Push for our Retro

BOSTON – As we go to press it seems clear that the next installment of our owed retro pay raise will happen. Most members and management thought we would never receive a penny of this pay raise. After all the Governor made it clear that he strongly opposed our pay raise and would veto funding for it. The Governor was true to his word; but the Legislature overrode his veto. In January 2004 we were brought up to our correct salary. This past spring we received our first retro payment. This Fall we will receive the second retro. Next year we should be receiving our final retro payment. A lot of desperately needed money is in these retro checks. The fact that we are receiving the money says good things about our members, our legislature, and our union leaders. Getting our retro means three forces have to come together. First, union members have to press state reps. Second, we have to have enough labor-friendly votes in the Legislature to override the Governor. Third, our union leadership has to be focused, determined, and insistent. Members have been active. We are fortunate to have a labor-friendly legislature. And our union leaders have demonstrated strong leadership on this issue. Soon, we will focus on the final payment.

Contract Status

AMHERST - Several campus unions has reached agreement with UMass on their contracts. Late spring GEO, representing grad students, settled. This summer, USA/MTA, representing clerical and technical workers, ratified. The faculty union MSP has settled; their contract is now at the Governor’s Office. Only SEIU (professional and classified bosses) and AFSCME have yet to settle (there have been suggestions that SEIU may be near a settlement as well). The core wage package for the settled unions includes a 2, 2, and 2 provision, back to February 2005. AFSCME contract talks, however, are proceeding at a snail’s pace. Says Treasurer Randy Boivin, “Negotiations have been unproductive and disappointing. We understand that monies are limited. The reasonable language concessions we seek are being met with resistance. Chances of agreement at this point are slim.”

Remembering Rita Messier

Long-time union activist Rita Messier passed away on Sunday, September 11th. Many of us remember Rita as a long-time union steward in Athletics, always fighting for her co-workers. More of us remember Rita as the mother of our union picnic, running raffles, helping to set up, helping to shuck corn, serving food. She’d be working the picnic hours before the crowds showed up and stay until late. Always a smile, always a kind and caring word. Rita was blessed with a powerful heart, and loving husband, Roland “Shorty” Messier. She breathed the fire of unionism into her son, plumbing steward Roger, and her son-in-law, E Board member John Daley. Rita, you were always there for us. Thank you.
President’s Report

by Francis Martin, Jr.

I urge all members to try to come to our fall membership meeting. At that meeting I will give a full update on our plans to secure the final installment on our retro pay raise from our contract of 2001-4. Also, I will give you a full accounting of our contract negotiations. I will explain the roadblocks that we’ve encountered on language. I will update you on the bargaining that has taken place around pay raises. I will give you the latest news about our Labor/Management Workplace Education Program. The membership meeting will take place in October. Look for flyers that tell meeting time and location.

In Memory of the husband of
Karen Saunders

Campaign to Organize 03 Workers

CAMPUS – This past spring AFSCME launched an effort to organize workers on campus who do the kind of work that we do, except that are not protected by the Union and they don’t receive benefits like health insurance. These “03’s” tend to be found in the dining commons and in parts of the Physical Plant. Bringing these non-benefitted workers into our union strengthens our union and therefore our bargaining position. And, of course, union membership carries with it major pluses for these unprotected 03 workers. This fall the campaign is heating up. We could use your help. If you could lend a hand in any way, please call us at 5-2831.

Early Retirement Rumors

BOSTON – This summer, on average, we received a couple of phone calls each day asking about the status of this or that retirement bill. Sometimes these bills were supposedly passed by the House or the Senate or at the Governor’s door. Or someone had heard from someone in Whitmore that this or that bill was on a fast track. Alas. None of these supposed fast track bills are going anywhere. Each year there are several dozen retirement bills filed in the legislature. And each year each and every one of these bills dies in the legislature. The only exception is when the state finds itself in a fiscal crisis, maybe once every six or eight years.

Labor/Management Workplace Education Fall Offerings

GOODELL – Soon, every AFSCME member will receive a brochure from our joint worker education program with courses and special projects intended to sharpen your skills and to keep your brain juices flowing. The offerings are not only free, top-notch (recognized nationally), but you get work release time to participate in classes. We strongly urge you to sign-up. A union of skilled workers is more powerful. There are courses and projects for everyone: members wanting to learn about computers, to explore issues of classism, to learn about diverse cultures, to gain skills in problem-solving and communication, to learn English as a new language.
Dale Melcher has been doing amazing work in the Valley for some 31 years. She started working at the University for Women Studies in 1974. Currently, Dale is the Labor Extension Coordinator at the UMass Labor Center in Gordon Hall. She teaches two courses for the Labor Center: an undergraduate course, Women and Work, and the graduate-level Labor Education. In addition, she offers workshops and training programs for unions, union members, and community groups on such topics as steward’s training, bargaining, organizing, labor history, worker rights, and grievance handling. Dale has been active for many years with WILD (Women's Institute for Leadership Development), and the New England Regional Summer School Program. Dale is also a member of the Labor/Management Workplace Education Advisory Committee.

