

Chelsea Now

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G.T.S.'s Tutu Center to give jobs to local youths

BY LAWRENCE LERNER

Fulton Houses Tenants Association Vice-President Miguel Acevedo has been lobbying for neighborhood jobs for years. He moved one step closer to that goal recently when the General Theological Seminary pledged to hire area youths to work in its soon-to-open Desmond Tutu Education Center.

On Tuesday night, he moved closer still, when G.T.S. made its employment plans public at the Business Licenses & Permits Committee meeting of Community Board 4. The seminary, which appeared before the committee to apply for a liquor license for the center,

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Holy Apostles chorus offers a home for every voice

BY TABITHA EARP

Doris Leone, at a youthful 92, could barely keep her feet still on Monday night as she lifted her voice with those booming around her. Sitting among a sea of blue chairs cascading down the altar's steps in five horizontal rows, Leone peered through her wire-rimmed glasses at the sheet music placed on the stand before her, dressed in a black skirt and lavender top, her bleached-white hair pinned back on each side. As the conductor raised and lowered his hands, she followed along, keeping up with the

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Chelsea Now photo by Jeffrey S. Sogol

At City Hall on Tuesday, workers for the New York City Housing Authority protested the agency's recent budget shortfall, which is threatening jobs and affordable housing in the city.

Unions come out strong against NYCHA budget cuts at City Hall

BY CHRIS LOMBARDI

New York City Housing Authority employees from Chelsea and other neighborhoods descended on City Hall on Tuesday to protest the housing agency's latest budget shortfall and demand that the federal, state and city governments adequately fund public developments to preserve jobs and affordable housing.

Immediately following Mayor Bloomberg and City Council Speaker Quinn's announcement of a new budget that included \$1.3 billion in tax cuts and expanded library hours, NYCHA workers led by Chelsea-based Teamsters Local 237 assembled just south of City Hall. They chanted and cheered as union leaders and

elected officials charged the city, state and federal governments with abandoning the workers, 20 percent of whom are among the city's half-million public housing residents.

They also spoke of how their unions have been affected by NYCHA's actions over the past six years, including "position reductions" and an increased reliance on private consultants and contractors. While union leaders onstage promised "No more layoffs!" and "Not another consultant!" advocates pledged to keep marching on City Hall, Albany and Washington, D.C., until funding was secured.

Last week, NYCHA released a budget with a glaring shortfall of \$159 million.

Agency officials placed responsibility for the gap on the Federal Housing and Urban Development agency (HUD)—which changed its funding formula change in 2004 to decrease New York's allotment and has kept funding levels flat despite increased costs—and on Governor Eliot Spitzer and the Bloomberg Administration, which abandoned the \$120 million contribution the city made last year to NYCHA's budget.

All three were targeted by speakers at the rally, who bemoaned the fact that housing for the poorest New Yorkers was being shortchanged during a boom time for Wall

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Unions protest NYCHA budget cuts at City Hall

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Street and private real estate developers. "When the city is not well, we are the first to step up and help out," said Ed Ott, of the Building Trades Council, mid-way through the rally. "Now, in the strongest moment in the city's economy, they are imposing cuts on the good people of NYCHA."

Ott was one of numerous union representatives at the rally convened by Teamsters Local 237, whose 8,000 members work throughout the authority's 344 complexes, and many of whom live in public housing. The Teamsters and Local 957 of DC 37, which also brought members to the rally, have felt most keenly the jobs cut by NYCHA since 2002, cuts described as "efficiency measures" in the authority's May budget statement.



Chelsea Now photo by Jefferson Siegel

Bronx Borough President Adolfo Carrion, Jr. addresses the crowd at Tuesday's union rally at City Hall, where NYCHA workers protested the agency's recent budget cuts.

'People are doing three jobs, the mayor is asking them to do more with less, and they are doing more with less. And now they [NYCHA workers] are still having their jobs threatened?'

— Ruben Torres, secretary-treasurer of Teamsters Local 237

"In the last four years, they eliminated 2,000 jobs," Ruben Torres, secretary-treasurer of Teamsters Local 237, told Chelsea Now earlier this week. Torres, who explained that his members work in a variety of jobs at NYCHA—"some as caretakers, some maintenance workers, and the skilled trades, [such as] roofers,"—said that the Teamsters had fought successfully to protect most direct layoffs, with many members taking early retirement so others could continue working. But deeper cuts, he said, could do far more damage.

