

RETIREE

news & views

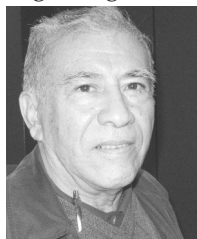


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On January 20, the Local 237 executive board hosted an open house reception for working members, retirees, and staff to view and celebrate the inauguration of Barack Obama as 44th president of the United States. As the group watched on two large TV screens rented for the occasion, cheering and applauding, they shared the experience with millions of people across the nation and around the world who viewed the event on huge outdoor screens, at work, at house parties or alone at home, in department and electronics stores, movie theaters, bars and restaurants, and many other sites, including, of course, in Washington, DC, where Local 237 President Gregory Floyd attended the inauguration.

A few days before the inauguration, Local 237 retirees attended the Retiree Division's annual tribute to the legacy of Martin Luther King, which featured "Songs for Obama," a multimedia presentation that also honored Obama and visionary women Marian Anderson, Lena Horne, and Eleanor Roosevelt, who traced the civil rights movement that led to the election of the first black man as president of the nation. Following are interviews with retirees who attended the program about what they hope Barack Obama will do as president.

CRISTOBAL BERMUDEZ This year is the beginning of new hope for a lot of people. I sense that everything is going to change. Maybe not today or tomorrow, but over time. It's important for people to start thinking another way, for change. Forget about the past. Start now with hope in this year. Obama is not only for the people in the United States but for the people of the world.



BARBARA HAZELWOOD. I hope Obama will do just what he says he will do. He says he wants change, and that's what I want. He says he'll end the war in a peaceful way.

Some are going to blame Obama for everything, but we have to say that things are going to take time. It's not going to happen overnight. Because he's the first black president doesn't mean he's a miracle worker. It's going to take Congress, the Senate, a lot of folks who are going to make it happen.

We were so tired of the old administra-

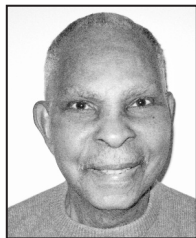
What Should Obama Do?



Barbara Hazelwood, wearing a shirt with pictures of Martin Luther King and Barack Obama and quotes from them about change and the "dream we can believe in."

tion. Obama came out of nowhere, no one believed he could win. I'm going to support him in any way I can. I just pray for his safety.

GRACE EUBANKS. I hope Obama is successful, for the whole United States of America. I have a feeling he will be. We have to give him time. He's not going to get to do everything—he says so himself—in his first term. I hope he will in his second, God willing. I pray I will live to see it. We African Americans have to realize he's not just there for us. He's there for the whole United States of America and our allies. I'm thankful God let me see Obama elected. Martin Luther King predicted it. Unfortunately my parents didn't get to see it, but my 95-year-old aunt is blessed.



Obama spiritual guidance.

WILFRED FERGUSON. Every so often an individual comes along who can make a difference. With this guy, everyone thought it was an impossibility. But God was in the works, he'll be giving



(l-r) Mavis Andrews, Millicent Stewart, and Ray Marquez interact with actress Leslie Dockery playing a TV talk show host at the Retiree Division's annual Martin Luther King tribute January 15

RAY MARQUEZ. What do I want Obama to do? Close Guantanamo. Out of Iraq. Out of Afghanistan. Bring our troops home with honor, and appropriately—not like Bush. Bailout for the people, not for the banks. Follow and obey the Constitution.

MAVIS ANDREWS. Obama is president of all the people, and he will represent them with compassion and dignity, with tolerance—gays, Latinos, blacks, immigrants. That's fundamental. That's why I voted for him. He's a wonderful man on paper; I just hope it's real.

[During interaction between the actors and audience, Andrews said, "I worked at the polls. At about 3 p.m. a guy came, said he was 40 years old and had never voted, but he had to come out to vote for Obama."]

MILLICENT STEWART. I hope the nation will be tolerant. Obama's promises will take time, but will come to fruition. I hope people remember him in their prayers everyday and are patient. He has a lot on his plate, but he's dealing with it. He has a good team to help him.

[Also during interaction between the actors and audience, Stewart said, "My uncle is 70 and just voted for the first time. I never knew he had never voted. But people from the Obama team kept calling him and telling him to vote. So he came out for the first time, to vote for Obama."]

