c) 100 d) 146

D. (*The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire Trial by Doug Linder (2002), <http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/triangle/triangleaccount.html>*)

6. True or False, In June of 1909, the management of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company received a letter from a fire prevention expert suggesting that they hold a meeting to discuss improved safety measures.

True. (<http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/triangle/triangleaccount.html>)

7. Witnesses testified at the trial of Triangle Shirtwaist Company owners, Isaac Harris and Max Blanck, that factory doors were kept locked to prevent employees from pilfering shirtwaists. Harris admitted on the stand to an almost obsessive concern with employee theft stating that the value of goods stolen over the company's 11 year history was how much?

- a) \$1000 b) under \$25 c) \$5000 d) \$100

B. (<http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/triangle/triangleaccount.html>)

8. The Triangle Shirtwaist Company paid an average of how much to the families of 23 fire victims?

- a) \$1000 b) \$500 c) \$100 d) \$75

D. (<http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/triangle/trianglechron.html>)

Career success

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way to demonstrate your ability to lead, to articulate issues, and assume real responsibility, than to become a shop steward. Conversely, if you don't want to get promoted, just sit at your desk each day, don't make any waves, do only the minimum required to get by, and let your managers know that you won't get involved with the union because you are afraid. Now I know that last sentence sounds harsh, but I'm trying to distill 18 years of comments from members into a few words to make a point.

One of the most common frustrations members approach their shop stewards with is that they perpetually get passed over for promotions even after many years on their current job. Trudy is an example of how serving on the executive council can lead to new opportunities and career advancement. Union volunteer work is a great opportunity to demonstrate your abilities above and beyond your current clerical or tech job, and you can put these experiences on your resume to advance your career.

Furthermore, one of our past presidents now has her own business, a former vice president now works as an organizer for a national labor union, and two of our former shop stewards are now lawyers. These are just a few success stories that I can think of off the top of my head. Many people have passed through the Local 3882 executive council during the past 25 years and made NYU a better place to work as a result. They used their union experience as a springboard to better opportunities, and you can too! Check out our website for current volunteer opportunities: www.ucats3882.org. 🌟

The best cure for an unhealthy work environment – unions

■ *Caroline Rubens,
Shop Steward, ITS*

In 1911, a fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory caused the deaths of nearly 150 people when locked and improperly built doors prevented workers from reaching safety. Public outrage over the event inspired a workplace reform movement that led to new safety legislation in the United States. Many health and safety laws have been passed in the years since the Triangle tragedy. Yet in 1991, a fire at the Imperial Food chicken plant in North Carolina took 25 lives. The main cause, according to investigators, was locked or blocked fire exits. How well are health and safety standards really enforced in this country, and who is best protecting the interests of workers?

A little history

Awareness of the need for health and safety regulation dates back to the industrial revolution and its increasingly hazardous work conditions. Railroad work, for example, was associated with very high death and injury rates. In 1893, the average life expectancy of a switchman was 7 years. Public pressure and the unionization of railway workers led to the passage of state and federal regulations, such as the Federal Employer's Liability Act (FELA), which allows injured railroad workers to sue their employers in cases of negligence. The introduction of hazardous chemicals into the workplace was another by-product of industrialization. At the turn of the century, phosphorous poisoning was widespread in the match



Union members meet to strategize about how to help Michele DePaola (featured second from the right). Left to right: Susan Price, Caroline Rubens, Ryan Nuckel, Rob Lesko, Michele DePaola and Steve Rechner.

industry, leading to regulations that forbade employers from allowing workers to take food into workspaces.

Weakening OSHA

Over the years, a patchwork quilt of state and federal laws was passed on a case by case basis, usually after a piece of machinery or toxic chemical had already caused injuries or fatalities. In the 1960s coal miners lobbied hard for safety regulations, inspiring a call for the creation of a centralized, federal system of occupational safety enforcement. In 1970, with concerted pressure from a broad front of unionists and activists, Congress passed the Occupational Safety and Health Act. Its stated intent was “to assure so far as possible every working man and woman in the nation safe and healthful working conditions.” The act created the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), whose job is to adopt standards and enforce them with a system of inspections and fines.