Dale, how did you get involved with the labor movement?
I was very active at the Valley Women’s Center in the 70's, which had a workplace organizing committee. I walked a picket line for the organizing campaign at Joe’s Pizza, in Northampton. One of the women in the organizing group was a Women’s Studies student who wanted to offer a colloq on women and work and needed a sponsor. So we got in touch with Harvey Friedman, director of the Labor Center. That was my start.

Tell me about the passion that goes into your work. It’s hard to describe. I fundamentally believe that we have an obligation in our lifetime to make this a better world. I believe it’s a requirement. Find your place. Do something about inequality and injustice. Obviously you can’t take on the whole world, so you find that small corner where you can make a difference. For me I love working with workers, with adult learners. I always learn something myself. And I believe in the idea of unions and a broad labor movement. Sometimes unions fall short of their potential, but I still believe that unions are the best vehicle for workers to have a voice. Particularly for women, it’s really the only place. And I believe in democratic unions. My place is helping activists to make their union really represent the interests of their members and have leadership that looks like the membership. I help unions bring forward the issues of their newest members as well.

What do you really love about your work? I really love WILD [the Women in Leadership Development conference]. There’s nothing like a WILD Summer Institute. We bring 100 or so women together – many of whom have never been at an all-women program (we always have lots of children too) and many of whom speak different languages - then see what happens when these women participate in workshops together to discuss some pretty heavy things. An energy is created. And come Saturday night, after a day of workshops, we’re ready for a party. For a beer and conversation and a some dancing. And salsa music. The Latina sisters show us some new dance moves. The energy levels stay high. And then Sunday it’s back to work at the summer school. I love bringing together women from very different workplaces. Maintenance women from SEIU 615 who clean the high-rises in Boston are talking with a social worker about the issues they have in common. A nurse and a home-health aid are talking and sharing stories. WILD is the most diverse work I do in terms of race, ethnicity, and age.

Any heroes or heroines come to mind? Three women come to mind. First, Frances Crowe, the founder of AFSC [The American Friends Service Committee] in the Valley. She’s unstoppable. She’s just tireless and indomitable. As an older woman who has never left the movement, who never gives up working for peace, she is an inspiration. Second, Freda Rozen. Freda passed away several years ago. She was a labor studies professor and a founding mother of the union women’s summer school. She did all this and raised 5 kids. She was really my mentor. Freda was one of the labor extension pioneers who not only created a space in our field for women but established programming for union women. And last, Nancy DeProsse. A former daycare worker, daycare organizer, GEO staff person and now grad student and GEO member. Like Frances and Freda, Nancy is tireless, smart, committed, and brave.

Tell us about Bill Newman, your husband. What do you admire most about Bill? A lot of things. I think it’s his commitment and passion to justice and particularly to protecting our civil liberties. But it’s more than that. People love him as a lawyer because he really gives himself to these issues [see Shah Sababdeen sidebar]. He’s just an incredibly generous, decent human-being. And funny too!

> continued on page 8
For 22 years Shah and Zaweeda Sahabdeen were the face of outstanding service at UMass Athletics. Both worked as Storekeeper II’s. Zaweeda helped out sports teams at Curry Hicks and Shah provided team support at Boyden. Two summers ago, during the campus budget crisis, the Athletic Department sent layoff notices to Shah and Zaweeda. Yet Shah and Zaweeda were the two most senior Storekeeper II’s in Athletics. They should have been the last, not the first, to be laid off in their job classification. Other Storekeepers II of color in the Department. Zaweeda was the only female Storekeeper II. Both Shah and Zaweeda are older employees. The layoff notices to the Sahabdeens raised issues of seniority, race, gender, and age. The Union immediately filed a grievance maintaining that the University broke the Contract when it sent these letters to the Sahabdeens. In addition, the Union contacted Attorney Bill Newman because it looked like the Sahabdeens could file a court case alleging employment discrimination. Working with Attorney Newman, Shah and Zaweeda Sahabdeen filed a case to the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination. Eventually, Zaweeda opted for retirement. Shah accepted an offer from the University to work in the downstairs Boyden laundry room.