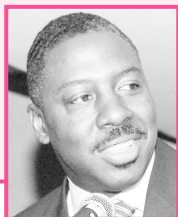
This year Black History Month celebrates a truly historic event, the inauguration of Barack Obama, the first African American president of the United States. His election signals a new era.

But we still have a long way to go, many obstacles to overcome. Let's not forget that 60 percent of black children are living in low-income families and 34 percent of black children are living in poverty. While the nation is entering the second year of a recession, people of color have been experiencing a recession for five years, according to a report issued in December by Fair Economy, "State of the Dream 2009: The Silent Depression." Key findings include:

- Black unemployment is 11.9 percent, compared to a general unemployment rate of 7.2 percent (now 7.6 percent);
- Unemployment is 32.8 percent for black males ages 16-19
- The median household income of blacks is \$38,269 and \$40,000 for Latinos, while the median household income of whites is \$61,280.

A report issued last May by the Center for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR), "Unions and Upward Mobility for African-American Workers," found that unionized black workers receive 12 percent more in wages and benefits than black workers who were not in unions. The union difference on health insurance and pension coverage was even larger.

Another CEPR report, "The Union Advantage for Low-Wage Workers," released at the same time, found that



A Message from the President

unionization boosts the wages of all low-wage workers by 20.6 percent, on average. Unions have a substantial impact on the wages of workers earning higher wages, as well. All workers benefit from union membership.

Higher wages makes it possible for working families to spend more, which economists say is important to the nation's economic recovery.

Clearly, unionization should be part of the plan to stimulate the economy and begin to correct racial inequities. In concrete terms, that means passage of the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA), which will make it easier for workers to join unions and penalize employers who intimidate and fire workers for seeking unionization.

To put this in a historic context, the CEPR's Union Advantage report said:

Martin Luther King's fateful trip to Memphis 40 years ago was part of his efforts to expand the cause of civil rights to the economic realm. King would almost certainly have been shocked to find that, despite substantial economic growth over the last four decades, the increasingly unequal U.S. economy has almost the same portion of its population living in poverty

today (12.32 percent in 2006) as it did in 1968 (12.8 percent) The most recent economic data, however, support King's view that the right of workers to organize, to bargain collectively, and, when necessary, to strike, offers an important path to counter-acting the rise in economic inequality, to the benefit of all workers.

The EFCA is actually a supplement to the American Recovery and Reinvestment Plan. More workers in unions, with higher salaries and more money to spend, will speed the nation's economic recovery.

U.S. businesses have made defeat of EFCA a top priority. They are using the economic crisis as an excuse, waging a multimillion dollar publicity campaign to argue that now is not the time to create more requirements for business. But President Obama disagrees. Obama said, "I don't see organized labor as part of the problem; to me, it's part of the solution." And he signed three pro-labor executive orders and appointed a task force charged with ensuring that economic recovery policies help, not hurt, the working middle class.

So I am optimistic.

Early this month, thousands of Teamsters and other union members rallied at the Capitol and delivered petitions with 1.5 million signatures to pressure Congress to pass the EFCA. We need to keep the pressure up. We also need to urge our representatives and senators to implement the American Recovery and Reinvestment Plan without further delay.

You can reach them online, by mail, by telephone, or you can visit their home office. Contact information is on page 3.

We are all hurting from the economic crisis. One out of ten senior citizens is now living in poverty. As union members, Local 237 retirees are fortunate to have a guaranteed pension (with a COLA) and benefits, in addition to Social Security, but we are still affected. Many have younger family mem-



Retirees Need Action Now

By Nancy B. True
Director, Retiree Division

bers who have lost jobs or are faced with college tuition hikes. Prescription food and drug prices, rents, and home heating costs are up. Many retirees have seen substantial drops in their investments.

But we have a new president who recognizes the seriousness of the economic crisis and is prepared to act now to stimulate the economy.

The stimulus bills being considered in Congress include provisions specifically for older Americans. The \$825 billion stimulus recovery package passed by the House Jan-

uary 15 includes an additional Supplemental Security Income payment for low-income older and disabled recipients as well as health care assistance through COBRA and Medicaid for older workers who have become temporarily unemployed. It includes additional funding for the Social Security Administration, Low-Income Energy Assistance, and Meals on Wheels.

The Senate plan includes a proposal by Senate Finance Committee Chair Max Baucus for a one-time payment of \$300 for retirees.

