The Power Of Unions
OFT President, Rob Pittman, #9M

Have no doubt about it: unions are still relevant and strong! That was the message sent throughout our state and the nation on Tuesday, November 7th 2017, when the New York State Constitutional Convention Proposal was voted down. The outcome was due to New York unions’ organization, action, solidarity and strength. Unions prevailed with a substantial 80% “no” vote.

The New York State Constitutional Convention gave unions a target on which to focus. Unions engaged their members and enlisted them in the fight to educate voters, to get out to vote, and to win with a message similar to Lincoln’s: “Don't interfere with anything in the Constitution. That must be maintained, for it is the only safeguard of our liberties.”

All of us shared in this victory through our various efforts: attending and educating ourselves at Union meetings; contributing to VOTE-COPE; attending rallies; ordering and proudly displaying “Vote No” buttons, magnets and lawn signs; engaging others in conversation, and getting out the vote. Our collective efforts secured our rights and sent a strong message to politicians and the anti-labor movement: we are a force to be reckoned with. Going forward, these anti-Union groups will remember that they challenged not only the Unions, but also their hundreds of thousands members who have great resolve.

The commitment of our members will get us through our next challenge, when the US Supreme Court decides on the Janus v. AFSCME Case in early summer 2018. NYSUT is certain that the Supreme Court will rule in favor of Janus and anti-labor advocates are betting that such a decision will decimate Unions, including our own. Anti-labor groups are conceited in their thinking that when labor Union members are given the choice whether or not to financially support their Union with dues, the labor will bail.

That will not be the case. Our members know the value of our Union. Our resolve to support our Union will prevail.

Anti-labor groups should review their history. Labor Unions grew and worker rights were gained long before there were mandatory “Agency Fee” laws. Early Union members of the past understood the power and value of Unions. They voluntarily contributed, supported, and worked to strengthen their Unions to gain collective bargaining rights.

We will not take a step back. We know that outside forces cannot and will not dictate to us whether we can organize and keep our Union. Maintaining our Union will be up to us. The only way our Union will disappear is if we turn our backs on each other. That simply will NOT happen!
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2017-2018

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Pre-K: Maria Cantone and Christina Peruffo, #6

Eyeglass Coordinator: Helen Sofocli, #2

OFT Additional Positions

OFT Times Co-Editors-in-Chief: Jeanmarie Johnson, #9M and Brian Weinstein, #9M

Grievance Chair: Frank Nappi, #7

Eyeglass Coordinator: Sue Frank, #9E

VOTE COPE Coordinator: Amanda Iemma, #9E

Public Relations/Outreach: Christine Blake-Jeremias, #8

New Teacher Coordinator: Christine Blake-Jeremias, #8

Maternity Leave Specialist: Heidi Burns, #8

Webmaster: Christine Sartory, #7
The Women’s March
Angelo Musto, #7

The Italian physician, feminist, and educator, Maria Montessori, whose internationally recognized educational method bears her name, once said: “The respect and protection of women and of maternity should be raised to the position of an inalienable social duty and should become one of the principles of human morality.” Having participated in the Second Annual Women’s March, I know I am not alone in affirming that Dr. Montessori’s words have never been more relevant.

It is estimated that anywhere from 1.5 to 2.6 million people marched on January 20th across the United States, as well as in a number of cities elsewhere around the globe. In New York alone, there were roughly 200,000 men, women and children, including fellow educators and dedicated union brothers and sisters, who marched and held signs high in solidarity with strong, independent women and the men who support them.

Among the crowds were zealous OFT members along with their friends and families. One of those members in attendance was OHS English teacher Andrea Levine. “How inspiring and encouraging to be in the resistance with women and feminist men,” she said, regarding her experience at the march. “In particular, I felt so moved by young girls leading the chant, ‘Tell me what democracy looks like,’ and all the marchers surrounding us cheering in response, ‘This is what democracy looks like!’ In addition, I recall looking up at an apartment window as I marched along Central Park West and seeing young girls pressing a sign against the windowpane reading ‘Thank you,’ while waving excitedly, all of us waving back in mutual celebration of woman power.”

This event comes in the wake of the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements, prompted by allegations of sexual abuse and harassment by powerful men in entertainment, politics and the media. In education, where women make up approximately three-quarters of the work force, we recognize that this moment in American history could not have arrived sooner and that it is time to stand up against said injustice, while reaffirming the strength of women.

NYSUT executive vice-president Jolene DiBrango echoed similar sentiments at a sister march in Utica by stating how she was “…proud to march with women across the nation and the world to support women’s rights, and equity and opportunity for all.”

