Winter 2017

The Workers' Edge

Voice of the Tompkins County Workers' Center

Community Union Organizers Arising!

By Ellen David Friedman

If you're reading this newsletter, the chances are that you agree all workers need ***dignity, decency, and a collective voice in their workplace***. If you're not sure you agree, take some time to talk to different kinds of workers to see how they feel. In nearly every sector - service, retail, hospitality, production, education, health care, agriculture - workers are experiencing stress, over-work, under-pay, bullying, unfairness, exploitation... and feeling really powerless.

In fact, we're at a moment in history when the imbalance of power between bosses and workers is as bad as it's been in a century. The concentration of money - and the power that comes with that money - is ridiculously out of control, as we all know. Sadly, this gross inequality is a "normal" function of capitalism, which always tends to siphon money and power upward from workers into the hands of capitalists, the corporate giants, and those who benefit from them. So, the typical working person is constantly squeezed and takes it all personally... not thinking that anything can change.



The vast majority of workers are scared silly to speak up, to organize. They are scared of losing their job, of retaliation, of being targeted, of being black-listed, and just simply of "making trouble." So most workers kind of suffer in silence, or complain without ever taking action to change things, or give up when they've tried to fix things and failed. Even worse... many workers convince themselves that *everything is really okay,* and they give up the idea that they can have decency, dignity and voice on the job.

Even some workers who are in a union feel that the union is far away from them and their daily troubles. Sometimes our unions are great... but unless the union members are active, engaged, and ready to fight, the power of the union is weakened.

But, here is the good news: A small - but rapidly growing - collection of working people from all over Tompkins County are starting to meet and learn how to ***organize in the workplace***. We're calling ourselves **Community Union Organizers (CUO)**, and we're meeting every week at the Workers Center. Some of us are workers in fast food places, or front line social service workers, or drivers, or students. It doesn't matter who you are or what you do... as long as you want to learn the skills and attitudes to make you an effective organizer. We listen carefully to each

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Why We Need a Hospitality Union in Tompkins County

By Korbin Richards

Service is power. Does that surprise you? If you think about it, it starts to make sense. After three years serving coffee and meeting countless people who have worked in the hospitality industry, I've noticed that the reality of our work doesn't match up with how we're perceived and treated by our bosses and various customers. When people call our work "high school" or "easy," or "low-value," we laugh, jaded by the unending workflow, stress, and aching back and feet that every hospitality worker understands. We're overworked and underpaid, from the college grad waiting tables, to the immigrant without documentation cooking in the back, and we know that we deserve better.

The punch line is that many of us genuinely love our work and thus accommodate the systemic abuse that the industry uses to keep us down. I'm here to tell you that the power to change the system, to uplift the industry, has been under our noses this whole time. Our power is in our service, in our labor, the labor that keeps the industry's wheel

Cont. pg 4

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Paid Family Leave begins in 2018

New York State's Paid Family Leave (PFL) goes into effect on January 1, 2018. Most private employers in NY will need to carry a new PFL insurance, provided by the same insurers as the disability coverage every employer has to buy. The premiums are small and designed to be "employee funded" through payroll withholdings although employers can choose to pay the full premium as a benefit for workers.

Workers in NY will be able to apply for PFL benefits using a form they get from their employer, the insurance company, or the State. People who work 20 hours a week or more are eligible after 26 weeks; people who work less than 20 hours a week are eligible after 175 days worked. NY PFL starts out as eight weeks' pay at 50%, going up to twelve weeks paid at 67% of average weekly wage by 2021, capped at a percent of New York average weekly wage. You can use PFL for situations like bonding with a new child, caring for a sick family member, or caring for your family when your spouse is deployed for military service. Your employer has to ensure that you can return to your job or a comparable one after your time away on PFL is done, and to continue any insurance benefit you receive. To find out more details from NY State, go to bit.ly/pflny

Left out by PFL? Tell employers to OPT IN!

By Megan Graham

As a member of the Ithaca College contingent faculty union, I'm accustomed to hearing about benefits that don't apply to our largely part-time membership, whether they're provided by the College or government. So I was delighted, at first, to learn about new NYS Paid Family Leave benefits. This is one provision that actually applies to part-time workers. In particular, this law seems geared to help women, who often do the work of caregiving in their families and end up sacrificing careers to do it. In our union, we were excited to think that, finally, adjuncts could look after their families without losing their job or seniority at Ithaca College.

