

Vocational Instructor

Local 4200A ~ AFT, AFTCT, & AFL-CIO



**"It Pays
To Be Taught
By a Vo-Tech
Teacher"**

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An Injury to One

By Ed Leavy, SVFT President

"An injury to one is an injury to all" is a slogan that strikes to the heart of the labor movement. We stand together when any of our colleagues is mistreated, both because we may be next and because it is the right thing to do. The slogan becomes more poignant when we are talking about a physical injury, not a metaphoric one. We had such an incident this past month when a carpentry teacher at Vinal was seriously injured in an accident with a machine.

It is good to report that Jeff Miller, the teacher, is in good spirits and recovering well. Because Jeff has been full-time for just a couple of months, he is ineligible for the sick bank. We are running a PL donation request for him. Workers' Comp only covers him for 44% of his time because he has not been with the system for very long, so the PL donations will have to cover the other five days out of nine. As an aside, the next time we bash the system and the Department of Education – and we all do sometimes – it's important to remember that there is nothing in the contract about PL donations; we make a request to Director of HR Karen Zuboff, and she unfailingly gives us permission. In my time as an officer, many people have been saved from bankruptcy because they continued to receive a paycheck throughout their recovery process. The member can concentrate on getting better without the financial pressure of being without a paycheck. The real reason the PL donations work, however, is so many of our members donate their time, often to people they have never met. I have talked to other union presidents who don't have the tradition of PL donations, and they assure me it would be a failure in their local – no one would give up a PL day, much less to someone he or she doesn't know. That's not the values of the SVFT membership; our members sacrifice a little, so our union brother doesn't lose a lot. We've been collecting the donations since we received approval, and it is inspiring to see.

The injury is also a reminder that because we negotiate our healthcare, no one will go bankrupt for medical bills either. The road ahead for Jeff is long, but our healthcare will cover most of the costs. It stinks when we go without a raise; prices go up, but our salary stays the same. It is discouraging, and it does affect our lives. Unless someone was within 1% of paying the bills, however, a 2%-3% raise is not life-changing, however. Good medical insurance does change lives. Over half a million people a year go bankrupt from medical bills, and most of them have insurance. Our medical insurance is not a gift; it doesn't come with the job. It comes with collective bargaining through SEBAC, and we have made sacrifices in pay to maintain quality health insurance. Remember that the next time a politician claims that State workers are "privileged," and we need to discontinue SEBAC after 2027. What they are really saying is that they are willing to condemn workers who are sick or injured to financial ruin. We see the real-world consequences too often to let that happen without a fight.

It seems every couple of years a school has a black cloud parked overhead. A few years ago, it was Bullard-Havens; for the last two years Wilcox seemed to have more than its share of problems. Vinal seems to be in that situation this year. The recent injury is the most horrific problem that arose, but it's not alone. The Middletown area has seen a decrease in its student-age population, and that has affected Vinal's recruitment. Shops have been closed or downsized; a new plan seems to exist, but the details are fuzzy. Many teachers live in a constant state of anxiety – will they be moved because of a new direction for the school? Last year, a student fight left teachers hurt, and teachers were concerned about the safety of their students and themselves. The staff, however, refuses to accept being victims. They publicly advocated for an SRO; the administration and the Superintendent listened, and the SRO has not only decreased some of the egregious safety issues but was indispensable when Jeff got hurt. They are taking care of each other through these difficult times. They donated PL days to Jeff, they took donations, and they made sure Jeff knows he's not alone. It's what we are about; no one is alone in a union. Please seek out your reps if you can donate a PL day. When issues arise in your building, stand together and be unafraid to address them. We can't always stop bad things from happening, but we can get through them together.

Pensions Are Not the Problem

Alisha Blake

We face a crisis in education: we are recruiting and retaining too few teachers. Only 30% of teachers stay for ten years, the time required to vest in the Teachers' Retirement System. Why is this happening? There are many reasons. The ever-increasing demands on the time and energy of teachers certainly is a factor. So is the low comparative salary. The average starting salary in Connecticut for a teacher with a masters' degree in education is \$45,000, far less than that of their classmates who got their masters' in finance, engineering, or healthcare. An estimated 1 in 6 teachers work second jobs. Clearly, the requirements of the job and the salary it receives too often drive young people who are already crushed under the weight of student loan debt to search for a different career.

The Yankee Institute recently released a "study" that determined the reason was actually something quite different: new teachers leave the profession because they do not want a defined benefit pension. Their solution to the lack of new teachers, arrived at after a litany of misleading information and non-factual conjecture, was the Yankee Institute's constant talking point: eliminate the defined benefit pension and put everyone into 401(k) style defined contribution plans. The idea is ludicrous on its face and becomes more so once examined.