As educators, we also march in response to the recent attacks on public education by Department of Ed. Secretary Betsy DeVos. Since being appointed to her cabinet position, DeVos has worked tirelessly to promote voucher programs. Vouchers allocate taxpayer dollars to private schools, while raising serious concerns that participating schools may not abide by civil rights and anti-discrimination laws. The contempt that DeVos has displayed is not limited to her push for vouchers. Early on in her tenure at the department of education, she did away with federal regulations (Title IX) that were created to protect women from sexual assault and harassment on campuses. Overturning Title IX protections – which have been shown to be successful – is just another example of how Washington DC is working to undermine decades of progress benefiting women.

We march because we understand that, as union members, we are under attack by corporations, private interest and politicians who want to see the demise of the labor movement for the sole purpose of increasing private wealth. The Janus case is a perfect example of this and with the recent appointment of Justice Gorsuch to the SCOTUS – who has, in prior decisions, showed nothing but contempt for unions – our concerns about the future of public-sector unions are substantial.

We will, nonetheless, continue to march in solidarity with our union brothers and sisters. We do so because we care about children and know that when the union is strong, our students receive the highest quality education possible.
We want to hear from you!!

Do you have something to say, or good news you want to share? Please send your writings, news, and/or photos to jjohnson@oceansideschools.org and bweinstein@oceansideschools.org. If you would like to use a print photo, please send it to Jeanmarie Johnson at school #9M. The photo will be scanned and sent back to you.
Betsy Weinman, #8, is proud to share that her daughter, Mindy was married to Tim Dogmanits on September 3rd. The couple resides in East Amherst, New York, where Mindy is finishing up Dental School.

Abigail Hijar-Belifore, #9M, and her husband Michael welcomed Amelia Rose on September 6th. She weighed in at 7 lbs. 3 oz.

Robert Blount, #7, and his wife Noelle welcomed Jameson Grey on January 10th. He weighed in at 7lbs. 2oz.

Ed Risener, #9M, and his wife Nicole welcomed Andrew on November 24th.

Evelyn Pineiro, #9M, and her husband Victor welcomed baby Julian.

Zach Richter, #9M, and his wife Caroline welcomed Mackenzie on June 17th. She weighed in at 7 lbs. 13 oz.

Alexandra Mangano, #9M, and her husband Anthony welcomed Layla Anne.

Karen Flynn, #4, has completed all of the components and has officially become a National Board Certified Teacher. Congratulations Karen!!!

John Messina (Travel), is happy to announce the marriage of his son, John, on January 13th and the engagement of his daughter, Sarafina. She will be married this summer on July 27th.

Kerri Witt, #9M, and her husband Jim welcomed triplets James, Michael, and Julia on December 19th. James weighed in at 4lbs, Michael at 3lbs. 9oz. And Julia at 3.7 lbs.
Give Back
Josh Hickey, #7

The labor movement did not diminish the strength of the nation, but enlarged it. By raising the living standards of millions, labor miraculously created a market for industry and lifted the whole nation to undreamed of levels of production. Those who attack labor forget these simple truths, but history remembers them. ~Martin Luther King, Jr.

As individuals, we each possess many different talents, strengths, and capabilities. These did not erupt fully formed within us; they were developed, grown, and nurtured by our families, our friends, our teachers, and anyone who has made a lasting impact on each one of us. Most of these positive attributes would be useless if they could not be shared with the people around us. It would be like a rainbow in the dark; something wonderful that no one can see. On some level, all of the teachers and school related professionals (SRP’s) we work with are engaged in education because we were called to this mission-driven labor. We had something to share, or felt like we could contribute in some meaningful way to the bigger picture. We all wanted to have the kind of impact we experienced in our lives from others, and to give something back.

Like it or not, we have undergone an erosion of what are generally described as “middle class values.” Educators in particular feel the brunt of this attack in recent years because our strong unions have protected us from much of the declining wages and changes in working conditions much of the rest of the economy has experienced. So much work and effort has been spent in isolating education professionals and making us feel weak, vulnerable, and alone because we are the only workers left who continue to enjoy the level of union protections we possess.

Over the last decade we have seen policies that seek to undermine our professionalism and to eliminate our profession. Some of the feelings are natural, given the structures and institutions we are dealing with. In other cases, these feelings of isolation and dissociation are the direct result of prolonged and sustained attacks on our profession. It doesn’t come as a surprise that recent studies conducted by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and Badass Teachers Association (BATs) indicate that these sentiments are shared widely across our profession. The highlights of this work found that, “Schools still struggle to provide educators and, by extension, students with healthy and productive environments. Districts that fail to recognize the importance of an educator’s well-being may be faced with higher turnover, more teacher and staff health issues, and greater burnout, all of which leads to higher costs, less stability for kids and, ultimately, lower student achievement.” This is a concern we all share, and should be a problem that we work together to address.

