

Rats invade York College

By SHOMIAL AHMAD

It is not uncommon to see a rodent scurrying around inside a CUNY building. But at York College this semester, when rats announced their presence in a big way, faculty and staff took action. Rats overturned plants, invaded a candy box in the office of a faculty member who was on sabbatical and deposited droppings inside desk drawers and on cubicle floors, according to faculty and staff accounts. Nighttime security guards even reported startled rats running across the guards' feet. So pervasive were such occurrences that the college's Faculty Caucus created an Excel spreadsheet titled "Ratpocalypse 2," documenting the incidents reported.

"You name an office, you name a location, generally [they're] there," Scott Sheidlower, PSC chapter chair at York College, said of the rats in an interview with *Clarion*. "This is a you-gotta-do-something situation – end of story."

Sheidlower did do something. He, along with representatives of AFSCME's District Council 37 and cross-campus PSC chapters for HEOs and CLTs, met with York College President Marcia V. Keizs in a March 10 labor-management meeting at which, according to Sheidlower, the administration took "full responsibility" for addressing the rat problem. A couple weeks earlier on February 23, the college's Faculty Caucus unanimously passed a resolution declaring the campus a "non-functional teaching environ-

Campus called 'non-functional'

ment," citing "rodent, squirrel and insect infestations," unhygienic restrooms and dirty classrooms. After a tour of the campus on March 2, the union's health and safety watchdogs described the situation at the college as "out of control" and "extremely unhealthy and dangerous." The York College administration has since devised a draft response plan for addressing the vermin problem and unsanitary conditions at the school.

PROBLEMS CUNY-WIDE

"The infestation at York is completely unacceptable; the health of our members and of our students is put at risk," said PSC Treasurer Sharon Persinger. "Students who

have to subject themselves to something so disgusting as an invasion of rats in order to get an education get the message that their work isn't respected."

The Jamaica, Queens, campus isn't the only CUNY college dealing with rodents and other urgent health and safety concerns. In March, City health inspectors shut down Brooklyn College's Boylan Hall cafeteria for two days after finding "roaches, mice and filth flies," according to the *New York Post*. Union officials also note that extensive mice droppings were found in the North Hall at John Jay College earlier in the semester. The presence of such pests poses public health risks; they often carry diseases and spread harmful

bacteria that can result in human ailments ranging from rashes to infections affecting the respiratory system, according to information on the Environmental Protection Agency's website (epa.gov).

The PSC's health and safety watchdogs say ongoing pest-control problems on CUNY campuses point to a reactive – rather than proactive –

approach taken by administrators to addressing these issues.

"Pest control can't be done on an as-needed basis," Joan Greenbaum, PSC Health and Safety Watchdog co-chair, told *Clarion*. A few years ago, Greenbaum says, officials from CUNY's Office of Environmental Health and Safety assured the union's health and safety monitors that there was an "integrated pest management" system in place, CUNY-wide. Such a system, Greenbaum says, should consist of measures taken routinely (monthly or bi-monthly), under the supervision of campus facilities officials, using products that are not harmful to

people. In light of the emergency situation at York College, she says, it doesn't seem that an integrated plan is in place.

A CUNY spokesperson contacted for this story said each campus manages its own pest-control program. York College officials say the "appearance of rodents in some buildings" is probably due to recent construction on and near campus that seems to have disturbed nearby colonies of rats and mice. "The college has acted swiftly to address the health and safety concerns by increasing our efforts to place traps in highlighted areas, to seal openings, place traps around the perimeter of buildings and implement reporting and cleaning protocols," reads a statement issued by the college.

The administration also shared a March 22 draft response plan with the college's Faculty Caucus that includes canceling the contract with the college's current pest-control service and hiring a new one, in addition to monitoring bathroom cleaning and conducting deep cleaning of classrooms during breaks, among other things. The Faculty Caucus is currently reviewing the plan.

