May 28, 2024

To the editor:

Over the past year, Syracuse University workers have had much to celebrate. Last spring, graduate students voted to unionize and Adjuncts United secured a wage increase package. This spring, student food service and library workers voted to unionize. On June 3-4, clerical staff vote on whether to follow suit.

Meanwhile, questions about how the University will pay for increased wages and benefits now converge with the nearly universal complaint that parking at SU costs too much.

Who pays? In both cases, we do.

Last year, Staff United proposed a petition drive for changes in the parking fee structure. Under the auspices of the *Syracuse United alliance, Matt Huber and Margaret Butler reported the results to the University Senate in September, joined Senate meetings with the administration (Peter Sala and Joseph Carfi), and met further with Sala and Carfi.

Perhaps more than any other issue, parking costs have united workers on our campus. It turns out that higher parking fees take a big bite out of other hard-won advances. For example, the report to the Senate found:

Parking cost increases are out of step with so-called “inflation.” From 2022-23 to 2023-24, parking fees at Irving Garage went up 52% and at Manley lot, 28%—while overall SU salaries increased just 19%. In fact, Manley parking cost has risen 72% just since 2019.

Your raise can’t keep up with your parking fee. In 2023-24, higher parking costs are gobbling up 27% of the entire raise for the year. Say your salary goes up from $29,500 to $30,090—that’s a modest 2%—but your parking goes up from $350 to $475—that’s a 36% rise. Your “true raise” shrinks to only 1.56 %.

“Range pricing”—permit fees based on salary ranges—means those paid the least pay the most. That is, your parking cost goes down as your wages rise. Does this seem backward? Not so different from living in a food desert where your only grocery option is the wicked expensive corner store, when richer neighborhoods offer supermarkets with lower prices and more choices.

Anecdotally, staff, grad students, and faculty reported the lack of part-time passes for part-time faculty, a lack of sensitivity for obstacles facing those with disabilities or dealing with even temporary medical concerns, scarce and crowded shuttle service from distant lots forcing unsafe walking, burdensome extra commute time that hurts teaching, research, and family obligations—plus the constant threat of almighty sports parking bumping your spot.

So, are we in the flow of traffic here—how do regional sister campuses handle parking? Now, members of Syracuse United are researching just that question, with some surprising revelations. So far, we’ve looked at Cornell, Rutgers, three SUNY schools (ESF, Oswego, and Upstate), and the University of Rochester (25 locations including campus, hospitals and city sites). Parking plans at these peer campuses range from simple and free (SUNY/ESF and a few Rochester lots) to equal for all ($120 a year for any Oswego employee) to depending on your union affiliation (nine at Upstate plus other factors) to a percentage of your salary (.005 % for all at Rutgers) to lot location alone (still only $746 tops at Cornell) to more complicated schemes juggling many factors (Rochester).

As we look forward to the clerical staff’s elections next week, parking remains the universal issue that unites all University workers. We urge you to vote yes!

On behalf of Syracuse United,

Nancy Keefe Rhodes

*Find the data for this project on the Syracuse United website: https://www.syracuseunited.org/ as well as Syracuse United member organizations: SEIU 200United, Service Maintenance and Library Workers Service Employees International Union 200United, Staff United, Adjuncts

United, AAUP, Syracuse Graduate Employees United SEIU 200United. Nancy Keefe Rhodes is a part-time instructor in the College of Visual & Performing Arts and a member of Adjuncts United.

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