

The FEDERATIONIST



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Jane Sessums leads press conference at Central Falls before candlelight vigil.

Union Opposes Pension Changes

Wearing union stickers originally printed seven years ago when Governor Carcieri first proposed eliminating pension COLAs, the RIFTHP testified against Article 16 of the Governor's Supplemental Budget. The House Finance Committee heard RIFTHP opposition to the proposal on January 12 and the Senate Finance Committee heard the same opposition on January 14.

Article 16 would change the pension COLA, or Cost Of Living Adjustment, for all teachers and State workers who were not eligible to retire as of September 30, 2009. This is the same group of workers who suffered pension cuts last session. In place of the automatic 3% compounded COLA, it would be up to the General Assembly on an annual basis to determine if pension benefits ought to be increased.

The RIFTHP objected to the proposal, noting that teachers and State workers have suffered two significant pension cuts in the past five years. We also noted that workers now pay for almost their entire pension benefit with high employee contributions and that eliminating the COLA would make the pension benefit worth less



than what employees contribute into the system.

The Governor has proposed balancing the Budget with a combination of cuts to cities and towns and a cut in the pension COLA. The current State Budget is over \$200 million in the red.

The elimination of the pension COLA would save the State approximately \$43 million this year and would save local school districts (which pay a portion of teacher pension costs) an additional \$18.5 million.

The Assembly is now considering all of the Governor's proposals to

balance the current State Budget. Now is the time for all teachers and State workers to call their Senator and Representative to ask them to reject Article 16 and keep the COLA.

Contact information for all Senators and Representatives is available on the RIFTHP website (www.rifthp.org). Look for the buttons along the left side of the webpage located under "Essential Info".

Bits and Pieces...

Federation Rocks!

The Rhode Island Federation of Teachers and Health Professionals has won the prestigious 2009 Rollie



Hopgood Award. This award is given by the AFT to the best op-

erated State Federation of the year. The award is named for the now deceased past president of the Michigan Federation of Teachers. Hopgood was a wonder at organizing and created an organizing culture at the Michigan Federation that brought thousands of new members into the AFT. The award presentation was made at the November AFT State Federation Presidents Conference in San Francisco.

The RIFTHP is respected nationally and has been recently highlighted for its internal organizing campaigns, Keep the Promise and our pension fights. The AFT and RIFTHP highly value membership activism and have made it a priority to capture the energy, enthusiasm and dedication of our members to help fight the fight.

On another front, the RIFTHP was one of seven locals/federations to win an AFT Innovation Grant. We were selected, along with the New York State United Teachers, to develop a rigor-

ous and robust teacher evaluation and support system. We know that our system will meet State standards and will likely be used in at least four of the five districts who are our partners. The Providence Teachers Union, Woonsocket Teachers' Guild, Central Falls Teachers' Union, Pawtucket Teachers' Alliance and Cranston Teachers' Alliance and their superintendents and other administrative leaders are partnering with us in this endeavor. We have brought in the pre-eminent researchers in teacher evaluation to help with this work.

There will be a Peer Assistance and Review component of the system that we hope will also be adopted by the districts.

The endeavor is being coordinated by Colleen Callahan, RIFTHP Director of Professional Issues.

At the Assembly

The State is broke again and will be for at least the next three years. ARRA money stops coming into the State in 2012 and then the even deeper crisis will hit. It's bad now. But we haven't yet seen the worst of it.

As a result of this economic crisis, which we can lay at the feet of Wall Street and the banks, public employees are feeling the brunt of the crisis. We are asked to get the State off the hook with deep pension cuts and pay cuts. The Governor this year is plan-

ning to cut State Aid to Education by 3% and suggests that teachers and para-professionals take a 3% pay cut for two years to leave the districts whole.

We are asked to give up our cost-of-living increase on our pensions and rely on the annual generosity of the General Assembly to decide if we are deserving of an increase in our pensions.

Representatives Arthur Corvese and Doug Gablinske have already introduced legislation to change the dates for layoff and termination of teachers under our tenure laws and to limit our scope of bargaining. We expect more of these bills to be proposed in the Assembly and are currently engaged in a ground war to KEEP THE COLA.

The Federation will likely be calling on members to do more and take on new responsibilities for activities this legislative season.

On Politics

At the time of this writing, our Governor has only 10 months more to run out his term of office. There will be at least four, perhaps five, candidates running for Governor. There will be a democratic primary, with Frank Caprio and Patrick Lynch challenging each other, John Robitaille will be running as a Republican, Linc Chafee is running as an Independent, and the Moderate Party has yet to name its candidate. This will leave four candidates on the ballot. This means that the labor vote will count very heavily in this

race, and we certainly could use someone in the State House who would be an advocate and not a basher of teachers and who would not be hostile to unions. We worked very hard in the last campaign and came very close to winning the Governor's seat.

We elected a Democrat to the Senate and helped make the short-lived majority. We will return our friends to Congress and, hopefully, capture the Governor's chair once again. There will be an unrivaled effort on our part to win the seats for those who will be friendly toward education, public employees, health care and the people who work in these institutions.

Marcia B. Reback

Another Successful QuEST

RIFTHP QuEST '09 was an unqualified success, held at the RI Convention Center in November of 2009. Randi Weingarten, the AFT's dynamic president, was the keynote speaker. Her message resonated clearly for RI teachers: while working in a culture of teacher bashing and union busting, it is difficult for our members to rise to the challenge every day and provide the highest quality education that our resources allow.

Weingarten talked about changing the narrative that has been defined by our enemies and meeting the challenges that we confront through hard work and dedication. She called for developing a true profession for teachers by assuring that the teacher's voice is heard in the decision-making process about what is taught, how it is taught and the policies that govern our schools.

QuEST featured four seminars in addition to 36 breakout sessions. The leadership seminar, by invitation only, focused on the challenges confronting union leadership. The breakout sessions varied from *RTI (Response to Intervention)* to *Using Technology* and the seminars on *Managing Aggressive Students* and *Creating a Climate for Learning* drew huge crowds.

The attendance at QuEST continued to break records with over 800 participants.

The next big event will be the third annual RIFTHP Summer Institute, yet to be scheduled.



**RI Federation of Teachers
& Health Professionals**

Marcia B. Reback
President

Robert E. Casey
Field Representative

Michael Mullane
Field Representative

James Parisi
Field Representative

Colleen Callahan
Director of Professional Issues

Maureen Martin
Director of Political Activities

Diane Thurber
Executive Assistant

Carol Santangini
Staff Assistant

Charlene Lee
Administrative Assistant

Kenn Fontaine
Administrative Assistant



Central Falls teachers in candlelight vigil before Board of Trustees and Superintendent threaten terminations.