



the union news



the newsletter of GSEU and Local 2110/UAW

Many people are unaware that the UAW has consistently been one of the most progressive unions in North America. In fact, UAW lobbyists have long championed the environmental concerns of individual members and local unions, who have elected representatives and passed resolutions to influence policy on the local and state level, as well as in Washington, D.C. From promoting clean fuels technology, to protecting ecologically sensitive public lands from ruinous drilling and development, to fighting to preserve funding for doc-

toral research in the environmental sciences, the UAW is at the forefront of green unionism.

This summer, the UAW helped sponsor a comprehensive energy plan, the Apollo

Project, which calls for the United States to invest \$300 billion in clean technologies over the next 10 years. The plan includes numerous specific proposals to encourage the manufacture of hybrid and hydrogen cars and energy-efficient appli-

ances, the development of cleaner fuels, and the construction of new, energy-efficient factories. If implemented, the plan would significantly improve environmental quality while both reducing the nation's dependence on imported petroleum and preserving American manufacturing jobs. The Apollo Project builds on earlier UAW proposals for increased investment in the refining of low-sulfur gasoline, which would facilitate the introduction of fuel cell technology while also drastically reducing tailpipe emissions from conventional automobiles.

continued, back page

Green Unionism

International Students Face Visa Delays

When an Iranian science graduate student at Columbia went home to Iran in the summer of 2002, he never thought he would be barred from re-entering the country until January 2003 to resume his graduate program. Nor did he count on fallout from the War on Terror. Thanks to the Patriot Act, passed by Congress shortly after September 11th, graduate students from countries in the Middle East, North Africa, South East Asia, and China studying in fields that could be deemed threats to national safety (primarily scientific) are facing increased scrutiny in applying for visas to enter the United States, or to re-enter the U.S. after visiting their home country.

The result? Returning graduate students have

continued inside

NLRB DECLARES MORATORIUM ON UNION ELECTIONS FOR STUDENT EMPLOYEES

A recent decision by the National Labor Relations Board has made two things very clear: that the NLRB

process is no longer a neutral one, and that the NYU decision is in peril. The NYU case, which currently gives student employees at private universities the right to a federally mandated union election, has been under review by the Board. This has held up election tallies at Brown, Tufts, University of Pennsylvania, and here at Columbia. Now, it seems that the ballots may never be counted.

On August 8, the NLRB overturned a regional board ruling in the case of

Pratt Institute's student employees (POSE/UAW), denying their right to proceed to pre-election hearings. The ruling states that, in the majority opinion, there is no need for POSE/UAW to petition for an election, because the law may soon be overturned. This unusual ruling sets a dangerous precedent. By arguing that setting aside Pratt would "save money and time," the Republicans on the Board have essentially declared a moratorium on union

continued, back page

INSIDE

TAKE ACTION!
Petition to help students facing visa delays

Columbia's New & "Improved" Health Plan

From BAD

To

Wondering why your health care costs have suddenly increased? Thanks to Columbia's unilateral changes to the University health insurance plan, many student employees have been left with bigger health care bills.

In mid-July Columbia students were notified that the administration and Chickering, the group that administers student medical insurance, had made changes to the 2003-2004 health plan. At the Health Science campus, students were informed that their insurance provider was being switched from Blue Cross/Blue Shield to Aetna, and this would significantly impact the quality and cost of health insurance.

The changes were made behind the scenes without input from students and student-employees who had no prior warning that their benefits and premiums would change. As Suzanne Theberge from the School of Public Health remarked, "A lot of people were unhappy. They didn't tell us they were changing to a plan that would cost more."

A dozen pages into the health insurance brochure, beyond the pages extolling the unique advantages of the plan, those changes become more clear. The University has passed the expense of healthcare on to graduate students in significant ways. Healthcare premiums are up about 12% from last year and mandatory co-pays have increased at least 20%, yet the base stipend increase at the University was only 6%. While student-employees are spared the cost of health care premiums, they bear the full load of the increased co-pays.

Over time, these seemingly small charges add up to hefty health care bills for many teaching and research assistants. At the Health Science Campus, where doctor's visits used to be free, a new \$10 co-pay/visit has been levied. Downtown, the same doctor's visit charges a \$25 co-pay. Add-

at the Morningside campus, while uptown the co-pay has increased to \$30. Compounding the cost of prescription drugs is the cap on prescription coverage. If annual prescription costs exceed the meager \$1000 limit, then students wind up paying the full price. Someone being treated for persistent medical problems can exhaust this limit within months.