Yankee Institute President Carol Platt Liebau was quoted saying "Connecticut's teacher pension system needs to be reformed in order to meet today's young workforce and save taxpayers money." Exactly what kind of reform does she have in mind? Closing the pension system to new hires and pushing new teachers into defined contribution plans?

Recent studies have shown increased difficulties in recruiting and retaining qualified teachers after closing pension plans to new hires. States that switched from a defined benefit pension plan to a defined contribution plan did not address existing pension underfunding as promised. Instead, costs for these states increased after closing the pension plan. The experience of the states outlined in this study show that changing benefits for new hires does not solve an existing funding shortfall, and that changes in plan design result in greater retirement insecurity for employees.

Stop trying to sell risky defined contribution plans as the better choice when we all know that it isn't factual. What research does prove is that 401(k) style plans cost an average of 48% more to run than defined benefit pensions. What research does prove is that unlike pensions, investments in 401(k) style plans are not pooled together, leaving retirees more vulnerable to economic downturns like the one we saw in 2008 and could very well see in the future.

What research does prove is that with defined contribution plans, retirees run the risk of outliving their savings. This is not the true retirement security our teachers deserve after spending their careers devoted to teaching our children.

Unfortunately, Connecticut has been left to catch up on decades of pension liability fueled by past administrations borrowing against Connecticut's pension funds rather than diligently making their payments. Responsible funding of pension plans is key to managing legacy costs associated with these plans. Connecticut's treasurer Sean Wooden has stated in response to the Yankee Institute's study, "I reject the idea that school choice is a quick-fix to our very real and complex teacher pension liability issue in Connecticut. The study, which was authored by a school choice advocate, draws broad conclusions from select data....The Connecticut teacher retirement restructuring approved earlier this year was an important step in creating a more transparent picture of the true unfunded long-term liabilities and a realistic plan to address them."

To say that work isn't being done to find a more sustainable answer to our Teachers' Retirement System is simply untrue. We need to stop making excuses to avoid providing the teachers who play a pivotal role in our children's young lives with the benefits and the respect that they have earned and deserve. Cutting their benefits as a solution to a problem should never even be considered an option. But in order to truly do what's best for our teachers and for the children and the communities they serve, we need to do much more to encourage young teachers to stay in the profession. We need to raise salaries, improve working conditions, and ensure that teachers have the necessary resources available in order to provide the best learning environments for their students. Strengthening their defined benefit plan is one small piece of how we do that.

Ms. Blake is the Campaign Coordinator for the CT Coalition for Retirement Security. This article ran as an op-ed in the Hartford Courant and the CT Mirror. The article shows how we must fight ludicrous, bad-faith argument that the State must break the promises made to us in our pension.



October's Labor-Management Meeting

The first labor-management of the years was held at Central Office on October 22. CTECS management was represented by Superintendent Jeff Wibbey, Assistant Superintendent Dr. Nikitoula Menounos, Human Resource Specialist Rafael Palacio, and Director of Human Resources for the DoE Karen Zuboff. The SVFT was represented by Prince Director of Guidance and Admissions Lisa Higgins, Windham Social Studies Teacher Angela Ocasio, Platt IST DH Tom Viola, Paul Angelucci, Bob Riccitelli, and Greg Beyer. The following topics were discussed:

- Teacher Attendance and follow-up meetings with after three incidents: Paul asked about differences around the system. The Superintendent said the approach is trying to be humane and judicious. The district wants consistency and will hold principals accountable for following procedures.
- The new individual PD policy timelines conflict with our contract. Greg presented a suggested Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that would work for our members and attempt not to conflict with needs of DAS. CO will review and respond.
- The prohibition of certified teachers being able to apply for a position which they are not currently teaching, mostly affecting ISS/SAIL teachers. BR: There have been members told they cannot apply for jobs while others have been allowed to. Another MOU was presented for consideration and will be reviewed.
- What is the plan for Electronics in the system? Current teachers in the program are concerned, for obvious reasons. Tom mentioned long history of success of Electronics programs and concerns of staff around the CTECS. The Superintendent said the plan is to bolster and improve the program. There may be some shops that are merged with Mechatronics. In schools with one of the shops but not both, keep successful programs as is and continue to evaluate employment opportunities for graduates as is the protocol for all trade programs. The system will be looking at Electronics and Mechatronics curricula for areas of overlap with the intent of certifying teachers in both.
- Is there a plan in place to deal with the prospective mass exodus of teachers, administrators, etc. in 2022? PA asked about possibility of incentivizing earlier announcements by SVFT members of planned retirements to speed refill process. JW is open to that discussion. He also mentioned new Director of Talent Management at CO to speed recruitment and align hiring and development of teachers. He wants to engage the union in how to recruit and attract talent going forward.