While OSHA can be a powerful tool in protecting workers, it has suffered from decades of weaken-

ing. In the 1980s, the Reagan administration made crippling cuts to the agency's funding and number of inspectors. The trend has been towards encouraging companies to “voluntarily” comply with regulations (this is also a tendency within the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) which recently signed a self-audit agreement with NYU). OSHA's fines have been called “toothless” by critics, as they are not really steep enough to significantly affect large companies with egregious violations. In addition, the agency has shown an unwillingness to pursue serious offenders. A recent *New York Times* study found that between 1982 and 2002, OSHA investigated 1,242 cases of “willful negligence” that resulted in worker deaths — that is, cases in which workers died because employers knowingly “ignored accepted safety precautions, removed safety devices to speed up production or denied workers protective gear.” OSHA sought criminal prosecution in only 7% of these cases. The other 93%, including repeat offenders, were given fines.

So what recourse do workers have? A strong union, according to studies. It has been established that unionized workers have better enforcement of health and safety regulations than non-unionized workers. In this light, perhaps the greatest modern gain for workplace health and safety reform was Congress' 1966 decision to force companies to negotiate with unions on health and safety issues (before that, they could refuse). At NYU, Local 3882 fought for 21 years to include a health and safety clause in its contract. This clause states that the university must meet with the union twice a year to discuss health and safety matters. It also says that NYU must investigate and report to the union about worksites that are suspected to have hazardous conditions.

The importance of a union in matters of health and safety hit home recently for members of Local 3882. Last year, technicians at the Morse Academic Plan lab had to lobby hard for a basic site inspection. They reported to the union that site managers were indifferent to safety violations (many of which had already been cited by NYU's own Environmental Services inspectors). Among these violations were improper ventilation and failure to warn staff not to eat or drink in the lab. It was only when the union demanded a walk-through visit with an industrial hygienist from NYCOSH that the school responded (NYCOSH is a consortium of unions and activists that provide inspection services and educational outreach for unions). Local 3882 has investigated myriad workplace problems at NYU, such as inadequate air flow at Bobst Library and black mold growing at 269 Mercer St. In each case, the

union was met with great resistance from the university (the revelation of safety lapses can result in liability for NYU, which creates a powerful disincentive for the university to thoroughly inspect its own sites).

In January a lab worker, Michele DePaola, suffered permanent lung

In January a lab worker, Michele DePaola, suffered permanent lung damage due to improper monitoring of formaldehyde levels at a dental school lab.

damage due to improper monitoring of formaldehyde levels at a Dental School Anatomy lab. When her supervisor was unresponsive to Michele's concerns of exposure, union representative Greg Succop had to essentially order the school to remove her from the site. Because of the complexity of the case, Local 3882 turned to its main sources of support on health and safety issues: NYCOSH and the local's state affiliate, New York State United Teachers (NYSUT). A health and safety specialist from NYSUT, Wendy Hord, gave the union guidance on our information request to NYU, our OSHA complaint and the workers' compensation information Michele needed.

Failure to protect the worker

The list of safety lapses at the Dental lab — from lack of basic protective equipment to improper disposal methods for toxic liquids — raises serious questions regarding the failure of managers and the school to protect an employee from overexposure to a toxic chemical that is regulated by OSHA. It was

only after the union filed for an OSHA inspection, and managers were confronted by a visiting inspector, that NYU grudgingly acknowledged safety problems. At this writing, OSHA is in the process of evaluating NYU's safety violations for possible disciplinary action. In addition, Local 3882 lab technicians from throughout the university have begun meeting to share and discuss their health and safety concerns.

The lives and physical well-being of many people have been sacrificed over the years to win laws that guarantee reasonably safe work conditions. Overall, things have improved. But when there are lapses, it is too often due to callous disregard for safety standards. Until regulatory agencies like OSHA have the proper authority and resources to fully enforce these standards, the best line of defense for workers is to exercise the union's right to demand accountability from management. With support from organizations such as NYCOSH and NYSUT, union members can insist that their concerns be addressed — not ignored, belittled, or swept under the rug. Through the ongoing efforts of committed unionists and activists, it is hoped that one day all workers — from office employees to immigrant laborers — can feel confident that they are not putting their health and safety at risk by simply coming to work.