While the new changes position Aetna as the sole insurance provider for graduate employees at both the Morningside and Health Science campuses, the University continues to shift costs differently across the two campuses. For example, after taking away contraceptive benefits from uptown student-employees, the University is now providing prescription contraceptives at no cost to downtown students. The cost of spousal/partner cover-

age is also nearly 33% higher at the Health Science Campus than on the Morningside campus.

The administration boasts about increasing stipend levels—which have been much more frequent since our organizing drive began—while behind the scenes, they increase our out-of-pocket expenses for health care. By barring student employees

Changes on the Health Science Campus

- Brand name prescription drug co-pay increased to \$30
- \$2500 annual limit on prescription drug benefits
- new \$10 co-pay for each doctor's visit (there used to be no co-pay)
- Prescription contraceptives are no longer covered (at least \$300/year out-of-pocket)
- Annual spouse/partner coverage increased 125% to \$4500

Changes on the Morningside Campus

- Brand name prescription-drug co-pay increased to \$25
- \$1000 annual limit on prescription drug benefits
- \$1000 annual limit on mental health services
- Cost for Out-of-Network services increases 20% under basic plan, 33% under comprehensive plan
- Prescription contraceptives are fully covered
- Annual spouse/partner coverage is \$3364

ing insult to injury, the University took away contraception benefits from Health Science students who must now pay for prescription contraceptives out of their own pockets, a cost of at least \$300 annually.

The cost of prescription drug coverage has also increased on both campuses, but by different amounts. The co-pay for brand name prescription drugs is now \$25

from the planning and structuring of graduate employee compensation, the University can create the illusion of vastly improved fellowships at the expense of health care and other benefits. "This is just another example of why we need a union," said Nellie Boucher from the History department. "If we had a contract, they couldn't just make changes like this."

WORSE: Columbia's "Improved" Health Plan

Visa Delays, from front page

been kept out of the country for extended periods of time—weeks, even months—while other international students have been barred from entering the U.S. to start their studies at Columbia at all. This Fall, the entering class in the Physics department will have three fewer students than it was supposed to—although admitted by Columbia, three Chinese physicists were denied visas by the State Department. (Two will seek re-admission next year, one will be studying at McGill in Canada instead.)

At Columbia and across the nation, international students have been paying a heavy price to study in the U.S. In addition to visa restrictions, international students are forced to pay for the U.S. government to monitor them. SEVIS, the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System, allows the government complete access to a student's personal and academic records without that student's knowledge. Under the Patriot Act and SEVIS, the U.S. government can deport or bar the entry of any international student for any reason deemed suspicious or a security threat, even dropping a class. These acts allow the government to detain any international student indefinitely and without cause, and most appallingly, international students must pay for this monitoring themselves. Under current provisions, the U.S. government charges a one-time fee to international students to maintain the SEVIS database and facilitate monitoring.

Before the Patriot Act and SEVIS, the U.S. INS was granted access to only five pieces of information about international students: Name, Country of Origin, Major, Student Status, and Mailing Address. Now, the government has access to “any tangible things” including financial and funding information, academic discipline records, employment records, and any practical training received.

The UAW has lobbied vigorously to prevent

and cultural environment of educational institutions around the country would be seriously undermined by any measure that discriminates against or unfairly singles out international students.” (For the full text of the letter, see our website at www.2110uaw.org/gseu)

Visa delays and monitoring accentuate many of the pre-existing obstacles that international students face. Many international graduate students lack the

caused by these government programs only adds insult to injury. Columbia has continued to charge rent and library fines to students detained in other countries during visa delays— even though often they cannot access their bills at all. There are no provisions guaranteeing that the student will be able to resume academic work at a reasonable pace, or ensuring that the student will be able to have access to funding and employment at the University.

TAKE ACTION to help students facing visa delays

At UPenn, the student-employee union GET-UP has circulated a petition on behalf of international students facing visa delays. A similar petition, which was co-sponsored by several groups including Local 2110 of the UAW and GSEU, has recently been sent out by GESO at Yale. If you would like to add your name to the petition, you can find it online at www.visareform.net. The Organizing Committee of GSEU/UAW is also currently working on new ways to handle international students' concerns here at Columbia, so if you would like to help out on our own campus, please contact us at gseu@2110uaw.org or call the union office at 212-749-6703, and ask for anyone from GSEU.

such attempts to single out international students. In 2001, the union wrote a letter to Columbia's then-president George Rupp urging him to join in efforts to oppose “any policy, regulation or legislation that attempts to discriminate” against international students, particularly the “Visa Entry Reform Act of 2001.” The letter goes on to say that the “intellectual

easy financial and personal connections in this country that many American students enjoy: personal loans are harder to secure, spouses are not allowed to work in the U.S. and must live solely off graduate student stipends, and a political voice is hard to achieve.