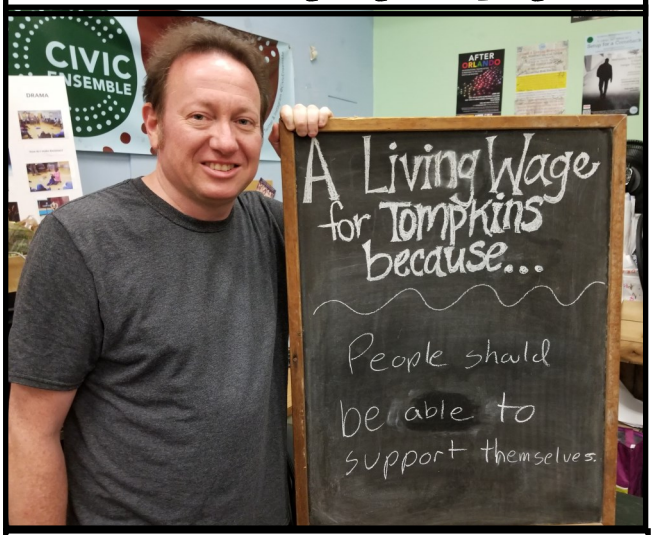
Just as we were getting our hopes up, though, they were dashed – we learned that educational workers, government employees and non-profit professionals are exempt from the PFL mandate. Our employer, Ithaca College, would not be required by the state to offer this very modest benefit that could do so much to support the teachers at IC. But, we learned, they could opt in. It's an employee-funded program, so workers who take the benefit aren't even costing their employers anything.

We are currently working with Ithaca College to get them to opt into this program. It's nerve-wracking work, because while we know the benefits this would bring to all of us – workers and employers alike – we also fear that too many employers in this region are going to take advantage of this loophole, leaving our hard-working teachers and non-profit workers without these new protections. That's why we think everyone needs to talk to co-workers and their employers. If you're entitled to the benefit, make sure everyone knows! And if you're not, ask your employer to opt in. We could create a movement that would do a lot of good. Tell your friends, your neighbors, the folks at the dog park: positive change is coming for many, and we need to work to ensure it arrives for all.

The good news is, if you work, full time or part time, in a non-educational for-profit industry, you will be entitled to this benefit beginning January first. And if you're not, I hope you'll join with the IC Contingent Faculty Union in petitioning employers to expand benefits, support women workers, and care for all working families.

Megan Graham is in her fifth year as a Contingent Faculty person at Ithaca College in the Writing Department. Megan is also a leader in the Ithaca College Contingent Faculty Union.

Tompkins County Leaders in Support for the Living Wage Campaign



Jason Leifer is the Town Supervisor for the Town of Dryden as well as serving as an attorney for the Tompkins County Assigned Counsel Program. In 2016, Jason played an important role as Town Supervisor in getting Dryden to pass Resolution of requiring everyone in Tompkins County to be paid a Living Wage.

Community Union Cont.

other's stories, and analyze the "balance of power" in each workplace. Then we start to generate ideas about how to bring people together around a problem in a workplace, and take collective action to fix it. It's simple, exhilarating, powerful... and seems to be spreading like magic.

We're discovering that this CUO process is helpful for workers who don't have a union but want one, who do have a union but want to make it better, and even for those who know they are unlikely to ever have a union. It's a totally flexible set of tools, ideas, and mostly attitude - plus tremendous support and solidarity from a "community of organizers" - that makes this possible. If you want to learn more, contact Ellen David Friedman <ellendavidfriedman@hotmail.com> or 802-522-6227 or the Tompkins County Workers' Center to get connected.

Ellen David Friedman is a cofounder of the Vermont Workers' Center, a longtime union organizer with the National Education Association, a member of the Labor Notes Policy Committee. Ellen moved to Ithaca 18 months ago and is playing a lead role with the TCWC's Community Union Organizers.

Hospitality Union Cont.

turning. It all starts with us, with our daily experiences and our shared narrative.