Torres also noted that "the clericals were hit hard" by the 2004 layoffs, when hundreds of "provisional" secretarial workers, represented by DC 37, were let go. (Efforts by Chelsea Now to get more concrete numbers of those losses met with a strict "no comment" from spokesman Rudy Orosco of DC 37. However, a look at the union's own 2004 newsletters provide a glimpse, chronicling 110 jobs eliminated in May alone.) Smaller, but still significant, cuts were felt in other unions, such as Local 1199 of the Service Employees International Union and the Organization of Staff Analysts (OSA), which represents professional-level workers across a span of city agencies.

Torres, a 20-year Teamsters veteran, told Chelsea Now that he started his career working at the Brookellen Houses in Brooklyn. "It was better then," he said. "People received better service." Since the first wave of cuts, he added, "buildings have gotten a lot dirtier."

The cuts have hurt those who remain,

too, said Torres, and morale at Local 237 is very low. "People are doing three jobs, the mayor is asking them to do more with less, and they are doing more with less. And now they are still having their jobs threatened?"

Thomas Anderson, who spoke at the rally on behalf of OSA, told Chelsea Now that when he started working for the city in 1969, as a young caseworker for the Bureau of Child Welfare, he found few refuges from the mean streets where many of his clients were forced to live. There was one exception, he remembers: the grounds of buildings owned by NYCHA.

"The Housing Authority projects were like an oasis," Anderson said. Amid the broken bottles and rubble in some outer-borough neighborhoods, "you'd see this clean place, with green spaces. You could breathe." He added that the current crisis was a rejection of that proud history, one that made him angry.

"I don't understand," Anderson said. "Civilization depends on [these] opportunities, for the people who are working in this city."

Tuesday's rally was called to start a movement to stem the budget cuts and save the 500 staff positions scheduled to be cut by NYCHA in October if further funding is not secured. The 5,000-plus union members, stuffed into a narrow protest pen on the east side of Broadway, were raucous, calling to one another and cheering each time a union leader called for aggressive action. Jaykwann Rivers, a tall man with long dark braids and a bright blue Teamsters polo shirt, started them off: "Say yeah. Say yeah. Say u-nion!" As the cloud-filled sky kept threatening rain, occasionally sending a crack of thunder across the landscape, union members told Chelsea Now that they were fed up.

One vivid woman with long ringlets, who declined to give her name, told Chelsea Now that she had worked at NYCHA for 16 years. "It used to be a good place to work, with opportunities for advancement," she said. But in recent years, a newer crop of supervisors with less experience has come in, while the front-line workers are given fewer materials to work with.

"They are downsizing, but the residents, they're not downsizing, if you know what I mean," she said with a small grin. "There's

less toilet paper, less soap. They give us one thing of soap, and say this is what you get for a week."

Josetta Beamon, who brought her son Elijah to the rally, confirmed that news with a resigned smile. In her nine years at Lillian Wald Houses, on the Lower East Side, she has noticed the shortages both as a worker and as a resident.

"They expect us to make a week's supply last a month," said Beamon. "And then the residents, they get angry, especially when they have to wait for us to get new supplies."

Bronx borough president Adolfo Carrion told the crowd that the decline in NYCHA's federal funding was part of a settled national policy: "This national administration has been slowly cutting away at public housing programs across the country." Brooklyn Councilman Charles Barron went further, starting his chant with "No Justice—No Peace!"

Pointing out that New York City's surplus exceeded \$5 billion, Barron said, "If they got money for Ratner, they got money for NYCHA!" and urged the crowd to keep coming back, again and again, until the authority was funded at pre-1997 levels.

Other officials bemoaned the increasing use of private contractors by the agency, instead of the skilled union professionals already available to NYCHA. Torres of DC

237 told Chelsea Now that his union had not even been offered work on the authority's new \$2 billion capital improvement plan, initiated in 2006. Miguel Acevedo of Fulton Houses, who is a member of Community Board 4, handed Chelsea Now a job ad from City Limits.org for a top-salaried "fiscal planner" for NYCHA, placed even as the agency contemplates more cuts.

Just as the rally was entering its last half-hour, another crack of thunder broke the air and thick raindrops began to fall, but neither the crowd nor the last set of speakers seemed dampened. A half-dozen more union and City Council officials denounced city policies that offer numerous tax breaks to private developers while insisting, as Mayor Bloomberg said in his weekly radio address last December, that NYCHA's buildings "should be self-supporting" instead of guaranteeing them a steady infusion of public funds.

Gregory Floyd, the new president of Local 237, told Chelsea Now that he fears that without serious policy changes in Washington and new help from City Hall, the era of public housing is at an end.

"The mayor is talking about building all these units of affordable housing. Meanwhile, the most affordable housing is going unfunded. Where are all these people—some of them [Local 237] members—where are they going to go?"