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Preview

Recent months have brought much positive news on the job front, but many contradictory developments as well. As the economy reached the mid-year mark in June, the U.S. Labor Department reported that the nation's unemployment rate had stayed at or below 5 percent for 15 consecutive months. Yet, contrary to many economists' predictions, consumer price inflation has so far shown no tendency to rise and remains at half the average inflation rate of the 1980s. The welcome tandem of low unemployment-low inflation moved Alan Greenspan, head of the Federal Reserve, to a rare celebratory pronouncement on June 10 that: "The current economic performance, with its combination of strong growth and low inflation, is as impressive as any I have witnessed in my near half-century of daily observation of the American economy."

However, for the average working person, more job growth has not yet translated into more wage growth. The wage (after adjustment for inflation) of the typical worker began to rise slowly after 1996, but it is still lower in 1998 than in 1989, the last pre-recession peak.ⁱ

post-Cold War demise of Long Island's large defense industry, led by Grumman and Republic, has resulted in a more fractured economy of innumerable small service, retail, and high-tech employers. While the official unemployment rate has been cut in half since 1992 and consumer income levels are above-average, this has only come about through unprecedented increases in moonlighting, temporary job-holding, income inequality, and out-migration of displaced workers. And surprisingly large numbers of people, particularly minorities and youth, have been bypassed by economic prosperity. For example, today less than one-fifth of New York City teenagers hold a job, fewer than in any other large city. And, while much of the growing minority population of Long Island is middle-income, surprisingly large concentrations are still poor, underemployed, and residentially segregated.

A growing number of observers have suggested that the loss of its own defense-related manufacturing base has left the Island's economy ever more dependent on the Manhattan financial sector, and thus vulnerable to its well-known volatility. Over 21 percent of employed Long Islanders -- a quarter of a million people -- today commute to jobs in the city. And those who don't often work for Island advertising firms, building contractors, computer companies, law firms, or others who draw a sizable share of their customers from downtown.

Both the city and Nassau-Suffolk have clearly become more dependent on both national and international forces. Global competition affects ever more companies and their employees, tourism has become a major industry, and the region is in the midst of a new era of high-volume immigration. Thus, any effort like ours to look closely at this metropolitan area must approach local issues with an international perspective.

In this first issue, immigration is the main subject of two articles. The first of these is Sharryn Kashmir's interview with Jennifer Gordon, founder of the pioneering immigrant organizing center, The Workplace Project. While New York's influx has drawn considerable media and scholarly attention, far less is known about the fast-growing immigrant population on the Island. Many are Central American refugees who have found work in an underground service economy of low-paid, unregulated, and often unsafe jobs. The interview reveals how a creative, flexible, and multifaceted approach to labor advocacy can sometimes succeed in organizing even those widely thought to be "unorganizable."

What effects has the new immigration been having on native-born minorities? This provocative question is the subject of a much-discussed new book, *Still the Promised City? African Americans and New Immigrants in Post-Industrial New York*, reviewed in this issue. In the period from 1970 to 1997, the foreign-born share of New York City's population leapt from barely one-fifth to over one-third. Author Roger Waldinger uses both extensive open-ended interviews and statistical analysis of census data to determine the relationships between this new immigration and the worsening trends in income inequality since the early seventies.

The current state of the labor market in which native- and foreign-born New Yorkers try to make a living today is appraised in “Regional Job Growth and Wage Trends through Mid-Year 1998.” We not only report the official statistical series published by federal and state government agencies, but we supplement their very limited metro-level information with our own analysis of the latest available Current Population Surveys. By examining the special March CPS, which each year captures a host of both demographic and labor market information on 50,000 households nationwide, we try to go far

mergers. Job security also was a key motivation behind the UAW strike that shut down nearly all of auto giant General Motors domestic production this summer. And New York City is now experiencing the most ambitious set of union recruiting drives since the successful campaign to organize municipal and hospital employees in the late 1960s. Bookstore clerks, limousine drivers, private school teachers, workfare parents, and even fashion models are among those engaged in major organizing efforts.

In "Long Island Labor: Constraints, Opportunities, and New Strategies," Marc Silver identifies important signs of vitality in new union leaders, growing cross-union cooperation and community involvement in recent efforts like the King Kullen supermarket strike. He outlines a number of economic and political barriers to organizing drives, and describes how infrequent and narrow news coverage of labor unions limits public awareness and support. And he suggests an array of promising strategies for labor and community activists to consider in future organizing efforts.

-- *The Editor*

NOTES

ⁱ Lawrence Mishel, Jared Bernstein, and John Schmitt, "Finally, Real Wage Gains," *EPI Issue Brief #127* (Washington, D.C.: Economic Policy Institute, July 1998).

ⁱⁱ Brooks Pierce, *Compensation Inequality*. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1998).