Shah, how are you doing? I’m doing alright at the moment. How is Zaweeda? A lot of people miss her at UMass. She’s doing alright too. She misses working at UMass. She always liked the coaches, the students, and the work environment at the Athletic Department. Everyone was nice. And the income was enough for us to maintain our home and our living conditions. So she doesn’t feel 100% good because she’s lost what she was doing earlier. She misses the kids and the coaches. Now she has to work elsewhere so we can settle bills and get some extra cash; she’s retired but she’s not retired.

Your case resolved over a year ago. Looking back, any thoughts about what you and Zaweeda went through? We are really sorry to have that bad memory which we never expected from a community of this kind, an educated community. That’s really bad.

Any lessons learned? However rosy the outlook there is always a dark side hidden behind which we can not see. Adjust accordingly to protect yourselves from unforeseen dangers.

You worked with Bill Newman on your MCAD complaint. When I was introduced to Bill Newman by the Union I found him extremely pleasant from the first, a very friendly type of person. He’s very humorous and very easy to talk to and even tolerated me barging in at an odd time without an appointment! He gave me an opportunity to be myself and open up and say whatever happened to me at the University. He listened to our story. He listened to the Union. When he fully realized what we had gone through he filed a MCAD case on our behalf against the University. As a result there was a settlement: my department agreed to accommodate me in a different place with the same salary status.

How important was his support? Without Mr. Newman’s support I don’t think I would have a footing in the university a second time. I’d like to add that when it came to charges, he told me he would bill me leniently, and he did. I told him, “I will never find a lawyer like you.” Bill Newman is a person who works for his client with the thought of what he can do for the client. Not with the thought of expecting how much he can get from the client. Therefore with the gods blessing, people of this kind should live healthy and happy to serve the cause of the needy, innocent people. May God bless Bill Newman and his family. With his choicest blessings for happiness and the best of health forever.

You worked with Francis Martin, Randy Boivin, and Mike Foster on your layoff grievance. How helpful was the Union? The union was extremely helpful. Without their representation, their firm and effective words, their strong resolve to help me get me once again a strong footing in the University, I would not be here today. UMass settled on account of pressure, not for reasons of dignity and respect. I’m sure therefore my presence irritates some.

I know that you were in Sri Lanka when the tsunami struck last November. That must have been pretty horrific. It was horrific. I still suffer from that trip. At this time when the tsunami struck I was living in Colombo City, the capital, about a quarter mile from the sea. By about 7:30 or 8:00 in the morning I heard the sound of the neighbors crying and running around in panic. They were carrying their children. I asked them, “What is all this about?” They said, “There is a flood. Water is coming.” I thought it was a joke. One lady asked me to switch on the tv. I did and saw on the screen scenes of devastation in Chennai, a city in India. There the sea had eroded vast sections of land, houses had been swept away, a lot of people were weeping. But no television coverage about the tsunami in Sri Lanka. It took us some time as the day went down to catch up with what was happening in Sri Lanka. But the tsunami did hit Sri Lanka.

Three Union Activists

In this issue of Spirit we interview three people who are each helping to build a stronger union movement. We start with long-time AFSCME member Shah Sahabdeen. We then interview the attorney for his MCAD case, Bill Newman. We conclude with an interview of Dale Melcher, the coordinator of Labor Extension work for the University.
How bad? Here is one story. There’s an express train that travels everyday from Colombo City to Galle (a place in the southern part of Sri Lanka) where many of my wife’s relatives live. The train route is by the sea. So on this particular day the train stops at a place called Hickaduwa. Normally the train doesn’t stop for more than thirty seconds in Hickaduwa. But on this particular day for some reason the signal is not down for the train to move. A little over 2000 people are on the train. As the train waits on the tracks, passengers begin disembarking from the train. They wander around the platform to find out why the train is not moving. At the same time they see the water in the sea receding backwards and the beach opening up for about 150 yards. The passengers begin walking onto the beach and towards the sea. Hundreds of them of them walk into the water. Suddenly the waters swell. The waves rise up and begin engulfing the passengers. Countless people are swept to their deaths. Section by section the train itself is taken out completely by these coastal waves. The main locomotive engine washes about 150 yards away from the main track. Of about 2,000 people on the train, more than 1,600 perish. Some are still missing. Thirteen of them of those who die, one whole family traveling to Galle, are relatives mine. In addition, I lose another four relatives in Galle itself. When I think of those relatives, I think back to 1963 and a question posed by one in that family. Back in 1963 she was a 14 year old girl. I was in a wedding party with her family. Unlike most Sri Lankans, Dhaus’ family is fair and well to do... so I stood out. Suddenly she turned to me and asked, “Uncle, why are you dark in color?” At first I was stuck for words. No one ever asked me a question like that. So I thought for a moment. “Dhaus, I am dark outside and maybe fair inside.” She smiled innocently and ran away. Today she is a grown up married lady with many children, very much into helping the helpless. She is a kind of lady beautiful inside and outside. I wish more people at UMass had her attitude.