This issue becomes even more crucial as we begin to examine the dynamics of the groups and organizations that look to reduce or eliminate our role in modern society. Did you notice I said “groups and organizations?” Groups with names like “The Broad Foundation,” “The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation,” “State Policy Network,” or even the two-dozen or so “independent education associations” (IEAs) across this country are proof that the people who oppose our collective strength choose to join together in opposition to labor unions because they recognize the strength and efficacy of a strong community. They recognize that organized labor acts as the last bastion of protected civil liberties, security for workers, decent wages, health care, and has the ability to mobilize for elections.

We can no longer exist in a business/union model, focusing only on salary and front-line defense. We must be willing to take to the streets for causes that may not just be about our jobs. We should not be afraid or reserved to use the power at our disposal. The people and groups mentioned above have no compunction about using that same power against us to slander our profession and professionalism in the media, to impugn our motives for doing this work, and to privatize education in order to turn it into a for-profit industry. It is about building relationships and organizing the pre-existing ties between our communities.

It is time to recast the perception of our union representatives as information conduits into leaders that can mobilize their schools. Some of you might be pointing to this page, and think: “There he goes, getting all oppositional and starting fights where there shouldn’t be any.” Let me ask you- did you sign your school’s “Vote No!” pledge poster? Did you end up voting “no” like so many of your union (continued on next page)
The OFT Affiliates Social was held on November 8th at EGP Gastropub. The event, organized by Helen Sofocli, was an opportunity for all of the affiliates from around the district to get together, catch up and also meet the new officers from the OFT that were recently voted in. A great time was had by all.

Giving Back (Continued from page 6)

sisters and brothers? Have you volunteered to be an ambassador in our pilot program? Have you spoken to your ambassador? Did you vote in the last union election?

Guess what: you have been mobilized. You have been mobilized to help support the colleagues you work with, in order to effect positive change for your families and students. You should be proud, because by your actions, you are holding up the organization that makes it possible, and making the motto: “Every member, every day” a truism. Remember, the sum of us is greater than all of our parts.

In conditions far worse than what we experience, organizations such as the British Columbia Federation of Teachers (BCFT) and the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) were able to develop enduring ties to the communities in which they lived and worked. They were able to secure reasonable contracts and stem the tide of privatization that closed more than half of Chicago’s community schools, as well as closing every single high school in the Englewood section of Chicago. If you think that those problems are far from our local experience, it isn’t a far drive from Oceanside to the Lawrence school district. There, similar conditions are already underway. It isn’t a far drive to Hempstead or Roosevelt where new charter schools will open next year.

Chinese philosopher Wang Yangming said, “There have never been people who knew and did not act. Those who are supposed to know but do not act simply do not yet know.” I am asking you to be informed and take action. We can work together to continue to affect positive change. If the BCFT and CTU mean anything, it is that pretending to have power doesn’t fool those who already wield power. There are no shortcuts. Speak up at a chapter meeting and ask your representatives what you can do to help yourself, your colleagues, and your community. Then, do what needs to be done.
Attending the annual meeting of NYSTRS (New York State Teacher Retirement System) is always enlightening and informative. It is not just informative to people who are nearing retirement, but also helpful to those just starting out.

The first thing that every member should do is to sign up on the nystrs.org site. By doing this, you are able to access all information that you receive annually in your booklet concerning your retirement status. It is imperative that you check this information so that you can see where you stand with regards to your future retirement, and to also to see the years that you have in the system (“service credit”).

Did you know that you can buy back time for any subbing, or work with a state agency offering a public pension, done prior to your hire date? It is better to do this now rather than later, as it will cost you later in your career. Did you also know that if you are subbing and haven’t joined NYSTRS, you should do it now? This will lock you into whichever tier is currently in effect. As you know, in recent years tiers have been added and each one has different parameters for retirement and related benefits.

There are also many different sources on the website that you can explore. PREP conferences which are very helpful, offer a wealth of information no matter what stage you are at in your career. Listed below are the sites and dates of prep conferences.

Once you have signed in to NYSTRS, you can access any and all of the videos presented and discussed with us at the annual meeting. There is a pension calculator which enables you to put in dates and salary amounts, and an estimated pension payment is calculated. NYSTRS administers retirement, disability, and death benefits for members. Eligibility depends on factors such as tier of membership, age, earnings and service credit. So take the time to explore the website and check out what might pertain to you at this stage.

The people in NYSTRS are always available to answer your questions. Please feel free to contact them at (800) 348-7298 (see below for some of the options and extensions).

- General information: Ext. 6250
- To request an estimate of your retirement benefit: Ext. 6020
- To schedule an appointment in Albany or at a video conference site: Ext. 6100
- For questions about prior service: Ext. 6030

To request a loan application, or check the status of an application or a balance: Ext. 6250. For other questions about a loan: Ext. 6080