Despite these hardships, Columbia's response to the serious disruptions

Around the country international student groups and student-employee unions—not university administrators—are leading the charge to rectify the situation. As these problems multiply, many graduate students have turned to their employee unions, like GSEU/UAW, as a way to wield political power in a way that was previously unavailable.

Green Unionism, from front page

Carl Pope, the executive director of the Sierra Club, said that the plan showed the commitment of unions like the UAW “to organize the rebuilding of blue-collar America around modern environmentalism and sound technology.” Partly in response to initiatives like the Apollo Project, major automakers have announced their intention to invest millions of dollars to develop new hybrid vehicles for the market. In the months and years to come, the UAW will continue to push industry and government alike to bring more clean products to consumers and to put more money into clean technologies. As demand for clean technology grows, these investments make good ecological sense and good economic sense.

Regrettably, the UAW has no direct influence on the automakers’ taste for sports utility vehicles and other models with poor fuel economy. However, the union’s position on the Corporate Average Fuel Economy (CAFE) standards mandated by the federal government illustrates how public

policy can be used to create incentives for more responsible corporate conduct. The UAW supports increasing fuel economy standards within an existing two-tiered framework to create strong incentives for the domestic production of smaller, more fuel-efficient cars without eliminating manufacturing jobs.

In addition, the UAW has opposed the Bush administration’s reckless stewardship of our natural resources. The union has fought the administration’s repeated attempts to open the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) in Alaska to oil drilling, as well as other efforts to open ecologically delicate public lands to drilling, mining, and other forms of damaging exploitation. The UAW has also campaigned against efforts by the Bush administration to weaken mandates in the Clean Air Act that call for the provision of near-zero sulfur fuels on a nationwide basis. By imprudently opening sensitive ecosystems to resource extraction instead of promoting resource conservation, the Bush

administration’s policies needlessly degrade the environment without providing any lasting economic benefits.

The UAW recognizes that the success of progressive environmental initiatives like the Apollo Project depends on the training of scientists and engineers capable of designing clean products and developing clean sources of energy. As a result, the union has lobbied against proposals by the Bush administration to cut funding for the only federal graduate-fellowship program focused on the environmental sciences. The Environmental Protection Agency’s (EPA) Science to Achieve Results (STAR) program awarded over 800 graduate fellowships at American universities between 1995 and 2001. Over the last two years, however, its activities have been curtailed. In its FY 2003 budget request, the administration sought to eliminate all STAR fellowships, but the political action of the UAW and other progressive groups led Congress to restore full funding. In its FY 2004 request, the admin-

istration seeks to cut STAR funding by 50 percent, from the current appropriation of \$9.75 million to \$4.875 million. In the weeks ahead, the UAW will again work aggressively to restore full funding for this critical fellowship program.

Finally, any assessment of the UAW’s environmental record could not be complete without consideration of the everyday role of UAW members in contributing to the environmental movement. Over the years, the staffs of several of the most important environmental organizations in the United States have sought to join the UAW. The UAW now represents employees at the San Francisco offices of the Sierra Club, at Great Lakes United in Buffalo, and at the Ecology Center in Ann Arbor. These environmentally conscious people have joined the UAW for the same reason that all sorts of professional and technical workers do. They want to be part of a union that will give them a voice in the workplace and a voice in the political realm on important issues.

NLRB Moratorium, from front page

elections for student employees—and their majority opinion cited no further legal precedent in doing so. As member Walsh, the lone dissenting Democrat, states in his opinion, “Although the Board is currently reconsidering *New York University*, in several pending cases, the fact remains that *NYU* is still the

law.”

The fact that the Board is willing to suspend all future petitions based on a mere legal possibility indicates to us that our election may be thrown out. That such a decision clearly cuts along partisan lines also demonstrates how much the role of the NLRB has changed in

recent years. Clearly, the spirit of neutrality that this mediating body once took seriously has been corroded almost beyond repair during Bush’s presidency.

Even if the NLRB proves too political to rely on, their role is not to legitimize our union; that legitimacy comes from the strength of our membership. Regardless

of when or how the NLRB rules, we will continue to pressure Columbia’s administration until we get the fair contract we deserve.



If you would like to find out more about Graduate Student Employees United (GSEU/UAW), or to get involved, please call our office at (212) 749-6703, or email us at GSEU@2110uaw.org. You can also visit our website at www.2110uaw.org/gseu.