What has been the effect of the tsunami on you personally? Something happened to me inside, I felt sick. A kind of fear gripped me. I felt lonely, helpless, that I might die. Even among people I felt completely lonely. I could not eat or sleep and strangely I could not go under a shower. My mouth became dry all the time. I’d run out of breath. I’d wake with a shock after a half hour of sleep, fearing darkness and death. With the rest of my family fast asleep, my mind would wander endlessly on frightening events. Somehow I managed to stay awake until morning with all the lights on. As this was happening daily I became more and more tired and concerned about my health. I consulted doctors and was put on medication.

So how did you come out of it? I’m not out of it. But one day I stumbled on a sudden thought: find something to do at night. So the thought of learning Hindi, the Indian national language, came to my mind. From then onwards every time I wake up I immediately switch on the lights, hit the books, and copy the Hindi alphabet. The practice gives me the luxury of slowly curtailing the speed of my wandering mind. Often I’ll be awake sitting and working with the books until morning. Sometimes I get lucky to find a little sleep for a couple of hours, with my books on my lap. Also, when I returned to the United States I learned to paint to keep my mind free from the “devil’s workshop,” daytime nightmares. I’m now working on watercolors. Landscapes.

What are you looking forward to, Shah? This layoff took away all my eagerness and ideas of living longer and happily. It is something like... I’m climbing a tree, I’m on a branch, someone is cutting that branch and I’m falling. I’m still with the bad feelings because of that fall... the layoff. As a result my mind has come to a stop and I can not think of what I am going to be in the future. From the time of the layoff onwards I live day to day without any mindful progress. I had planned so many things and right now they have completely gone out of my mind. I’m just like a floating person.

The fact that you won a favorable settlement has that helped? Sure. But it’s not only me it’s my wife, she’s in pain too. Anytime anyone in your family is in pain, you suffer too.
Attorney Bill Newman has been a partner in the law firm of Lesser, Newman, Souweine, and Nasser since 1976. Among his clients: SEIU Local 211, Amalgamated Transit Union Local 1512, and SSEA in Greenfield. He has been the director of the Western Regional Office of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Massachusetts since its opening in 1987. Bill Newman fights for the rights of working people and for the fundamental constitutional rights of all people. Last year Attorney Newman filed a discrimination lawsuit on behalf of Thawood and Zaweeda Sahabdeen with the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination [see Thawood Sahabdeen interview].

Married to Dale Melcher, Bill and Dale have two daughters.

Bill, you’re everywhere addressing civil liberties. You’re in court, you speak at rallies, you participate on panels, you’re on television and radio, you’re in theater productions. Why civil liberties? I’ve always seen the law as potentially a mechanism to try to achieve fairness in the workplace, in the courthouse, and in our daily lives. It’s an honor and a privilege to have the chance to fight for fundamental rights.

What’s the connection between civil liberties and union work? Union work at its core involves core civil rights such as freedom of speech and freedom of association. It also involves a fight for equality and due process, which is what a grievance and arbitration provision makes real in the workplace.

I notice that the American Civil Liberties Union identifies itself as a union. The organization is not called the American Civil Liberties Organization or Association. It’s called the American Civil Liberties Union for good reasons. We are a membership organization. Our membership is our strength. The ACLU very much began as an organization to fight for the rights of working people to organize and assemble and fight for equality and fairness. We still fight for the rights of working people. Among our more recent high publicity cases, the ACLU in Massachusetts successfully litigated against the use of indiscriminate drug-testing in the workplace, and we represented the stewardesses who were discriminated against by the airlines.

If our members want more information about the ACLU? Our websites are a good place to start. www.aclu-mass.org or www.aclu.org. We, of course, encourage people to join.

Why is the Shah Sahabdeen case important? It’s important to stand up for what’s right. It’s often said that in the workplace and in a union an injury to one is an injury to all. And that’s true. The corollary is for every time we insist on fairness for one employee, we have achieved some measure of justice not only for him or her but for all of us.

Bill, any heroes or heroines who’ve made a difference in your life? Well, this may sound cliched but I was moved, I was indelibly impressed with the words and the vision of John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King. To this day I remember hearing Bobby Kennedy saying, “Some people see the world as it is and ask ‘Why?’ And others dream of the world as it might be and ask ‘Why not?’”

