



COMMUNIQUE

MURPHY INSTITUTE IT STARTED ON THE BACK OF A BAR COASTER THE TRANSITION TO CUNY SCHOOL OF LABOR AND URBAN STUDIES

By Marci Rosenblum, Local 1180 Communications Director

The history of the Murphy Institute, now officially the CUNY School of Labor and Urban Studies, goes back a long way — a really long way — to the days when three labor leaders and two academics sat down for a brainstorming session.

Former Local 1180 President Arthur Cheliotis and CUNY School of Labor and Urban Studies (SLU) Dean Gregory Mantsios were both students at Queens College at the same time, and were friends. But as life would have it, their paths diverged after college and they lost touch for a while.

“One day we reconnected and found out we both ended up as labor leaders, me as President of Local 1180 and Greg as an elected officer with AFT Local 1796. We didn’t know the other one was involved in the labor movement,” Cheliotis said.

Cheliotis took the helm of Local 1180 in 1979. At that time, he brought in a new generation of union leaders that reflected the changing demographics of the membership. They replaced members who thought of themselves more as managers than as actual union members. Back then, there was not a tremendous amount of union consciousness. The younger cohort was active in their communities, in their houses of worship, in their children’s school activities. They saw how the auto, steel, and telephone workers were effective in improving the standard of living for their members, and they wanted their union to do the same. These young leaders were active in the civil rights and anti-war movements, and engaged in politics seeking social and economic justice.

“The old guard used to be the Municipal Management Society and after they became a union, they still thought of themselves as a professional association more than a union,” Cheliotis said. “The new leadership team pledged to be much more proactive, engaging and mobilizing members to stand up for their rights. The new growing rank and file were front line supervisors, not office managers, and they were much more diverse and better educated. There were plenty of grievances and complaints about the way they were being treated, and the new leadership had to find a strategic way to deal with addressing these complaints.”

Never one to sit back and let an opportunity pass him by, it was this lack of members’ union knowledge that led Cheliotis to brainstorm about an academic program that would appeal to the members because the instruction would be centered on public services they provided on the job, while simultaneously teaching about the labor movement. He reached out to his Queens College classmate Greg Mantsios, an academic with strong union experience, to further pursue the conversation about higher education for union members and get his input. The initial thought process was that if members could learn more about the labor movement, unions that represented them, and how society and the workplace were intertwined, then they would be able to advance economically and professionally.

Enter two other labor leaders, one from the private sector and one from the public sector, who also had similar interests in developing a program that would specifically address the needs of working adults.

“There were four of us who said ‘let’s see if we can develop a program within CUNY’. We reached out to faculty at Queens College because there had been a previous effort to get a labor program going on that campus. We knew there was some interest before and we were hopeful that some of the faculty would be receptive to our ideas,” Cheliotis said. “We called one of the professors who was involved with the first attempt and he was a little ambivalent based on his experience from the first go round. But, he said that if we were interested in trying to pursue it again, he would be supportive.”

That professor, who completed the initial group of five, suggested they all meet after his classes at a bar across the street from Queens College. “We discussed what we were looking for and gave him our ideas. He literally took the bar coaster that was holding his beer and on the back he started to scratch out an action plan with specific steps and how we would pursue and explore the possibility of establishing a program for labor studies at Queens College,” Cheliotis said.

Build it and they will come. And they did.

What started in 1984 as a program for urban and labor studies with 52 students from three unions, one of which was CWA Local 1180, and was officially renamed in 2005 as the Joseph S. Murphy Institute for Worker Education and Labor Studies, has now turned into a full-fledged School of Labor and Urban Studies at CUNY.

Cheliotis recalls how the small program at Queens College was initially promoted with leaflets, brochures, and in-person visits to City work sites in Queens and the garment factories. "It took a lot of work to get our members interested in the program. Many were single mothers working full time, struggling to make ends meet. They couldn't even begin to imagine going back to school in addition," he said.

The early Murphy Institute program was located at Queens College from 1984 until 2005. In 1995, after an agreement with UAW District 65, a satellite office was opened in Manhattan on 43rd Street. Ten years later, in 2005, the Manhattan location became the main office of the Murphy Institute, and Queens College became the satellite location. That same year, the Murphy Institute became part of the CUNY system and was affiliated with the School of Professional Studies. In 2018, with approval from the City and State of New York, the School of Professional Studies evolved into the CUNY School of Labor and Urban Studies. This semester, the new School opened its doors for the first time with the new classification. In addition to Queens College, it also has a presence at Lehman College, Brooklyn College, and the College of Staten Island.

The effort to establish this School has been a six-year initiative, spearheaded by labor leaders on Murphy's Advisory Board, including tremendous endeavors from Local 1180 officers and staff. These efforts gained wide support from the Governor, who allocated \$1.5 million in supplemental funding, and the State Legislature, which allocated an equal amount thanks to the energy of NYS Assembly Speaker Carl Heastie and Senator Diane Savino. In New York City, Council Members I. Danek Miller and Inez Baron led the initiative that resulted in the Council also setting aside an additional \$1 million.