For more information on health and safety, see: Local 3882 union contract, Article 37: www.ucats3882.org, New York Committee for Occupational Safety and Health: www.nycosh.org New York State United Teachers: www.nysut.org/healthandsafety/index.html Occupational Safety and Health Administration: www.osha.gov 𠄎

Bush is bad for workers (and everyone else)

■ *Stephen Rechner, Vanderbilt Hall*

Our state affiliate, NYSUT, has recently recommended a “No-CARB” election this November — no Cheney, no Ashcroft, no Rumsfeld, and no Bush.

Since President George Bush took office, over 3 million jobs have been lost in the United States, and over 15 million Americans are unemployed or underemployed. These, of course, are only the jobs and workers that are counted. Government statisticians don't count as unemployed anyone whose unemployment benefits have expired, or in other words, if a worker's unemployment benefits expire, that worker is effectively considered employed. This is why the reported unemployment rate has held steady for many months, while people still can't find jobs and continue to lose jobs. This is also an unspoken, but major reason, our Republican-controlled congress resists extending unemployment benefits to long-term unemployed people — because it will make the unemployment statistics go up. When unemployment statistics go up, tax breaks for the wealthy are a tougher sell. Thus, it's harder to make false claims that the economy is improving, and it dims the prospects for George Bush's reelection.

What went wrong

In 1980, President Ronald Reagan fired the first shot at working people when he unilaterally disbanded the air traffic controllers union. Corporate America realized

they had a friend in the white house, and the age of declining benefits, longer working hours, and union busting was underway.

Now we live in a country where the solutions to the nations' economic problems offered by the Republican Bush administration are to give tax breaks to corporations and multi-millionaire CEOs and renege on promises to working Americans, by threatening the Social Security and Medicare benefit programs that we have paid into for decades. We're told our government can't afford the inadequate social programs we have, let alone invest in anything new that might address poverty in our country; yet there's no shortage of money to topple nations, and send men to Mars.

It doesn't have to be this way

We know what it takes to build a better society, and how to pay for it. Our parents and grandparents survived the depression of the 1930s. As a result of that tragedy, they realized that only labor unions could raise working people into the middle class. For 50 years our country grew and prospered because unions demanded that government and business invest in people. It was labor unions that first negotiated health insurance, retirement insurance (which evolved into social security), shorter work weeks, and safe work environments. The jobs crisis we are facing today isn't due to a declining economy, it's the result of setting the wrong priorities, it isn't a lack of solutions — it's a lack of compassion; and it isn't even that jobs are being exported — it's

that for reasons incomprehensible to thinking Americans, our leaders have entered into trade agreements that are undermining the economy of our nation.

Our local has a 25 year history of not endorsing candidates for any public office. I'm not going to start now, because I don't think you look to me to tell you how to vote, or for whom to vote. I haven't forgotten, that NAFTA was negotiated by (democratic) President Bill Clinton, and voted for by democratic presidential candidate Senator, John Kerry; but I remember that it was negotiated at a time when jobs were plentiful, and there was a 15 year projected surplus of tax revenues. Perhaps Clinton and Kerry were short-sighted, maybe even plain stupid, but the writing has been on the wall for sometime now that NAFTA is bad economics. The current administration not only embraces NAFTA, it is trying to negotiate similar arrangements with more trading partners.

It is clear (to me) that George Bush has been a disaster for working people in this country. Not only has he given away so many tax breaks to his corporate benefactors that in three short years he as managed our nation's economy to the brink of bankruptcy, but he has also been engaged in a full-frontal assault on working people by eliminating over-time pay to 8 million working people, and denying many federal workers the right to belong to a union. No, I won't tell you who to vote for, but may I suggest who you shouldn't vote for this November? ☘

Women do better in unions

■ Luz Contreras, UCATS Vice President

The advantages for women who belong in unions are well documented. Unionized women have fought for and won better health and safety conditions at their job sites, as well as better benefits and better pay. In 2002, women made up 46.6% of all workers. Of all union members 42% were women. A female union member earns 33% more than a woman who is not a member of a labor union. The difference in salaries is strong — union women earn an average of \$696 per week compared to non-union women who earn an average of \$523 per week.

