Union puts members and those they serve first

By Ned Hoskin

The old joke is that legislation is like sausage — you don’t want to see how it’s made. On the other hand, as Mike Ditka once said in a movie, “Every good thing starts with a Brat!” So, the role of the union in shaping and supporting — and opposing — legislation is crucial to promoting and protecting public education, health care and the labor movement itself.

Laws and regulations affecting every member’s terms and conditions of employment are passed by lawmakers every year. Following a legislative program that is adopted as policy by elected delegates to the annual NYSUT Representative Assembly, the union’s legislative department drafts, introduces and lobbies for bills affecting state aid to schools and colleges, licensure, tenure, health and safety, education standards, health care, pensions and retirement.

But it doesn’t stop with the legislative staff. NYSUT’s influence in supporting positive change and opposing destructive proposals extends to every member of every local union.

Constitutional convention
In addition to working to defeat the referendum on the November ballot, the union will inform elected officials of the dangers of opening up the state’s guiding document.

Funding for education
NYSUT will push for at least a $2 billion increase in state school aid in 2017-18, and call for the phase-in of the full Foundation Aid formula. In addition, NYSUT will seek increased funding for the state’s network of teacher centers.

Tax cap reform
Fixing the misguided tax cap, which prevents local districts from raising local revenue to offset the lack of state aid, will involve a consistent 2 percent cap — not the current cap tied to the inflation rate — and removing the undemocratic supermajority requirement for districts exceeding the cap.

Receivership/community schools
The union is working hard for repeal of the counterproductive, ill-advised receivership law that squashes local control of struggling school districts. Instead, NYSUT seeks resources for community schools that boost these districts with local support systems.

Higher education
NYSUT will seek fair and equitable funding, transparency and accountability guarantees for SUNY and CUNY, and will oppose any performance-based campus funding initiatives.

Health care
At the top of the list is safe nurse-patient staffing ratios. The fight for adequate funding of SUNY’s teaching hospitals continues, as does the struggle to stave off privatization proposals.

Special Act schools, 853, 4201 and 4410 schools
These vital institutions that serve some of the state’s most challenging students must be fairly and equitably supported.

Social justice
The union will continue its efforts to extend wage and benefit equity for all, including farmworkers and women. It also will pursue legislation to ensure women’s health rights.

Union leaders pledge to protect undocumented students, educators

By Sylvia Saunders

“Our members are on the front lines every day, hearing heartbreaking stories and trying to reassure students and their families,” said NYSUT President Karen E. Magee. “We know that many of our students are scared and are naturally turning to our members for information and support.”

United Federation of Teachers educators said a number of their undocumented students expressed fears that a Trump presidency meant they could face deportation.

Thomas Hasler of International High School at Union Square in Manhattan shared one student’s concerns “that her dream of going to college died … and that her parents were talking about moving back to their home country because they were scared that once his policies were set into action, they will be put into a deportation center and moved out of the country. That our students feel those things is heartbreaking.”

Higher education unionists are also speaking out on behalf of immigrant students and staff.

Barbara Bowen, president of the Professional Staff Congress, called on officials to make CUNY a “sanctuary university” and refuse to provide information on the immigration status of undocumented students or sensitive information about CUNY faculty, staff or students to federal officials unless required by subpoena or court order. She called for policies prohibiting federal immigration enforcement on college campuses, and for increased resources to help those who feel at risk.

 Bowen noted several thousand CUNY students are protected by DACA, a presidential executive order that grants reprieve from deportation and allows undocumented youth to work. “The revocation of DACA … could rip apart students’ families and destroy the lives they have worked to build for themselves against great odds,” Bowen said in an open letter to CUNY Chancellor James Milliken.

Fred Kowal, president of United University Professions at SUNY, said the union supports protections for undocumented students and educators covered by the Deferred Action program.

