

## RETIREE

## news &amp; views



A PUBLICATION OF LOCAL 237 RETIREE DIVISION • VOL. 14 NO. 4 • APRIL 2009

## Retirees Set Legislative Priorities for 2009

Organizations representing older Americans have been meeting in New York and across the nation to draw up legislative priorities under the new Obama administration. Health care reform and preserving Social Security remain at the top of the list, but there are many other issues as well that have taken on more urgency amid the nation's financial crisis, which deals the harshest blow to seniors, many living on low and fixed incomes, who face higher food, home energy, and health care costs.

Retiree and health care advocates were encouraged by President Obama's remarks to a joint session of Congress on the budget February 24: "Health care reform cannot wait, it must not wait, and it will not wait another year." He argued at his Fiscal Responsibility Summit February 23 that reorganization of the health care system is vital to restoration of the nation's economic health.

At the White House Health Care Summit March 5, the president affirmed his commitment to reform the country's health care system to both cover everyone and control health costs in the first year of his presidency. Based on the principle that all Americans should have affordable health care, Obama's budget includes a \$634 bil-

lion "down payment" on health care reform over ten years.

The Alliance for Retired Americans, representing 7.5 million retired union members and seniors in community-based organizations, says that the conversation about health care reform must include meaningful measures that address the growing needs of the nation's seniors. The ARA, which is holding its 2009 legislative conference June 15-18, calls for legislation that will:

- Allow Medicare to negotiate volume discounts with drug manufacturers (**Medicare Prescription Drug Savings and Choice Act of 2009, S.330 and H.R. 684**, introduced by Reps. Jan Schakowsky and Marion Berry and Senator Richard Durbin);
- Create a national Part D plan administered by Medicare (also **S.330 and H.R. 684**);
- Close the "doughnut hole," or gap, in Medicare Part D coverage, when beneficiaries whose drug costs exceed a certain amount each year pay 100 percent of the cost, while continuing to pay premiums (**Medicare Prescription Drug Gap Reduction Act of 2009, S. 266**);
- Provide early retirees age 55-64 the option to purchase Medicare coverage;
- **Repeal the 2010 Medicare Privatiza-**

**tion Project** provision of the Medicare Prescription Drug, Improvement, and Modernization Act of 2003, which requires Medicare to compete with private, subsidized, Medicare Advantage plans in up to six areas in 2010. This would likely lead to the erosion of Medicare as healthier beneficiaries enroll in the MAs, leaving sicker, low-income recipients in traditional Medicare;

- Stop the overpayments to private Medicare Advantage insurance companies. (**A victory:** Obama's budget slashes overpayments to Medicare Advantage plans, which will save \$176 billion over the next ten years);
- Include comprehensive long-term care and support services. Specifically, the **CLASS Act, the Community Living Assistance Services and Supports Act of 2009, S. 697 and H.R. 1721**, introduced by Senator Edward Kennedy, would create a national insurance program for adults who become functionally disabled. The CLASS Act would be financed by a voluntary payroll withholding (no more than \$30 a month) placed in a fund to be managed by the Department of Health and Human Services.

The ARA **opposes taxing employee benefits.**

Other issues on retirees' legislative agenda include:

- Home energy costs;
- **Older Americans Act**, which authorizes and funds the Administration on Aging and all of its programs, including Means on Wheels, senior centers, senior transportation, caregiver support programs, housing assistance, and in-home services for frail elderly. Funding for OAA and its programs has not kept up with inflation, and with the significantly increased demand for services due to the economy, the ARA is asking Congress for at least a 12 percent increase in funding;
- Affordable housing for low-income seniors, the **Section 202 Supportive Housing for the Elderly** program;
- **Employee Free Choice Act**, which would make it easier for workers to organize. Union retirees are far more likely to have pensions and health benefits than nonunion.

(New York Legislative priorities will appear in a future issue of Retiree News & Views.)

### A Victory for Fairer Taxation

The budget passed by the New York State Legislature to close the state's \$15 billion deficit March 29 includes a tax hike for those earning more than \$300,000, with a further increase for those earning more than \$500,000. It is expected to raise roughly \$4 billion. It will sunset in three years.

The Fair Share Plan proposal championed by the Working Families Party and many unions, community groups, and senior organizations called for a tax on incomes over \$250,000. Governor Paterson initially opposed any increase for wealthy New Yorkers, proposing to close the budget gap primarily through layoffs and billions of dollars in cuts from health care and education, as well as other programs that would disproportionately harm New York's working families and retirees. The budget that passed, although not as strong as it could have been, will avert many of the most painful cuts. What is needed in the long run, says the New York State AFL-CIO, is a restructuring of the personal income tax so that the wealthiest New Yorkers will pay more permanently.