The Murphy Institute will continue as a unit within the new School, focusing on workforce development programs and service to the labor movement and broader community. The Institute, amongst other areas, conducts civic participation workshops to prepare participants to run for public office.

The road from a single-campus program to a university-wide institute to a CUNY School of Labor and Urban Studies was not an easy one. "It took a lot of support and advocacy on the part of labor and community leaders to realize this vision," Cheliotis said.

SLU will offer undergraduate and graduate degree programs in Labor Studies and Urban Studies that are designed to meet the needs of working adults, as well as traditional-age college students who seek to learn more about the challenges confronting poor and working-class populations. It will also collaborate with other units of CUNY to offer a range of college-credit programs designed to give workers the academic and technical skills they need for professional advancement.

To accomplish these goals, SLU will have four units or foundational pillars — Labor Studies, Urban Studies, Workforce Development, and Community Service — supporting a range of intellectual aspirations and practical needs, and serve as a gateway to college for many workers and working-class communities.

The School will have new resources, an elevated status, and the ability to set its own institutional policies and priorities attuned to its specific constituencies. This degree of independence will lead to a number of new initiatives and services. What does all this mean for Local 1180 members?

"This new School is designed to prepare the next generation of labor, community, and government leaders," Cheliotis said. "Our members can get the academic credentials they need to pursue their careers in an ever-changing work environment, and Local 1180 will continue to offer job-related programs that meet the professional and academic requirements of members seeking to advance their careers. At the same time, our members will gain a better understanding of the important role that organized labor plays in ensuring social and economic justice."

Through Local 1180's Education Fund, members can earn 24 undergraduate and 24 graduate credits, all of which will be paid for by the Union.

"Our goal has always been to give our members a path to earn the credentials they need to obtain higher-level jobs, which of course means an increase in salary," said current Local 1180 President Gloria Middleton.

Factor in Local 1180's EEO Case

The success of members in the degree and certificate programs played an important part in the Union's EEO case against the City where Local 1180 claims that women and people of color who had the same level of experience and education, and performed the same kind of work as their white male counterparts, were being paid significantly less.

In the early 1980s, the Koch Administration claimed Local 1180 members who were eligible to be promoted to administrative managers were not qualified to replace provisional appointees, who tended to be white males, because they lacked the academic credentials needed for the position. The Koch Administration then moved to protect their provisional appointments by reclassifying their jobs to other civil service titles with required academic credentials. Local 1180 vigorously objected to any actions that would cut off opportunities for tested and qualified Local 1180 members. The Union threatened court action — and followed through.

Local 1180 went to court demanding civil service law be enforced — and won. This resulted in the largest group of women and people of color being promoted to managerial positions. The Union learned a valuable lesson; barriers had to be removed that prevented members from moving up the career ladder due to a lack of necessary academic credentials.

Working with what was then the Murphy Institute, Local 1180 agreed to fund 24 credits for an undergraduate degree for courses that would prepare members for promotion and success. A few years later, when members approached the Union and asked for financial assistance to pursue graduate degrees, Local 1180 agreed to fund 24 graduate credits as well.

Since the inception of the Murphy Institute, Middleton said that well more than 1,000 Local 1180 members have gone through the program, either earning a Bachelor's or Master's degree, or a certificate in public administration or health care administration. "This is a Union benefit we constantly promote since it is the best path for our members to advance in their careers," Middleton said.

The School opened its doors this semester with a cohort of 400 students in its core academic programs (Labor Studies and Urban Studies) and more than 800 students in its workforce development programs. Of the

total student enrollment, 70% are women and 74% are students of color. The majority are working adults who receive tuition support from their unions or employers.

Degrees and certificates offered by SLU will be advantageous to graduates of the School who want potential employers to know they received an education from a school that is socially conscious and focuses on labor and community issues, public service, and social advocacy.

Degrees Awarded by SLU

As a CUNY School, SLU will offer undergraduate and graduate degrees in Labor Studies and Urban Studies, and certificate programs in Labor Relations, Public Administration and Policy, Health Care Administration and Policy, and Community Leadership.

Expanding Workforce Development Initiatives

Through its re-constituted Murphy Institute, SLU will assist unions, employers, and joint labor-management programs in developing career pathways for workers through credit and degree programs offered at various CUNY campuses. It will expand and initiate new programs for government workers, school paraprofessionals, hospital workers, transit workers, and others. New funding will allow SLU to expand evening-hour support services, thereby making it easier for adult students.

"We are dedicated to providing students with the tools they need to advance their careers in both city and state government. We want students to become union activists and then union officers and train them through a mix of both theoretical and practical knowledge," Cheliotas said. "SLU is a one-of-a-kind institution that will definitely provide union members who take advantage of the offerings the best academic training anywhere in urban and labor studies. We've come a long way from the notes on the back of that bar coaster."