

Onondaga Citizens League

Study Session #3 October 25, 2016

“How CNY Works: Examining the Diversity of Our Economic Base – Past, Present and Future”

5:30-7 p.m. The Gear Factory, Syracuse, NY

Panelists:

Al Turner, Retired member of the Communications Workers of America (CWA) which was the union that represents AT&T/New York Telephone workers. (New York Telephone became Verizon) Volunteer and Board Member of On Point for College, Inc. Foundation Chair and RYLA Chair, Syracuse Inner-City Rotary, Education Committee Member 100 Black Men of Syracuse, Board Member, Eat to Live Co-op

Brittany Buffum, Workforce Development Institute, Child Care Community Advocacy Coordinator, Onondaga County. Formerly active in Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 200, which represents Syracuse University employees.

Mark Spadafore, Political Organizer SEIU 1199, which represents healthcare workers in the private sector, such as Crouse Hospital, Loretto and Menorah Park.

Richard Knowles, Regional Director of the Steelworkers Union

The third study session of “CNY Works” examined the role of organized labor in our region.

Study Co-chair Craig French began the meeting by asking panelists to talk briefly about the union they are involved with and who the union represents in the area.

Knowles explained that, nationally, in the 1930s and 1940s, the Steelworkers Union focused primarily on steelworkers, but over time, with the growth of other businesses, the union began organizing with other industries. It is now very diversified, with a minority of the workers represented working in the steel industry.

Knowles said the union represents many different industries in Central New York, focusing on wages, benefits and conditions of employment. Most members work 40 hours and do shift work (7 a.m.-3 p.m., 3 p.m.-11 p.m., 11 p.m.-7 a.m.)

Mark Spadafore spoke about SEIU 1199 which has 8,000 members in the area, and 400,000 across the country. Members range from housekeepers to nurse practitioners. Workers may work full-time, part-time or per diem.

Brittany Buffum spoke about her involvement with SEIU Local 200, which has approximately 800 members at Syracuse University. Most of the work is scheduled; but some is shift work. Members include food service workers, custodians, groundskeepers and library workers.

Al Turner spoke about his experience with CWA. When he was working for New York Telephone/Verizon the union was restricted to telephone company workers. "At that time, there was no such thing as working poor. If you were a union worker, you made a living wage. This is no longer true." The union has greatly diversified in recent years.

Co-chair Mel Menon asked panelists how workers join a union.

Spadafore said that workers at a facility represented by 1199 automatically become union members when they are hired.

Historically, Knowles said, in trade positions, when a worker completed an apprenticeship, he/she joined a union. He said if a person's mother or father had belonged to the union, that improved the chances of the son/daughter getting a job with union membership.

Turner commented that when he was working, most people got their jobs with the telephone company/joined the union, initially because they had a relative who was already working with the telephone company. Those family connections were key. He estimated that 70 percent of telephone company workers had a relative who also worked for the telephone company.

Turner said there were very few minority workers in the telephone company. This was also a major issue with Niagara Mohawk. A protest in 1965 led to Niagara Mohawk changing its policies.

Buffum started in food service at Syracuse University. She said when she first worked for the university and joined the union, it was not difficult to get a job. The university hired entry-level people with high school educations, people who had been through a rehabilitation program, and refugees. She said that over time, when the recession hit and with improved wages for SU workers, it became more difficult to secure a job (and join the union) at Syracuse University, as people wanted to work at SU to take advantage of the tuition benefit for their child/children.

Buffum said many people who were overqualified competed for jobs because of the benefits, particularly tuition. Now, she says, many people who secure work at entry-level jobs have some connection with the university.

Knowles said the union encourages members to pursue training in order to advance in their jobs. He said the union tries to come up with internal programs that would enable employees to get training. This is generally part of a negotiated contract with the industry.

Spadafore said there is a training and operating funds that the union runs in conjunction with the employers. Both the union and employers contribute. It has been very successful. Employees can get new training and learn new skills to advance in their career.

Panelists were asked what union members earn.

Spadafore said an entry-level Personal Care Assistant (working in someone's home) earns \$10 per hour. A Certified Nurses Aide working in nursing home earn \$12 per hour. A Certified Nurses Aide working in a hospital earns \$14-\$15 per hour. A nurse practitioner would earn in the \$30,000 range. LPN in nursing homes earn \$18 per hour.

Spadafore said that right now, Loretto needs 50 LPNs. There is a current program at BOCES in Liverpool during the day that offers LPN training. For people who cannot do the training during the day, there is an evening training program in Auburn. However, travel/transportation presents a problem for prospective students. A local training program, within the city, could address this issue.

Buffum said when she began at Syracuse University, generally the pay was just over minimum wage. A successful fair-wage campaign at the University several years ago resulted in raises in wages that were comparable to faculty raises. For instance, if faculty had their pay increased by 4 percent, the union members would also have their pay increased by 4 percent. Today most workers are earning \$15 per hour; the high end of pay for union workers is approximately \$25 per hour.

Turner said he does not know what today's wireless workers are earning, as wireless service was growing when he retired. But within major telephone companies, when he was working, there were three-year contracts, with pay raises every six months, as well as full benefits, including tuition assistance.

Knowles gave the example of three local industries represented by the Steelworkers Union. Cathedral Candle Company workers earn in the \$10-\$11 range -- up to \$18. RockTenn employees earn \$15-\$21 per hour. Crucible Steel workers earn from \$18 per hour up to \$31 per hour. He added that he felt these were all good local employers, who want to work with the union and give their employees "a fair shake."

Knowles talked about "fact finding" when preparing to bargain with employees. People often focus on pay, he said. Other factors are important as well. Cost of living

in the area, profit of the company and also non-economic issues, work rules, work conditions, how employers roll out new procedures, etc.

Buffum said that a frustration working with union members, particularly young employees, is that they focus on the pay, and not as much on the benefits.

Spadafore said a troubling problem in health care, especially, entry-level jobs, is retention. He referred to “the churn,” – people coming into a job, leaving after a short time. Another issue is employees who are not ready for work. At some jobs, issues from the “streets” are coming into the workplace.

An attendee commented that unions have traditionally provided an opportunity for upward mobility for young people. He posed the question – “How can we as a community ensure that new contracts, for new construction, are awarded to local people/minority businesses, that jobs are made available for our local young people?”

An attendee noted Spadafore’s comment and added that some new employees are “not ready to work,” and asked him to elaborate.

Spadafore responded that he meant that many employees are not ready to work in health care. He referred to the closing of New Venture Gear (which offered good paying jobs) and the devastating effect on the community, particularly the African American community. He talked about the difference in working for a factory and working in a nursing home.

Spadafore referenced a program that was in place in Syracuse some years ago, called “Pathways to Paychecks,” which taught prospective employees “soft skills.” The grant ended and the program is no longer in place, but a similar program could be helpful in the community, he said.

Turner pointed to a problematic societal attitude, which he sees reflected in the Syracuse City Schools, that “everyone should go to college.” Vocational programs would be helpful. He pointed out a number of young people are not successful in college, because they don’t want to go to college. But they have never had a chance to do vocational programming. An attendee pointed out that there are a number vocational programs available (and options are growing) – but that there is a societal problem. Some young people feel they are looked down upon if they are involved in a BOCES or other vocational program.

Meeting adjourned.

