

WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT NYSUT?

New York State United Teachers (NYSUT) appeared at Manhattan College a few months ago interested in our adjuncts. There have been adjuncts at Manhattan for years but NYSUT was never interested. What happened to make NYSUT interested in Manhattan's adjunct faculty? And what do adjunct faculty members know about NYSUT.

So who is NYSUT? NYSUT is a union for 600,000 employees, almost all of whom are public school teachers. It includes the UFT in New York City. It also represents faculty at CUNY, SUNY and public community colleges. In short, it represents public employees at public schools and public colleges. If you look at NYSUT's website it is all about public education and public colleges. You have to look hard to find anything about private education or independent colleges. You have to look harder to find NYSUT taking any steps to promote or protect private colleges in New York such as Manhattan. In fact we can't find any evidence that NYSUT advocates publicly for independent colleges.

But there is evidence that NYSUT does argue against private colleges. *Crains New York* reported in November 2010 that the NYSUT faculty union at SUNY was telling legislators to change the state's financial aid program, TAP, so that more of the money was given to students at public colleges than students at private colleges. And it is reported that NYSUT lobby's for more direct state aid to go to the public colleges as well. So at the same time NYSUT was asking Manhattan College adjuncts to support NYSUT, the union was asking the legislature to cut back on the state aid students need to attend Manhattan.

What does NYSUT actually do? As reported by the *New York Post* last spring, NYSUT together with the UFT spent just under 5 million dollars on campaign contributions and lobbying in 2009, though down from the 6.6 million dollars NYSUT spent in 2008. Described by the *Post* as the biggest spender among special interest groups in New York, NYSUT proudly reports on its website that it is the most influential and successful lobbying group in New York for every school district and public higher education institution. NYSUT is not shy about the fact that it focuses on making campaign contributions and lobbying because employment terms for public school teachers and college faculty are passed by the legislature. So NYSUT spends money in Albany and around the state with politicians to seek gains for public employees, like the legislation NYSUT secured about 2 years ago to guarantee automatic cost of living increases for public sector retiree's pensions – paid for with public funds. The *New York Times* reported in March 2010 that when Governor Patterson asked teachers to delay salary increases to help close a budget gap, NYSUT's President Richard Iannuzzi refused and said that a better option would be tax increases and some spending cuts.

What has NYSUT done for independent colleges lately? NYSUT rarely seems to speak out for independent colleges because they are a very small part of NYSUT's membership. The interests of public colleges and independent colleges are not the same and may even

conflict. We could not find an example of NYSUT speaking out for private colleges in NY State. In fact when NYSUT tried to represent the adjuncts at NYU, the adjunct faculty at NYU voted for the UAW over NYSUT.

Is there anything else we should know about NYSUT? NYSUT does not spend its time merely lobbying and supporting public candidates however. It reports that it also seeks to provide benefits for its members, such as supplemental pension investments. However, in 2006 the *NY Times* reported that the Attorney General of New York State was investigating the union because of NYSUT's exclusive arrangement with ING to sell costly retirement investments to teachers. According to the Attorney General, NYSUT never told the teachers that NYSUT was receiving \$3 million a year from ING for NYSUT's endorsement of ING's high-priced pension funds to more than 5000,000 NYSUT members. The Attorney General reported that NYSUT made more than \$10 million in kickbacks on the ING pension scheme at the expense of its own members. NYSUT agreed to pay the Attorney General a \$100,000 fine and to change its practices. ING subsequently was fined \$30 million. For years NYSUT has fought a class action lawsuit in the New York courts brought by some of the teachers who claim they were defrauded by the NYSUT/ING scheme.

In its most recent communication to adjuncts, NYSUT has said that it takes a number of years to get a first contract. And the results – well at Pace ten adjuncts qualified for assistance toward health benefits – 10 adjuncts out of more than a 1000 adjuncts. They make the case for questioning what NYSUT can do for Manhattan College adjuncts right now – this year.

In fact, union membership in this country is plummeting. Private sector employees are disenchanted with unions even in tough economic times. There must be a good reason for employees turning away from unions.

In January the *NY Times* reported that the rate of unionized employees in the private sector has dropped to the lowest level in a century, only 6.9% of private sector employees are in unions. Even among public sector employees the number had fallen to a 70 year low. These figures, compiled by the US government, show that the steady drop in unionization has been clear since the 1950's, but these are record breaking numbers. And the numbers speak for themselves. Few employees believe that a union such as NYSUT can yield any advantages. And NYSUT cannot make the case that it has been able to bring about significant improvements quickly.

In the scheme of things, are adjuncts at Manhattan a priority for NYSUT? What can NYSUT really do right now that adjuncts at Manhattan College cannot do themselves? This is the time for everyone at Manhattan College to work together for the benefit of faculty, staff and students. We can face challenges and move forward as a community. Now is the time for Manhattan College's deans, chairs, faculty and adjuncts to work together. We do not need NYSUT. We can do this together.