- The after-school program that has been run through Jobs for Justice - will that be discontinued? Many of our trade teachers taught in that program. Lisa mentioned success of program in the past. The Superintendent reiterated the success in some locations and noted concerns about afternoon and evening use of shops and challenges in implementation in some schools. He spoke of need for alternative pathways for some students to access our programs rather than the full 9-12 model which he would like to keep "pristine." He would like to explore afternoon and evening possibilities in grades 11 and 12 for students not initially accepted but who have improved in grades 9 & 10.

- Ella Grasso and the Electric Boat program - how exactly is that working? Paul noted concerns with adult learners accessing areas of Grasso that are meant for 9-12th grades only. The Superintendent agreed that should not be happening and mentioned a dedicated security staffer provided by EB. Our plan, he continued is to open a Precision Manufacturing shop of our own in that space and create a dedicated outbuilding for the EB program. Adult learners, he reiterated, are not supposed to be meandering about.

- Title IX coordinators – Paul asked, "What is the districts view for a Teacher vs Teacher or a Teacher vs Student complaint?" The Superintendent noted that it should be very clear in all buildings that our members should never conduct those investigations. They should be handled by administration.

- Concern with the late release of the evaluation and support plan. Bob noted that the plan is not available online. Dr. Menounos noted that the plan had been posted but somehow had been inadvertently removed from the website. It will be reposted ASAP. There was further discussion of the SLO/IAGD procedure reinforced the notion that SLOs should be developed collaboratively and that administrators should not be mandating them. However, standardized assessments should be used where available.

- Power school connectivity issues. Angela asked about new web hosting of PowerSchool/PowerTeacher and why it seems to be down so often. The district plan was to continue to host it on our own, but it could not be completed in time so is now being hosted by PowerSchool who is not the best at customer service. We hope to self-host in the future.

- Concern with Parent Square – Angela explained that teachers are being contacted by parents and students on their personal cell phones at any time. JW explained that this is not supposed to happen and that, like Go Guardian in the recent past, he will have those features disabled.

What's Happening in Wallingford?

- We held our first contract meeting on November 6th. We looked at proposals from the last negotiations that did not make it into the contract, and we discussed possible new proposals. We will be sending an email out soon asking for ideas for changes in the contract. A survey of proposals will be sent out in late February. We will begin bargaining the contract in the fall of 2020. Anyone interested in being on the committee should contact the office.
- After two years (!), we finally have a process for people who were not given an option to joint TRS because they substituted before becoming a regular teacher – even if it was only a week or so before their hiring became official. Our substitutes are automatically put in Tier 4 by the State; once they become regular employees, they should have a one-time irrevocable choice of retirements. For some of our members, this is an important issue; a person who taught 17 years under TRS in another district wants to remain in TRS to avoid vesting penalties.
- We are finding an unusual number of mistakes in paychecks; these range from putting people on the wrong step for promotions to keeping people on the new Tier 4S (for substitutes – it's a long story). If there's an issue, please call the office before calling payroll. We have developed relationships with the people there and can facilitate getting issues resolved. They are good people who work incredibly hard despite being down several people.
- AFT CT continues to push for the recruitment and retention of people of color. While all evidence points to the educational improvements students of color when they see themselves reflected in their teachers, Connecticut continues to have one of the lowest rates of minority teachers in the country. The SVFT has joined this effort. Anyone who is interested in taking part should call the office.



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SVFT Mission Statement

The SVFT is an organization of professional educators that promotes excellence through the mutual adherence to policies, documents, and procedures negotiated with the CTEC. We work to guarantee that the contract is followed and positive working conditions are maintained. This organization shall be to provide a safe and positive teaching environment for all by:

1. Maintaining the integrity of the contract, the Vocational Technical High School System, and the solidarity of the union
2. Ensuring all members are protected by the contract and equipped with the tools and knowledge necessary to make them successful
3. Protecting the jobs of our members and strengthening our system
4. Providing members opportunities to further their education and receive quality professional development
5. Responding quickly to the emerging changes to the workplace and technological challenges
6. Handling all interactions with fairness and integrity
7. Striving for productive, open communication between the SVFT leadership and our membership
8. Building and improving relationships with our union affiliates and local labor councils