If you compare the Kennedys and Martin Luther King to our current leadership in Washington... [a long sigh.] It’s a very big topic. It’s complicated because the JFK presidential record is mixed. But his vision, his eloquence inspired a generation to fight for equality and justice. His words mattered, Bobby mattered, and Martin Luther King perhaps mattered the most. No one was more eloquent than Reverend King and more passionate in his quest for justice. I still wonder how much fairer and just our country would be if Bobby had been elected President, how much more peaceful, prosperous and egalitarian the world might be if Reverend King had been allowed to live out his life.

Speaking of heroes and heroines, what do you admire most about Dale? Well, she’s incredibly talented, caring, smart, effective, insightful, and creative. She’s a great mom. She’s a remarkably effective organizer and teacher. I’m blessed that she’s my partner.
REMEMBER!

AFTER 30 DAYS EMPLOYMENT, YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR EITHER UNION DUES OR AN AGENCY SERVICE FEE. TO AVOID BACK PAYMENTS, CONTACT YOUR STEWARD OR THE LOCAL OFFICE 545-2831.

OFFICE HOURS

MON, TUES, WED, THURS, and FRIDAY 9 am to 4 pm

Grievance News

Grievance Officer

At any one time the Local has dozens of grievances and reallocations going. Since a number of these are class-action (more than one unit member involved) a lot of us have a direct stake in these actions. In addition, many of us are affected by grievances filed by other members. What follows are some recent grievance/reallocation developments.

A Dozen Third Steps Scheduled for September

WHITMORE – The good news: A serious effort is underway to schedule long-lingering third steps. The bad news: there are way still many cases waiting to be heard at third step that should never have had to wait this long. As the saying goes, “Justice Delayed is Justice Denied.” Among the cases scheduled is a termination case. Also, there are several layoff cases, one of which contests the failure of the University to uphold protected rights of Armed Service Veterans. There are several discipline cases in this mix of 12 grievances. Also, several bypasses. One cases revolves around the claim that the University improperly assigned work to maintenance techs that should have been assigned to other trades workers. In addition, there is an harassment case, originally filed in September.

Union Monitoring Third Step Answers

WHITMORE – As these twelve grievances are heard at third step this September, the Union will be monitoring how long it takes the University to respond to these grievances. According to the Contract [Article 29, section 3c], “The CEO shall render a written decision within ten (10) days of the date of the meeting.” The Union has never received a written response to some thirty grievances were heard at third step. In some cases the Union has been waiting for months for a reply from the University. The grievance system was never intended to operate like this. The system is broken and needs to be fixed.
> Dale Melcher continued from page 3
You’re in labor extension. Bill is a lawyer who focuses on both civil liberties and labor issues, what do you talk about over supper? Baseball. He’s a Yankee Fan, I’m a Red Sox fan. And our children. They’re both away at college now. Bill and I often talk about unions. He represents the ATU local that represents Peter Pan bus drivers and a SEIU local at Smith College. We talk about labor issues and stuff that comes up for him and for me. We talk about the University because he’s often called in to shake a finger when UMass does something it shouldn’t.

Any funny work stories? A number of years ago, before WILD in the Winter, we tried to do a winter project, and 1776 signed on. Cheryl Gooding, the WILD staff person, and I facilitated. You guys sent a great group of women. One of the women I interviewed for the project was Lillian Coleman who was doing food service work at the time on campus. So I asked her what she liked about her job. She gave me this look and said “I spend my day slopping out dining commons food to a line of students and you want to know what I like about my job?” Then she laughed and told me about her interest in fashion design. But she did see union work as something she really liked about her work at the University. Her job was not fun, fulfilling, or empowering, but her union work was.

> Labor Chorus continued from page 2
The Labor Chorus will meet on eight Wednesdays during the Fall semesters from 4:15-5:45. Our first gathering will be in Campus Center 174-176 on September 28th. The musical coordinator/conductor will be Anne Louise White, and the administrative coordinator is UMass staff member and SEIU Chapter Board member Sandy Mandel.

For the past nine years, Anne Louise White has directed choruses and led classes in vocal technique, harmony singing and performance skills. For five years she performed as a member of the nationally acclaimed band Trapezoid. A skilled vocalist, Anne’s work can be heard on recordings by John McCutcheon, Sally Rodgers, and Si Kahn, as well as on her own solo recordings. In addition, Anne founded and has served as choral director for the Leverett Community Chorus from 2002 to the present.