**WHO WOULD BE AFFECTED?**  
Across New York State, **only the wealthiest 3.2%** of tax filers would have been affected by the Fair Share Plan.



This year, union contract negotiations will take place in the midst the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression and a multibillion dollar shortfall in the city budget. The city is exploiting the crisis to try to extract pension and health benefit concessions that they have been demanding for years, under threat of layoffs of thousands of workers.

The Bloomberg administration is demanding that unions support state legislation to create a new, inferior, Tier V pension system for new hires, and agree to a health benefits program that would require employees to pay 10 percent of their health premiums. He is threatening layoffs if these goals are not achieved.

A memo issued by the city budget director instructing city agencies to produce plans for additional cuts refers to "headcount reductions." Headcounts? Such terms obscure the fact that they are talking about people, men and women with families, and that "headcount reductions" means cuts in important services for the public.

I was recently interviewed about the impact of the city's financial crisis on labor and working families on WABC-TV's *Like It Is*, hosted by award-winning journalist Gil Noble. I appeared with



### A Message from the President

Roger Toussaint, president of Transport Workers Union Local 100. I told Mr. Noble that city officials are holding us hostage over health benefits and pensions. I said the labor leaders I am working with are not going to respond to this kind of pressure.

City officials are demanding that workers and retirees sacrifice disproportionately to solve a problem they did not create. Our members cannot afford to pay 10 percent of their health premiums. Once you start that, you'll never catch up. Costs for everything are going up. Nobody gets 15 percent annual pay increases, and that's the rate at which health costs are rising. We should be working to lower the premiums through preventive measures, such as encouraging healthy lifestyles. When health costs go up, people tend to delay going to the doctor until there is an emergency, which is not only bad for their health, but more costly

in the long run.

As for the pension plan the city is proposing—not a new proposal—that wouldn't produce savings for the city for years. The city needs money now.

Not only is the proposal shortsighted, but it promotes the false stereotype of overpaid municipal workers retiring early with extravagant pensions and benefits. Unions fought for years for a secure, comfortable retirement for their members, but they are hardly living a life of luxury.

The Mayor's plan goes in the opposite direction of President Obama's stimulus plan. The president's plan is about creating jobs, making good, affordable health care available to all, putting money in the pockets of working middle class families so they can buy goods and help restore the economy. His plan will grow the middle class, not destroy it.

We are well aware of the financial crisis. After all, workers and retirees and their families are hit the hardest. We are eager to work with the Mayor to put the city back on the road to recovery, as we have in the past. But we will insist on a plan that balances financial responsibility with workers' rights, one in which wealthy New Yorkers and big businesses pay their fair share.

April is Alcoholism Awareness Month, so I thought I would take this opportunity to talk about a subject many people find it difficult to discuss.

People think of alcohol abuse as the problem of someone else's family, of someone else's friend. But alcohol abuse is more widespread than many of us like to admit. It affects people of all ages. I know it's affected my extended family, and it likely has affected many of you. The National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence estimates that 18 million Americans have alcohol problems, and more than half of all adults have a family history of alcoholism or problem drinking.



### Alcohol Awareness Month

By Nancy B. True  
Director, Retiree Division

Retirees drink for different reasons—health concerns, financial worries, boredom after retirement, loneliness, the death of friends and loved ones. These retirees may be helped by family and friends, or by professional counseling.

There are other factors in alcohol abuse, as well. Alcohol affects people differently as they age. The government's National Institute on Aging says that the same amount of alcohol can have a greater effect on an older person than on someone younger. Over time, someone whose drinking habits haven't changed and never caused a problem before may find he or she has a problem now.

As people age, many begin to need more medication to stay healthy. Many prescription, over-the-counter, and herbal remedies can be dangerous or even deadly when mixed with alcohol.

For example, drinking alcohol while taking sleeping pills, pain pills, or anxiety or depression medicine can be very dangerous. Even a beer or a glass of wine might trigger bigger health problems. It's important to ask your doctor or pharmacist about your medication, and to read the labels on all your medicines.

If you feel that you or someone you know may have a drinking problem, help is available. Resources include:

- New York State has one of the largest programs in the nation, led by the New York State Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services. Call the HOPEline, 1-877-8-HOPENY, 24 hours a day.
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information (NCADI), 1-800-729-6686, [www.csat.samhsa.gov](http://www.csat.samhsa.gov).
- Al-Anon, for people whose loved ones have an alcohol problem. Look in your local phone book, or call 1-888-425-2666 (toll free)

And don't hesitate to talk to one of the social workers on the Retiree Division staff, 212-807-0555.

