



COMMUNIQUE

RUNAWAY INEQUALITY

By John O'Malley, Local 1180 Legislative Coordinator

“The United States is among the richest countries in all of history. But if you’re not a corporate or political elite, you’d never know it. In the world working people inhabit, our infrastructure is collapsing, our schools are laying off teachers, our drinking water is barely potable, our cities are facing bankruptcy, and our public and private pension funds are nearing collapse. We consumers, students, and homeowners are loaded with crushing debt, but our real wages haven’t risen since the 1970s.

How can we be so rich and still have such poor services, so much debt, and such stagnant incomes?

The answer: runaway inequality - the ever-increasing gap in income and wealth between the super-rich and the rest of us.”

Excerpt from the introduction to *Runaway Inequality*.

An activist’s guide to economic Justice by Les Leopold

Maybe you think that is a lot of platitudinous talk. Perhaps the term “inequality” has been thrown about so much that it really doesn’t mean anything to you. Or perhaps manifestations of it are so abundant that you don’t even notice when you hear about it. If so, you would be like most Americans — weary.

There is so much news about inequality that one may not even notice it. For example, the state or the city gives another tax break for a real estate developer to build “affordable housing,” but nobody who lives in the neighborhood can afford the new rents; or another baseball stadium or arena is funded by the taxpayers, but the neighborhood immediately surrounding it gets no benefit and remains without investment in schools, housing, infrastructure, updated subway stations, or bus routes; or there is talk of raising fares again without repairing the tracks or increasing the frequency of the trains. These are all examples of economic inequality.

But what about taxes? We hear about tax cuts for the rich, tax cuts for the middle class, and creating jobs. While workers’ tax burdens increase every year, the rich pay even less. And even though we are paying more, there is not enough money to fund hospitals or schools, fix roads and bridges, and provide adequate social services. Working families end up paying the taxes that fund our public services, and then we end up needing those services because we cannot make ends meet ourselves. Meanwhile the rich save in taxes and don’t pay their share for the public services. Instead, they use that money to fund their kids’ private schools, private garages for their cars, and live behind gated communities or

buildings with security at the door. Instead of participating with the rest of us, they separate themselves and are treated to a premium for their trouble. These are all examples of economic inequality.

Private sector unions had a great awakening in the 1930s. During the New Deal, there were jobs aplenty and the effects of the newly passed National Labor Relations Act were becoming a reality. But before the ink was dry, the forces behind economic inequality began to work at undermining private sector unions. As a result, private sector unions went from a high of 36% membership in 1953, to 6.6% in 2015 — a delirium-inspiring drop. The cycle was different for the public sector unions, however. They experienced a steady rise in membership to a high of 37% in 1982. And in 2014, 36% of public sector workers nationally still belonged to unions (see chart on next page.) Because of New York State’s Taylor Law, the rate is approximately double the national average at 70%! Public sector unions have been protected from the storm that decimated the private sector, but that may not last.

Since 2014, the beginning of a decline in numbers is evident. We have fewer workers in the public sector than at any time since 1984, and most of that drop has occurred since 2010, which is the year that the U.S. Supreme court decided a landmark case in favor of Citizens’ United, and against the Federal Election Commission. The attacks on public sector unions have occurred in various states throughout the country, which would have been unpredictable anytime in the recent past, from Michigan and Wisconsin, to Illinois, which is the origin of the upcoming U.S. Supreme Court case *Janus vs. AFSCME* that threatens to destroy public unions throughout the country.

Public sector unions have been targeted. You may have noticed fewer workers in your department and now find yourself doing out-of-title or double duty work. How often do you work through your breaks or lunch? Even if you choose to do it, it is still “wage-theft.” If you work at NYCH+H, you probably have noticed all the talk about shortfalls in the budget and possible layoffs. That’s all in addition to the hiring freeze you may not have known about, so that for every four workers who retire, only one is replaced. It’s as if all the money to fund H+H has vanished and so, too, have the workers who provide the services.

If you work for a non-profit, you have probably noticed a drastic cut to the supportive funding to carry out your work. Staffs are shrinking, human rights abuses are increasing, the federal government is not providing financial allocations to fund these critical services. But for those who use private schools, private hospitals, private transportation, and

other private services, everything seems fine. These are all examples of economic inequality.

