

ALBANY LEGISLATIVE SESSION ENDS

Time to Unite the People's Forces

Statement by the New York District, Communist Party USA

The challenge now is to unite the various people's forces into a vibrant working class-led coalition and to actively participate in the legislative and electoral process around a number of key issues, such as mass incarceration and police brutality, the DREAM Act, quality public education, the enactment of a \$15 an hour minimum wage, affordable housing, and an expansion of labor rights.

The strength of a united, militant, and well-organized movement shook Albany and forced a conservative retreat on a number of issues. That in itself must be seen as a people's victory.

Raising the Minimum Wage - Governor Cuomo won reelection in part based upon a "good faith" commitment both to raise New York's \$8.75 an hour minimum wage and to allow high-cost cities to set wages that reflect local costs of living. However the governor's eventual proposal of \$10.50 an hour statewide and \$11.50 an hour in New York City fell well short of a living wage. The governor backed down in the face of Wall Street and its Senate Republicans whose majority he helped ensure, and no action on the minimum wage was taken. While the broad public movement of fast-food workers, other low-wage workers and allies forced the governor to request a wage board for fast-food workers, his lack of leadership during the past term has left millions of working families in poverty.

Rent Regulations - The rent regulation laws, which expired on June 15, were extended for four years. The rent laws govern rents of some 1 million apartments in New York City and its suburbs. The renewal slightly increased the threshold rent, from \$2,500 to \$2,700 a month. The threshold is indexed to local Rent Guideline Board (RGB) increases. Vacated apartments reaching that limit can be deregulated.

The tenants' movement wanted vacancy deregulation and other tools used to gut the rent regulated stock eliminated altogether but the powerful real estate/Wall Street forces lobbied to further weaken regulations. While the law that finally passed represents a stalemate, a million residencies continue to be threatened. Without the militant organized tenants' campaign, there is every indication that the rent regulation laws would have been gutted.

Tax Abatements for Developers - The 421-a program, which grants large tax abatements for real estate developers, was renewed again. The tax abatement is designed to incentivize developers to build more affordable housing, but has not resulted in significant affordable unit construction and costs the city over a billion dollars in lost revenue each year. As amended the law raised the "affordability" requirement from 20% to 25-30% of units in new construction for developers to qualify. In the end, the new law basically retains the provisions of the old law, with some major anti-tenant changes: the 25-year tax abatement was extended for another 10 years, making it a 35-year tax break; the definition of "affordable" was increased from those making 60% of Area Median Income (AMI) to include those making up to 130% of the AMI; and finally developers and representatives of state construction unions must, within six months, negotiate an agreement regarding wages on 421-a projects. If no agreement is reached, the entire program will be repealed.

The tenants' movement had wanted to stop the million-dollar giveaways to developers and instead have the city invest its increased tax revenues to build affordable housing. Because the people's progressive forces could not find common ground on some elements of their opposition to the tax abatements, we could not win more.

**Contact NY District, CPUSA: ny@cpusa.org
cpusa.org • peoplesworld.org • politicalaffairs.net • yclusa.org**

Mayoral Control of New York City Board of Education - When a progressive-leaning slate assumed the reins of city government, control of education became a contentious issue between Governor Cuomo and Mayor de Blasio. Instead of granting the mayor extended control of the Board of Education, as de Blasio had sought, the law passed in Albany only provides for one year of control. This limits the mayor's power to enact the people's agenda in public schools while expanding that of for-profit charter schools. The corporate attack on public education continues.

Education Tax Credit - Governor Cuomo had initially proposed a \$150 million tax credit to individuals and corporations who finance scholarships and tuition fees. Faced with mounting opposition to that giveaway while public education is shortchanged, Cuomo backed off. The legislature nevertheless provided \$250 million in new public funding for private education to finance programs mandated by the state.

Police Accountability - The struggle to hold law enforcement accountable to the communities it serves continues. Bills granting individuals the "right to know" by whom and why they are stopped during a police encounter and for a special prosecutor in police-involved shootings were supported by the NYS Assembly. Gov. Cuomo promised to support these initiatives but reneged during negotiations. In response to pressure from the movement for police accountability Gov. Cuomo has used executive power to appoint New York Attorney General as special prosecutor. This is a temporary measure and legislative action is necessary to make the reform permanent.

Criminal Justice - Some 30,000 adolescents are confined as adults in New York State prisons and are extremely vulnerable, as was dramatically shown by the death of Kahlif Browder who languished for three years on Rikers Island. The City Council and State Assembly passed bills to "raise the age" and leave North Carolina as the only state to incarcerate children with adults. Opposition from Senate Republicans together with inaction by Gov. Cuomo caused this bill to fall short of legislation.

In the session just ended, the legislature failed to enact a number of vital bills, including, in particular, the provision of any increase in statewide and local minimum wages, removal of children from adult prisons and the adoption of tuition assistance to undocumented students.

In evaluating the gains and losses for the people of New York State in the 2015 legislative session, we should take into account the strength of the opposing constituencies.

The majority of people living in the state of New York are working class while racially and nationally oppressed people are the fastest growing sector. The people of New York are electing to office more candidates who reflect this. Seeing the writing on the wall, the real estate/Wall Street forces were desperate for the Legislature to gut rent regulations, as well as to keep tax breaks and subsidies for themselves and to continue to shortchange public education. The warnings posted on that wall:

- *The pushback against right-wing policies, especially from the financial and real estate industries, over the nation's largest city by the 2013 election of a new progressive-leaning New York City government.*
- *A serious challenge to the vacillating Andrew Cuomo in the 2014 Democratic gubernatorial primary from Zephyr Teachout, independent progressive and anti-monopoly candidate.*
- *A strong showing by Working Families Party candidates in November 2014 including strong vote totals in upstate races and the recent election to the Assembly of Diana Richardson in Brooklyn.*
- *Sheldon Silver's loss of the Assembly speakership following his indictment for corruption and the resulting increased importance of progressive forces in that chamber.*
- *Removal of Republican Dean Skelos from his position as majority leader of the State Senate, weakening the control his party holds in that chamber.*

Dr. Martin Luther King said "the moral arc of history is long but bends towards justice". The Communist Party USA (CPUSA) has a 95 year history of bending that arc. The struggle continues and the New York District, CPUSA is committed to being an active and unifying force in it.