Together, we'll change the industry. Together, we will realize our collective power, that together we will recreate an industry that respects us, honors our dignity, and recognizes that the true power lies with us, not the few positioned up top. Change is coming like a wind, and with a tree whose roots run strong and deep it's the top branches that fall. The movement is here, and roots are already in place. Now we grow.

If YOU are a hospitality worker and would like to get more information about how to change your workplace for the better in Tompkins County, please visit the Tompkins County Workers' Center at 115 The Commons; or call us at 607-269-0409 or email TCWRH@tcworkersenter.org.

Korbin Richards has worked as a barista at Gimme! Coffee for the past three years, and is a founding member of the Gimme! Coffee Baristas Union, Local 2833. Korbin is ALSO taking a lead role in creating the larger Hospitality Workers Union. She can be reached at korbin.richards@gmail.com

34th Annual Labor Day Picnic
Photos by TCWC Member Dave Turkon







Over 350 People Attend the 34th Annual Labor Day Picnic: Awards and Photos

Mobilizing for Our Rights and Fighting for a Countywide Living Wage: Over 350 People At 34th Annual Labor Day Picnic in Ithaca

Over 350 people attended the Tompkins County Workers' Center and Midstate Central Labor Council's 34th Annual Labor Day Picnic @ Ithaca's Stewart Park on Monday, September 4th. The Picnic's theme was: Mobilizing for Our Rights and Fighting for a Countywide Living Wage. Incredible music was provided by the Ithaca Bottom Boys.

Two Mother Jones Awards went to the following organizations:

- Gimme! Coffee Baristas, Workers United Local 2833, for their stellar and impassioned work to create a union, evidently the first barista union in the country;
- Ellen David Friedman, cofounder of the Vermont Workers' Center, moved to Ithaca 18 months ago and is heavily involved in TCWC efforts to deepen our Community Union Organizers leadership program

The three Joe Hill Awards went to:

- The Fired Three @ Ithaca College (Shoshe Cole; Rachel Gunderson; and David Kornreich) for their work as Full-Time Contingent Professors whose contracts were not renewed after having worked at Ithaca College for numerous years.

The Friend of Labor Award

- The Friend of Labor Award went to Angela Cornell and the Cornell Labor Law Clinic for their stellar work supporting workers in struggles for justice
- An Honorable Mention for the Friend of Labor Award went to Eric Evans, a member and leader of UAW Local 2300. Among other things, Eric was honored for his fundraising efforts for the Robin Fund, which helps people in the community in financial crisis.

The Goat of Labor Award

- Cornell University for its response to graduate student's organizing to create a union at Cornell as well as Cornell building it's Maplewood project with non-union labor.

- Honorable mention for the Goat of Labor Award went to Cayuga Medical Center for its working with Haynor Hoyt as its unscrupulous general contractor in its most recent construction.









How to Organize a Union in Your Workplace

By Richard Bensinger

Wish you had a real voice on the job? Have you seen co-workers unfairly treated or terminated? Do you have little say over new company policies, work schedules, overtime, etc.? Do you want to participate in workplace decisions? Are your pay and benefits less than what the employer can afford? Workers who want dignity and security at work can organize unions.

Unions are run by the membership. Every union is different, because the workers impart their own values and culture to their organization. There is a misconception that there has to be a large employer to have a union. This is not true. Ten workers at a restaurant can build a union as successfully as a thousand workers at an auto plant. Having a union means having a seat at the table, where workers can deal with managers and owners on an equal basis with due process so that an employer cannot unfairly favor some workers over others or unfairly discipline or terminate someone.

Unions also support the employer's ability to make a profit and grow. Some see unions as only being confrontational. In fact, no one has a greater stake in the success of an enterprise than its workers. Unions believe in joint problem-solving, open communication, and adding value.