For many years now, CWA has been spreading the word about public policy that favors the rich, limits services, and drains the middle class. In just one example, New Jersey Governor Chris Christie was known in his first term for cutting taxes for the rich, cutting services to the poor, and cutting the public workforce. Even though he campaigned to expand these same practices, he was reelected in 2013 with an overwhelming 60% of the vote, taking all but two counties. CWA members and their families voted for him also, even ones who knew that he planned to cut the very jobs CWA members held, or cut the services on which we depend, or cut taxes for the rich, thereby increasing our taxes. That's why it was unfathomable why some CWA members and their families voted against their own interests. This awakened the need to understand and educate our members about the policies, causes, and remedies of the problem.

CWA District 1 partnered with Les Leopold, author of a groundbreaking book called *Runaway Inequality*. The book's stated purpose is to shine the light on economic inequality, examine the fading American dream, empower ourselves with the big picture, and come to a common understanding so we can build a common movement. Even before it was published, the leadership at CWA knew that this was exactly what was needed. The training was developed in 2015 as a pilot program in New York State by Margarita Hernandez (then at District 1), along with Leopold and District 1 Assistant to the President Bob Master. In the first year, the training was provided to 85 people, of which 20 were recruited to become the first generation of member-trainers. This group facilitated the program throughout the state to participants within CWA locals and invited other community allies to participate as well.

During the next two years, CWA trainers continued to train other members in CWA, and also worked with allies to train their members and the public about the importance of the current economic inequality situation and what can be done about it. Each year, additional members who receive the training are recruited to learn how to facilitate the training, and the program grows. Hernandez is now expanding the program nationally from her new home base in Minnesota, District 7.

In the first year, CWA trained 32 members from New York, Texas, Minnesota, Michigan, and Missouri, who led 42 workshops for 629 participants. In its second year, the *Runaway Inequality* program has expanded into Wisconsin, North Carolina, Indiana, Arizona, and Washington. In 2017, CWA member-educators led 27 *Runaway Inequality* full-day workshops for 416 participants in nine states with a few more workshops that will be completed before the end of 2017.

CWA now has 18 trainers throughout New York State, and has provided the training to 242 members in 2017 — 82 of which came from Local 1180. The goal is to train 500 members in 2018 across District 1. Currently there are two member-trainers from Local 1180, although we are looking to recruit 10 more for 2018.

Reversing Runaway Inequality is a way of educating members about the economic situation that has occurred in after the last 40 years of class war that has been waged against the working class. During the training, we examine the forces that have been enacting policies that favor the rich and hurt the middle class, and we look through history to understand how those policies have created both income and wealth inequality between the 99% and the 1%. The training also focuses on how the 1% has used divide-and-conquer method to separate us by race, gender, and other delineations they can to keep us from joining together to fight for justice and our fair share. And finally, it offers up a solution to the problem that includes breaking out of our own silos and understanding how a movement is more than just disparate groups fighting for their own interests at the same time. We must be willing to fight for each other's interests, knowing that we are all fighting the same enemy.

The most important part of understanding inequality and how to reverse it is understanding that it is not holding steady; it is running away from us. Today, the rich are getting richer at rates that are much faster than at any time in our recent history. Since the 2008 recession, the rich have recovered, and even prospered, while we languish with wages that have stagnated since the early 1970s. Healthcare and other costs increase at 20% per year while wages go up by 1%-2%. This is an unsustainable situation. And this is because of policies that have been suggested, promoted, and executed by actual people with names and addresses, not the result of some mysterious market forces. *Runaway Inequality* training opens the eyes of our members to understand the causes, ramifications, and solutions to this problem. All we have to do is organize around it, spread the word, and put it into practice. That plan includes a whole group of new trainers, and a whole group of new participants.

In 2018, we will face with the biggest challenge to the survival of public sector unions in recent history — *Janus v. AFSCME*. This case is the result of decades of pressure on union members to try to diminish our power so that the political and economic elites can divide us further, and gain even more for themselves, along with cutting more services and cutting our jobs. At a minimum we must resist. But we must do more by taking affirmative action. We must fight to gain back our fair share in the most prosperous economy on earth. This economy is successful because of the work we do and the services we provide. Let's continue to do that for future generations.

Sign up for one of the trainings, and help us in *Reversing Runaway Inequality* so that working families can survive, including members of CWA.