The situation changes from day to day. Unfortunately, one thing that does not change is Republicans' failure to cooperate, despite President Obama's many attempts. The Republican solution of tax cuts for the wealthy does not work.

Make your voices heard. Contact your legislators and tell them we need an economic stimulus package now.

RETIREE NEWS & VIEWS

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Medicare Rx, Medicare for All Bills Reintroduced in Congress

Congressional Democrats reintroduced the Medicare Prescription Drugs Savings and Choice Act, a bill to provide a prescription drug benefit under original Medicare. The legislation HR 684 and S 330, would create a government-run coverage option that would provide a choice for people with Medicare who now can only receive drug coverage through a private plan.

Currently, private plans can change what they charge and what drugs they cover year to year, making drug coverage for Part D enrollees unpredictable and inconsistent. A Medicare-run drug benefit created by the bill, sponsored by Rep. Marion Berry (D-Ark) in the House and Senate Majority Whip Richard Durbin (D-Ill.) in the Senate, would:

- offer a low premium that is uniform nationwide;
- offer a consistent formulary;
- authorize the secretary of Health and Human Services to negotiate lower drug prices—like the Veterans Administration, which has negotiated drug prices 20 percent to 30 percent lower than drug prices available through private Part D plans
- provide stable coverage for all people with Medicare, including individuals with limited income enrolled in Extra Help;
- strengthen the right of Medicare beneficiaries to appeal denials of coverage for medically necessary medications under all Medicare Part D plans.

Democrats tried and failed to insert this provision into the original Part D legislation, and tried again in the last Congress, but both attempts failed because of opposition by the Bush administration and Republican legislators.

Obama favors allowing the federal government to negotiate for lower drug prices for the Medicare program. He also supports allowing seniors to import safe prescription drugs from overseas, and said he would prevent pharmaceutical companies from blocking cheap and safe generic drugs from the market.

HR 676, Medicare for All

Single-payer “Medicare for All” legislation (HR 676) was reintroduced on the same day, January 26. The bill, United States National Health Care Act, had 93 co-sponsors in addition to its primary sponsor, Rep. John Conyers (D-Mich.) in the 110th Congress, but co-sponsors have to sign on anew for the new Congress. Thirty-

three had signed on by January 26.

HR 676 would institute a single payer health care system by expanding a greatly improved Medicare system to everyone residing in the U. S.

An important improvement in this version of HR 676 is the expansion of protection for workers in insurance companies, doctors’ offices, hospitals and other work sites who are displaced or whose jobs are eliminated due to reduced administration needs.

HR 676 has been endorsed by the Alliance for Retired Americans and 483 union organizations in 49 states including 118 Central Labor Councils (including the New York City Central Labor Council) and Area Labor Federations and 39 state AFL-CIO’s (including in New York State).

What You Can Do

Urge your representative and senators to co-sponsor the Medicare Prescription Drugs Savings and Choice Act, HR 684 and S 330, and the Medicare for All bill, HR 676, and to support the Employee Free Choice Act.

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‘You Cannot Have a Strong Middle Class without a Strong Labor Movement’

I believe that we have to reverse many of the policies towards organized labor that we've seen these last eight years, policies with which I've sharply disagreed. I do not view the labor movement as part of the problem, to me it's part of the solution.

We need to level the playing field for workers and the unions that represent their interests, because we know that you cannot have a strong middle class without a strong labor movement. When workers are prospering, they buy products that make businesses prosper. We can be competitive and lean and mean and still create a situation where workers are thriving in this country.

President Barack Obama, Jan. 30, 2009

President Barack Obama made these remarks confirming his support for unions at his announcement of a new Task Force on Middle Class Working Families, dedicated to raising the standards of middle class families, under the leadership of Vice President Joe Biden.

Obama said that passing his American Recovery and Reinvestment Plan is just the beginning. “America’s middle class is the economic engine of this nation. Our road to economic recovery begins with restoring the prosperity of working families and small business owners. . . We know we need to

create jobs . . . that sustain families and sustain dreams; jobs in new and growing industries; jobs that don't feel like a dead end, but a way forward and a way up; jobs that will foster a vibrant and growing middle class, because the strength of our economy can be measured directly by the strength of our middle class.”