If you think you may want to form a union at work some basic steps are:

1. Reach out to the Workers' Center or a union for advice and organizing strategies.
2. Do research on the employer.
3. Talk to co-workers who might be interested, ideally in one on one meetings.
4. Hold a meeting to form the organizing committee.
5. Make an informed decision whether your team wants to work with a larger union. The Workers' Center can connect you with different union reps if you want to interview them.
6. The committee passes out union cards with the goal of signing up a strong majority.
7. Hold an election conducted by the National Labor Relations Board or a neutral community group. The employer can choose to voluntarily recognize the union based on majority support on union cards.
8. Once the union is certified elect a negotiating committee and with the involvement of every worker draw up initial union contract proposals.
9. Before the contract goes into effect a majority of the workforce must ratify it.
10. Community/worker victory party!

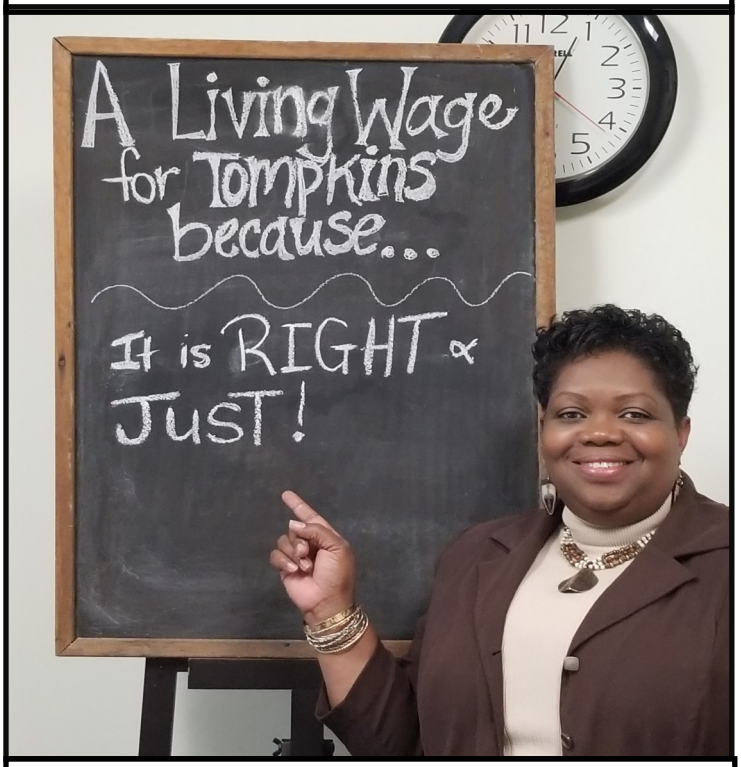
The strongest organizing committee includes workers from all demographics, areas and shifts. Workers must have ownership of the organizing process.

In every democratic society, unions are essential to provide a counterbalance to the concentrated power of wealth. It is up to this generation of workers to decide if they wish to reinvent unions to address the problem of economic insecurity and growing inequality.

If you want to do so, we are here to help!

Richard Bensinger is the former National Organizing Director for the AFL-CIO and Founder of the AFLs Organizing Institute. He is a Chief Negotiator with the Rochester Regional Joint Board, Workers United, for Tompkins County contracts at Gimme! Coffee and Ithaca Health Alliance.

Tompkins County Leaders in Support for the Living Wage Campaign



Tompkins County Legislator, Leslyn McBean-Clairborne, has represented Tompkins County's 1st District since 2001.

Want safety training?
Call TCWC: 607-269-0409 or
email carlos@tcworkerscenter.org



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St. Paul's United Methodist Church and Nursery School
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Town of Ithaca
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I want to Get Involved in the Fight for Workers Rights!

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During the next year, I'LL BE THERE at least five times for someone else's fight, as well as my own. Contact me for Rapid Response Alerts.

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Name (Please Print):
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Mail to: **TC Workers Center 115 The Commons/ E MLK St. Ithaca, NY 14850**
You'll receive a laminated card in the mail.
Great to have you with us!

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During the year, I'LL BE THERE at least five times for someone else's struggle as well as my own. If enough of us are there, we'll start winning.

I'LL BE THERE...
...standing up for our rights as working people to a decent standard of living

...organizing working families to take strong action to secure better economic future for all of us

...fighting for secure family-wage jobs in the face of corporate attacks on working people and communities

...supporting the right of all workers to organize and bargain collectively in the workplace

Tompkins County Workers' Center
TC Workers' Center
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TCWorkersCenter.org

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