#### RETIREE NEWS & VIEWS

Published monthly, except for July/August combined, by the Retiree Division of Local 237, International Brotherhood of Teamsters (USPS 013028) Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY. Postmaster: Send address changes to Retiree News & Views, 216 West 14 St., NY, NY 10011 • 212-807-0555 • [retirees@local237.org](mailto:retirees@local237.org) • [www.local237.org](http://www.local237.org)

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# Dabney Montgomery

## A NATIONAL HERO

One day in March, Retiree Division Deputy Director Winston George saw Dabney Montgomery, a retired housing assistant at the New York City Housing Authority, in the reception area of the Retiree Division, and he struck up a conversation. During their discussion, Montgomery revealed that he had served in the ground crew of the

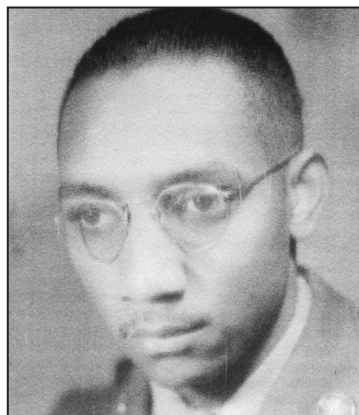
*Tuskegee Airmen, the famed all-black air force fighters during World War II, and, later, was a body guard for Martin Luther King during the historic 1965 voting rights march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama.*

A little more than a week after this chance meeting, Montgomery returned to the office for an interview, accompanied by his wife, Amelia. Following are excerpts of what Montgomery said about the Tuskegee Airmen. Excerpts of his recollections of the Selma to Montgomery march will appear in a future issue.

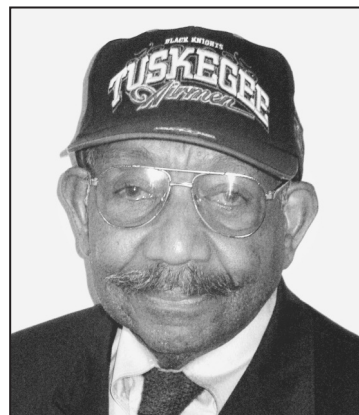
I was born in 1923 in Selma, Alabama... I was inducted into the armed forces in 1943. After basic training in Biloxi, Mississippi, I went for special training, a crash course in the mechanics of army supplies, at Camp Lee, Virginia. They sent three of us to the Army Air Corps in Oscoda, Michigan. That was the beginning of the Tuskegee Experiment. [The Tuskegee Army Air Field in Tuskegee, Alabama, is where the air pilots were trained, but many other personnel were trained elsewhere.]

When we got to Oscoda, they were already packing to leave. "Wow, we're going overseas already," we said. We got to go home for three days. In those days there were furloughs so soldiers could go home and visit their families before being shipped overseas.

One of the odd experiences I had was eating in the dining car on the train in Alabama. There was a long line, and one of the agents came and took me to the front of the line. I thought, "Ah, VIP treatment." He sat me down at a table, and he reached his arm up and pulled down a black curtain. I was surrounded by a black curtain. I couldn't see anything and no one could see me. It was because I was black, and the law said that



Dabney Montgomery as a 19-year-old serviceman, and today, at age 85



blacks had to be separated, segregated. That was a nice welcome back to Alabama!

But I was used to it. I was raised in a segregated society, so I had seen it before.

I was assigned to the 1051st [Quartermaster Trucking] Company of the 96th Air Service group. My company's duty was supplies. We supplied the Tuskegee Experiment with food and clothing. That was a major contribution; without food and clothing, you can't fight a war.

I use the word "experiment" because the theory was, because of the color of our skin, we could not do the job. There was a theory from the 1920s that the arteries in the brain of black men were smaller than the arteries in the brains of white men, so our brain could not accept sharp curves and dives that were needed to fly a fighter plane. Tuskegee was an "experiment" to see if young black men could actually fly a plane.

You may have heard the story of Mrs. [Eleanor] Roosevelt. She went to Tuskegee and actually asked for a black pilot to fly her, in 1941. A black pilot took her up, flew her around, and landed the plane. She went back to Washington and told her husband, President Roosevelt, and asked him to use his influence to give these young black men a chance to fly a fighter plane. So he used his influence as commander-in-chief to do that.

When we flew to southern Italy, the 99th [Pursuit] Squadron had already gone to northern Africa. The 99th was pulled out of northern Africa to join us. At first we were given meager assignments, to attack convoys and ground objects, never assignments to support the bombers. However, the Air Force started losing B-17 bombers by the dozen—and I mean by the dozen. Someone in the higher echelons said, "We

were called the Red Tails. One time we met a group of pilots who had been saved by the Red Tails. They came over to thank the pilots for saving their lives and they asked who the Red Tails were. When we said it was us, they were surprised. "You're black!" they said. When the armed forces were given their first orders to bomb Berlin, the pilots requested that the Red Tails escort them. What a change.