In acknowledging the importance of the labor movement to creating a strong middle class, “the economic engine of the nation,” Obama reaffirmed his support for the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA), which would create a level playing field for workers who have been faced with intimidation and firing by their employers for seeking to join a union. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce and its business allies have made defeat of the bill their top priority and are spending millions on a publicity campaign to accomplish their goal.

The Task Force on Middle Class Working Families plans to hold meetings around the country to get input from the public. The first meeting will be in Philadelphia February 27.

The task force has set up a web site, **AStrongMiddleClass.gov**, as a source of information and conversation, a place where Americans can share their experiences and ideas about what the task force and the Obama administration should do. People can also call or write letters. Local 237 retirees are urged to submit their ideas.

FOUNDING MEMBER THOMAS LEATH DIES

Thomas Leath, a founding member of Local 237 at the Housing Authority, a retired caretaker, and long-time Retiree Division activist, died December 16 after a long battle with cancer.

After Leath retired in 1976, he attended Retiree Division classes and participated regularly in division's programs. He was an activist in Senior Summer in 1996 and '97, the AFL-CIO's pioneer program to involve retirees in union organizing drives and political campaigns. He continued to be active with the Alliance for Retired Americans.

Leath went to work for NYCHA in August 1947. Recently discharged from the service, married to his childhood sweetheart, and going to music school on the GI Bill, Leath said, "I got news that every man wants to hear: I was going to be a father." He began to search for steady employment."

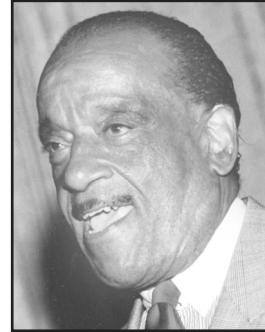
He bumped into a friend from the service who told him about jobs at the Author-

ity. He applied for a job, expecting to be told "don't call us, we'll call us." To his surprise, he was hired on the spot and told to report for work the next day.

Speaking at the Retiree Division's Founders Day program highlighting the union's Oral History Project in 1998, Leath recalled, "I started as a laborer at the 'Huts,' a temporary project in Queens. They were later dismantled. I made civil service in 1951.

"We had a union, the UPW [United Public Workers]. It was during the Communist paranoia. The UPW was too pushy for some city fathers, so they said that the union was 'communist.' That was the end of the UPW. Then we got the CIO, but that was a disaster."

Recounting how he became a founding member of Local 237 at NYCHA, Leath said, "One day during lunch a guy named Sammy Jackson came by. It was around 1952 or '53



and I was at Melrose Houses then. He said, I represent Local 237 and we're going to be having an election. He said, If you vote for us for collective bargaining we'll fight to get you time and a half for overtime, health insurance, and other bene-

fits. The health benefits were most important to me, because by that time I had four children. And he said 237 would fight for Social Security. That was very important, because at that time, if you worked for the Housing Authority or were civil service, there was no Social Security—pension only.

"We voted for 237; we took a chance. . . . Everything Sammy promised us, 237 delivered. 237 is the best union on the planet Earth—not just in the country, but on the planet. When I tell my friends what we get, they can't believe it."

ATTENTION

Florida Local 237 retirees

HOLD THE DATE

March 26-27

**Retiree Division Conference
West Palm Beach**

Visit Local 237's web site
www.local237.org

Retiree Personal Notes

Congratulations to **Robert Wolf** of Macon, Georgia, who turned 67 on January 15 and is getting remarried in July. Wolf, a NYCHA caretaker J, groundsman, truck driver, boiler technician, and maintenance man who retired in 1995 after 31 years of service, sends greetings to former co-workers at Highbridge and Bronx River Houses . . . NYCHA retirees (photo at right) held their end-of-the-year luncheon December 14 at the Harbor Restaurant on City Island in The Bronx. If anyone is interested in joining the group for future functions, call **Tony Cottone**, 718-745-7576, or **Roland Diaz**, 516-931-3022 . . . Deepest sympathy to Agnes Gibson and family on the passing of retired Special Officer **Hiliary Gibson, Sr.**, who died January 7.



BLACK HISTORY MONTH

Paul Robeson
1881-1976



**20th Century Renaissance Man,
son of an escaped slave,
athlete, actor, singer, lawyer, cultural
scholar, author, national symbol
and leader in the war against
fascism abroad and racism at home.**

INDUCTED INTO THE NEW JERSEY HALL
OF FAME IN JANUARY 2009

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Happy Valentine's Day