“We rely on grassroots activism to demonstrate to lawmakers that these issues matter to people on the front lines of our institutions and our communities,” said Executive Vice President Andy Pallotta. “From the annual Committee of 100 that brings hundreds of activists to Albany each year to share their stories with legislators, to our letter writing and phone call campaigns orchestrated through the online Member Action Center, to our annual VOTE-COPE fund drive, we rely on all NYSUT members to help us succeed.”

Here are some of the key issues in the 2017 session of the state Legislature, which starts in early January.

“...we don’t want to see how it’s made.”
No way, no how

Union vows to stand up against DeVos, any attempts to destroy public education. Day of action declared.

By NYSUT United staff

NYSUT pledges to combat any federal policy that aims to dismantle public education and harm educators and students.

In an initial salvo, the statewide union will take part in a Jan. 19 national Day of Action organized by the Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools (AROS), a network of community groups and unions across the country that promote educational and social justice, according to a resolution passed by the NYSUT Board of Directors at its December meeting.

The actions are in direct response to the controversial nomination of Betsy DeVos for U.S. Secretary of Education, a clear sign the president-elect will follow through on his plan to privatize public education. DeVos — who has no experience or expertise in education — has used her family’s vast fortune in Michigan to push for the proliferation of for-profit charter schools and the implementation of voucher schemes that siphon millions from public schools.

“Betsy DeVos has spent a lifetime using her family’s billions to push for policies that would systematically destroy the nation’s public education system,” said NYSUT President Karen E. Magee. “Her nomination defies logic and represents the potentially destructive path on which our next president could set this nation. NYSUT will not relent in its fight to protect students, families, schools and communities against the threats posed by the policies of such dangerous ideologues.”

NYSUT Vice President Paul Pecorale, the union’s liaison to AROS, agreed: “Betsy DeVos has no meaningful background in education and has a long history of waging war on public schools. Her philosophies, if carried forward, would threaten our students and their futures. It is imperative we stand up to the danger this presents to public education.”

NYSUT urges locals to use the Day of Action to:

■ Demand the full funding for your schools.
■ Affirm the NYSUT Board resolution calling for your campus or school community to be designated a sanctuary for children of undocumented immigrants.
■ Connect with leaders of organized labor and other community groups to demonstrate against the nomination of Betsy DeVos for U.S. Secretary of Education.
■ Demonstrate against other proposed Cabinet selections whose policies would diminish workers’ rights, civil rights and access to health care.
■ Educate the community on the resources available to reduce/eliminate the opioid addiction in our communities.
■ Organize members to defend the social safety net: Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid and food stamps — federal, state and local programs, intended to provide protection against economic calamity.

The American Federation of Teachers and National Education Association, NYSUT’s national affiliates, also vow to fight back against any federal policy proposals that undermine public education.

“In nominating DeVos, Trump makes it loud and clear that his education policy will focus on privatizing, defunding and destroying public education in America,” said AFT President Randi Weingarten. DeVos, who gives generously to Republican political campaigns, has long supported school vouchers that funnel taxpayers’ money away from public schools to private and religious schools. If confirmed, she would become the first education secretary who never invested in education and for living wages that lift working people out of poverty. Watch www.nysut.org and the NYSUT Leader and Member briefings for developments.

Pledge to protect undocumented students, educators continued...

Act now!

Say NO to making Betsy DeVos U.S. Secretary of Education. Sign the petition on NYSUT’s Member Action Center — mac.nysut.org.

You can also sign an open letter from the NEA and AFT demanding the next education secretary commit to student success in public schools. Visit https://actionnetwork.org/forms/add-your-name-commit-to-student-success?source=AFT.

“Betsy Devos will dismantle America’s public schools and turn the education of our children over to right-wing ideologues and corporate profit takers,” said NYSUT Executive Vice President Andy Pallotta. “Don’t let her!”

Resources are available via AFT’s Share My Lesson (sharemylesson.com) and website (www.aft.org/our-community/immigration), including AFT’s Guide for Educators and School Support Staff; 15 Things Educators and School Support Staff Can Do to Help Protect Undocumented Students and Families and 6 Things Educators Can Do to Create Welcoming Classrooms.