A few years ago, I was wearing this cap [pointing to his Tuskegee Airman cap], walking down Wall Street, and a white guy wearing a suit with a vest, carrying a briefcase, came over to me. He asked me if I was a Tuskegee Airman. I said yes, and he grabbed me. He said, "You saved my father! My father has told me many stories about how the pilots of the Tuskegee Experiment saved his life."

Because of the impact that these pilots had, President Truman gave an executive order that there will be only one army, not a black army and a white army. That was the first major step toward integration in this country. I was so happy to be part of it, although I was only 19 and didn't really understand the full impact.

Despite the superior record of the Tuskegee Airmen, when they returned to the United States, they faced racism and bigotry—including exclusion from victory celebrations. On March 30, 2007, the Tuskegee Airmen were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. Of the original 4,000, they were able to find 330 still alive. "So 61 years after the fact, we were recognized," said Montgomery.

Then, Barack Obama invited the Airmen to his inauguration, where they were honored at a special Inauguration Breakfast. Montgomery and his wife went, and were photographed and interviewed by the Japanese press. During the inauguration, the Tuskegee Airmen sat with members of Congress. Said Montgomery, "Never did I think I would live to see a black man elected president."



Congressional Medal of Honor awarded to the Tuskegee Airmen in 2007

## Credit Card Reforms

Amid the economic crisis, credit card companies are making the situation worse for consumers, raising interest rates, imposing new maintenance fees, raising minimum payments, increasing penalty fees for late payments and overlimit charges, reducing credit lines, and other measures.

Even credit cardholders who are diligent can find themselves hit with these charges. For example, it can be easy to miss a payment, because some card companies have been shortening grace periods, while others use "floating due dates" and have due dates that fall on holidays or weekends, when payments aren't processed. And it's not just the due date you need to pay attention to; you need to know what time on that date the payment is due.

Congress has passed new regulations to protect consumers, *but they won't go into effect until July 2010*. The regulations don't deal with every injustice, but some of the things they will do are:

- allow credit card companies to raise interest rates only on new credit cards and future purchases or advances, rather than on current balances;
- prohibit monthly maintenance fees;
- require companies to give enough time for payments or forego the late fee;
- forbid issuers from setting a cut-off time earlier than 5 p.m. for receiving a payment
- require companies to consider on time payments received the day after a due date when payments are not processed;
- restrict allocating all payments to balances with lower interest rates when a borrower has balances with different rates.

## John Toumbacaris, Division Charter Member, Dies

John Toumbacaris, a charter member of the Retiree Division who for years chaired the division's Education Committee and was active with the Activities Committee, died April 6 after a long illness.

Toumbacaris went to work for NYCHA as a housing assistant at Queensbridge Houses in 1952, the year Local 237 was founded, and retired in 1977 as a housing manager.

When the Retiree Division was started in 1980, Toumbacaris and his wife, Louise, responded to the call, and the two of them were active in Retiree Division programs until the past year or so. Toumbacaris always called people who were unable to participate activities due to illness or other problems, and at committee meetings, he circulated get-well, thinking-of-you, and condolence cards.

Toumbacaris often spoke about his "three families": his nuclear family, his union family, and his church family. In a Local 237 Oral History Project interview in 1999, Toumbacaris said, "The union and the people I've met made everything worthwhile."

Funeral services were held in North Carolina. There will be a memorial service in New York in the future.



John and Louise Toumbacaris at Founders Day a few years ago

Gary Schlichter

## Retiree Personal Notes

A happy birthday toast to **Pauline Rosenbaum** who reached 90 on March 22 . . . Congratulations to retired HPO **Joseph Hayes** on the birth March 22 of his ninth grandchild, Winston Hayes, born to Joseph Hayes, Jr. and his wife, Wanda, of Philadelphia . . . Happy anniversary to **John E. Emery**, retired director of warehousing, Social Services Division, BKL, and his wife, Alice, who are celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary April 18 with their children, 10 grandchildren, and three great-grandchildren.

\* \* \*

Deepest sympathy to retired Local 237 Secretary-Treasurer **Manny Cuebas** and family on the passing of his mother, Isidra Cuebas, on March 10 . . . Condolences to the family of retired HPO **Vaughn Banks**, who passed away on March 13 . . . Condolences also to the family of **Angel Moya**, retired Taxi & Limousine Commission Inspector, who died April 1.

*If you would like to share a new development or special event in your life in the Retiree Personal Notes column, call, mail, or e-mail the information to Retiree News & Views, Teamsters Local 237, 216 W. 14 St., New York, NY 10011; 212-807-0555; retirees@local237.org.*

**SAVE THE DATE**

**FRIDAY, JUNE 5**

**Founders Day**  
8:30 a.m. - 2 p.m.  
New York Hilton

**SUNDAY, JUNE 14**

**Puerto Rican Day Parade**  
March with the Teamsters  
watch for information



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