Unions help close the wage gaps based on gender and race. Unionized women earn almost 84% as much as union men, whereas non-union women make 70.1% as much as non-union men. Unionized women of color earn almost 35% more than their non-union counterparts do.

For more information, check out the website: <http://www.aflcio.org/aboutunions/joinunions/whyjoin/uniondifference/uniondiff4.cfm>.



AT THE NYSUT REPRESENTATIVE ASSEMBLY, delegates showed their support for sister locals who are working under expired contracts—the United Federation of Teachers (representing NYC school teachers and school-related personnel), the Professional Staff Congress (representing CUNY workers) and the United College Employees of the Fashion Institute of Technology. Featured here are UCATS delegates, from left to right: Caroline Rubens, Ralph Simeron, Edwin Guzman, Luz Contreras, Steve Rechner and Susan Price.

A worker's life

(Continued from back page)

the three years following the Commission's report, New York State passed 36 new safety laws.

The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory building was found to have complied with the building and safety laws of that time. The laws on staircases, fire escapes, and indoor non-wood surfaces were in compliance. Sprinklers and fire drills were not required in buildings then.

The owners of the factory were indicted for manslaughter on April 11, 1911. The key issue in the trial was whether the exit doors were locked or obstructed, a violation of Article 6, Section 80 of the NYS Labor Laws. Many of the bodies found on the ninth floor were in front of the exit door. The trial lasted until December 27, 1911. The jury deliberated for only two hours before reaching a verdict of not guilty. Prosecutors attempted a second trial but it was dismissed on grounds of double jeopardy.

The families of the victims filed lawsuits against the owners. All of the suits were settled. The settlements were for \$75 per life lost.

The following resources were used for this article and can be accessed for further information: www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire; www.groveatlantic.com:/grove/wc.dll?groveproc~misc~2620; www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/triangle/tanglefire.html; http://newdeal.feri.org/library/d_4m.htm. ☞

A worker's life equals \$75



Procession for the Triangle victims, 1911.

■ Luz Contreras,
Kimmel Center

On Saturday, March 25, 1911, just before the end of the workday, a fire broke out in the top floors of the ten-story Asch Building on the corner of Greene Street and Washington Place. Within one half hour, 146 immigrant workers, mostly females aged 16-25 years old, lost their lives. Many suffocated and burned to death. Others decided to take a chance and jumped out of windows, only to meet death sooner when they landed on the pavement. Public outrage demanded a full investigation and a swift reform in health and safety laws. This is the story of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire.

No escape

The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory occupied the top three floors of what is now

NYU's Brown Building. The building was classified as fireproof. The cause of the fire was either a sewing machine motor that had sparked or a lit cigarette that ignited the oils and textile scraps that were scattered and piled on the floors and tables. The scrap materials and trash were not regularly thrown out. The last pick up had been two months prior.

Since the machines, work-tables and racks of shirtwaists and materials, including flammable oils, were jammed close to each other, the materials easily caught fire and spread quickly. Work tables did not leave enough room for egress. Workers literally jumped and scrambled over each other to reach the only exits they knew — two freight elevators. When they found the elevators inoperable, some tried the only fire escape which was broken and warped from the heat

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and weight of the workers. Other workers broke open the windows and jumped or pushed their way out.

The factory owners, Isaac Harris and Max Blanck, found safety by reaching the rooftop. Most of the workers on the 10th floor were able to reach the roof to safety. NYU law students tried to help by extending a ladder from their building to the Asch building.

The public outcry

Most of the workers who perished in the fire worked on the ninth floor. Bodies were found there, as well as on the sidewalk. A temporary morgue was established at the W. 26th

Street pier. More than 100,000 mourners passed through to identify the bodies and grieve. A funeral parade and labor rally was held on April 5, 1911, for the six unidentified bodies.

Public outrage over the existence of sweatshops, weak building fire codes, and the fire, prompted immediate action for resolution. The Factory Investigation Commission was created in August 1911 to investigate and examine the need for new legislation to prevent future tragedies. New York was the first state to authorize a general investigation of the conditions in factories and commercial buildings. Within

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