

## **Mayoral Forum on February 28**

This November, for the first time since 2001, New York City will elect a new mayor. Last year we witnessed a presidential campaign that never focused on the problems of urban America or the concerns of the nation's low-wage workers. Unlike the presidential candidates, the candidates for mayor must discuss issues relevant to New York City, such as:

- one in five residents struggling to survive on income below the poverty level
- income inequality greater than any other urban center
- more than 50,000 mostly black and Latino young people who have left school without a diploma or a job
- thousands of New Yorkers struggling to support their families on low-wage, non-union jobs
- 348,000 unemployed New Yorkers, many of whom have been jobless for more than a year
- 350,000 (1 of 5) renters pay at least half their incomes for housing

To focus on these and other issues of concern to low-income New Yorkers, the Community Service Society (CSS), in partnership with Local 32BJ of the Service Employees International Union, the Center for Popular Democracy, and United New York, is sponsoring the forum, which will be held on Thursday, February 28. We have invited every announced and presumptive candidate for mayor to participate.

There are three specific issues of concern to low-income New Yorkers that we would like to hear the candidates discuss: (1) how to strengthen the linkage between education and jobs for our young people; (2) whether the latest public housing plan for mixed income units will generate sufficient income for more affordable housing; and (3) the candidates' stand on the extension of job benefits to support low-wage workers.

### **Linking Education to Jobs**

In New York City, with a graduation rate that still hovers around 50 percent for blacks and Latinos, with few achieving a Regents diploma - which is accepted as the minimum needed to really compete for higher wage, higher skilled jobs - there is a lack of the technical skills necessary to compete for jobs that pay well.

To be ready for a career in our labor market, students who are not going on to college need to be able to integrate technical knowledge and skills with core academic knowledge. In our changing economy, even the most technical job today requires basic literate and numeric skills.

Vocational education, now known as career and technical education (CTE), was once a separate "track" in our high schools. Presently, the city offers programs in its CTE schools in many areas. Students graduating from these courses should be entering a pipeline to well-paying jobs through apprenticeship programs in various industries.

In many cases, this means bringing in trade unions as a partner to the educational process. Unfortunately, the history of some of these unions has been to exclude people of color. Given the fact that over 70 percent of the city's high school students are black or Latino and, thus, are likely to form the overwhelming number of CTE students, this potential roadblock to work after school must be closely monitored by the city.

## **Affordable Housing**

In a city with a tight, high-cost rental market, too many low-income New Yorkers pay rents they cannot afford, placing them at risk of eviction and homelessness. That is why our next mayor needs to expand affordable housing opportunities as well as preserve our assisted housing resources. Public housing — 179,000 units in 340 developments — is a major, irreplaceable part of the city's housing infrastructure. Due to continuing starvation funding, it is at serious risk of deterioration and insolvency. Regrettably, the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) is planning to lease its underutilized real estate — not existing public housing — for private redevelopment to realize revenues it needs to operate and catch up with repairs and major improvements. The next mayor must see that resulting development of mixed-income housing is targeted to low-income households rather than market rentals, and that current NYCHA residents agree that redevelopment plans will enhance their communities.

## **Support for Workers**

The local battle for paid sick leave has been brewing for several years. Both Mayor Bloomberg and Council President Quinn have opposed legislation in the Council to mandate paid sick leave for workers in New York City. Workers in San Francisco, Washington, D.C., and Connecticut have mandated paid sick leave. Their economies haven't tanked. It's time for New York City to institute paid sick leave for all workers as a benefit, particularly important to low-wage working women of color and to protect public health.

In his State of the State Address, Governor Cuomo stated that he wants to increase the state's minimum wage from \$7.25 an hour to \$8.75. Currently, a minimum wage worker in New York City earns poverty wages; about \$15,080 for someone working full-time, year-round. That is not enough to put a family of three above the federal poverty threshold of \$17,916. A minimum wage increase is long overdue.

The forum will be moderated by Brian Lehrer of WNYC. It is free to the public but, because of space concerns, we ask that you register either online at [www.cssny.org/forum](http://www.cssny.org/forum), or call 212-614-5365.

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David R. Jones, Esq., is President and CEO of the Community Service Society of New York (CSS), the leading voice on behalf of low-income New Yorkers for over 168 years. The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer. The Urban Agenda is available on CSS's website: [www.cssny.org](http://www.cssny.org).

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