LONG-STANDING ISSUES

Bill Ashton, leader of York College's Faculty Caucus, says there have been issues with rodents and dirty bathrooms at the college for years. It's only now that the situation has gone further out of control and faculty and staff have organized around the issue that administration is taking action. "What you see [at York College] is a long-growing problem and a long-growing frustration that took years to develop," Ashton told *Clarion*.

Right before the spring semester began, Ashton began to hear many complaints about pests on the campus, and started documenting new and ongoing problems.

The recurrent sound of tiny, scampering feet in the library ceiling led staff to give a name – "Skippy" – to the squirrel who occupied the space above their heads. The stench of dead rodents that were not immediately removed filled the air in certain offices. Sewer flies routinely invaded a basement-level women's bathroom.

Faculty reported mice running through classrooms, interrupting their classes. The stress of working in such an infested environment showed on the faces of staff, a faculty member reported.

MONITORING PROGRESS

The PSC, the Faculty Caucus and other unions on the campus will continue to press administration to implement ongoing procedures for preventing such problems in the future, Sheidlower said, so that the York campus is conducive to learning. "I'm happy that things are moving," Sheidlower said. "I plan to keep working with other stewards; this is a college-wide issue."

Ashton and Sheidlower spoke to *Clarion* as funding for CUNY was being debated in the state legislature. "If anybody from the State of New York had to see the conditions that our students have to learn in, they would be disgusted," Ashton said.



NYSUT honors PSC members with highest awards

By SHOMIAL AHMAD

Two PSC union activists were honored on April 8 at the New York State United Teachers (NYSUT) annual Representative Assembly, which took place in Rochester. Cecelia McCall, who served as PSC secretary and legislative director for six years, was recognized with the The Sandy Feldman Outstanding Leadership Award, "Not for Ourselves Alone," named for the late United Federation of Teachers (UFT) and American Federation of Teachers (AFT) president. NYSUT leaders praised McCall for "expanding opportunities for all."

PSC member Jasmin Smith, who teaches English as a second language and language immersion at LaGuardia Community College, was named as one of two Higher Education Members of the Year.

DECADES OF ACTIVISM

The labor and faculty activism of McCall, an English professor who joined the Baruch College faculty in 1969 and retired in 2007, has spanned decades. She's fought to ex-



DA member Cecelia McCall

pand CUNY's funding, pressed the administration to exercise affirmative action in hiring and organized PSC's grassroots lobbying efforts.

McCall's social justice activism began in the civil rights movement, and she continues to fight for ra-

cial equality and gender equity. The first big protest she took part in, she told NYSUT, was called to demand that the building trades in New York be made to hire black men. In a 2006 interview in *Clarion's* summer issue, McCall talked about what she planned to do after she retired from CUNY.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

"The struggle is everywhere, you just change your relationship to it," McCall told *Clarion*. "I'm going to find one good activity, and I'll concentrate on that." She appears to have found a few. McCall is active in the PSC Retirees Chapter, where she serves on the chapter's executive committee, and in the union's Delegate Assembly, often taking part in PSC actions and protests.

Smith served as a shop steward for the Union of Clerical, Administrative and Technical Staff (UCATS) at New York University prior to coming to LaGuardia Community College; she told NYSUT that she became a union rep after she sought help from her

union for a payroll issue. As a union activist, Smith testified before the National Labor Relations Board on behalf of coworkers, led a grievance regarding a tax withholding issue and encouraged member involvement among her coworkers.

"Every working person deserves to have a voice," Smith told *Clarion*. "I became involved in union activities because I wanted to find my own voice and also help other regular working people find their own."

"One of the things that has driven me [to be] active in the union, and also drove me to go into the education field is a desire to make a difference," Smith, who teaches in the CUNY Language Immersion Program (CLIP), told NYSUT. "[T]aking an active interest in another person can really transform them."

Smith appears in this video by NYSUT: <http://tinyurl.com/JasminSmith>.

NYSUT offers a tribute to McCall in this video: <http://tinyurl.com/CeceliaMcCall>.

'Every working person deserves to have a voice.'