

LAWCHA Session at the 2015 AHA: “From the Frontlines with New York Labor: What Is Working?”

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Historians and activists gathered at the Murphy Institute on Friday, January 2nd for a LAWCHA event: “From the Frontlines with New York Labor: What Is Working?” CUNY professor [Josh Freeman](#) chaired a lively discussion featuring three organizers who suggested creative solutions to some of the serious challenges labor faces.

[Ed Ott](#), for many years the director of the New York City Labor Council, argued that there is no single way to organize. He highlighted creative initiatives such as small-scale workers’ centers and the [Taxi Workers Alliance](#). Although the rate of union density in New York City remains relatively high, there are still challenges: the disconnect between the labor movement and the city’s working class; the threat of court cases undermining public sector unionism; and the general disarray of the Left.

One in nine private sector workers in the city work in retail. [Sasha Hammad](#), director of the [Retail Action Project](#) (RAP) a membership organization that began as a union-sponsored community campaign, described efforts to build a base across multiple chain stores such as [Zara](#). RAP has focused on issues of pay and scheduling, but has to contend with high turnover among retail workers, and the fact that because they are not a union they do not have rights to collective bargaining.

[Bob Master](#), a co-chair of the [Working Families Party](#) and a leader of the Communications Workers of America characterized the current moment as one of experimentation. Supported by SEIU, [The Fight for \\$15](#) campaign is gaining traction by connecting to a broader discussion about economic inequality. Organized workers can win pay increases, but without a union it is difficult to insure workplace control. Likewise, without political power, it is difficult to insure compliance with federal labor laws, as [Cablevision workers discovered](#) when their boss, James Dolan, refused to recognize their right to unionize.

While new initiatives are bringing workers into the labor movement through community-

based organizing, maintaining and expanding basic labor rights such as collective bargaining remains a challenge. Forms of organizing are changing, but key goals are enduring. As RAP explains: “What we’re asking for is simple: dignity, respect, and enough hours to support ourselves.”

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