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# Retiree Organizer

A NEWSLETTER FOR NYSUT'S RETIREE LEADERS

## Cohen, Cormican honored as NYSUT 2017 Retirees of the Year

Stewart Cohen and Alma Cormican, who together represent nearly a century of dedicated labor activism, were honored as NYSUT's 2017 Retirees of the Year during the union's 45th annual Representative Assembly in New York City.

Cohen is a member of the United Federation of Teachers — Retired Teachers Chapter. Since retiring to Sarasota in 2003, Cohen has served as a UFT delegate to the Florida Alliance for Retired Americans, representing FLARA on the West Central Florida Federation of Labor, AFL-CIO and chairing its board of trustees. Cohen is also a regular participant in Sarasota and Manatee Democratic Party actions as a labor advocate.

In his pre-recorded remarks Cohen told delegates: "Being a union member means you are concerned about others, even those you do not know. Helping to bring social justice to those in need is in our union blood," he

said. "Remember to act locally, and the effect will be nationally."

Westchester Putnam Retirees, RC 15/16 member Alma Cormican epitomizes the qualities that make NYSUT a strong union. The past president and chief negotiator for the White Plains Teachers Association, Cormican remained a union activist after retiring in 1999, joining her retiree local's executive committee in 2004 and becoming its president in 2008. Cormican has edited her retiree local's award-winning newsletter since 2006; organized and run pre-retirement seminars for in-service teachers since 2009; and raised more than \$15,000 for local scholarships and the Westchester Putnam Retirees' REACT committee, which helps schools and children in need.

In her videotaped remarks to delegates, Cormican thanked NYSUT: "for always being our



Alma Cormican



Stewart Cohen

advocate. Things have certainly changed for the better over these years thanks to our state union. I am proud to have been a part of the struggles and to have had the union movement be an important part of my life."

Since 1972, Cormican has attended NYSUT RAs and is an active member of the statewide union's Retiree Advisory Committee, where she contributed to the online retirement planning guide *Your Blueprint for a Successful Retirement: An online planning guide*.

## Delegates elect Pallotta as President

Delegates to NYSUT's annual Representative Assembly elected Andrew Pallotta to a three-year term as president, Jolene T. DiBrango, executive vice president and J. Philippe Abraham, first vice president. Paul Pecorale was re-elected second vice president and Martin Messner was re-elected as secretary-treasurer. For more visit [www.nysut.org/officers2017](http://www.nysut.org/officers2017).

The  
**Retiree  
Organizer**

is published periodically  
for NYSUT's retiree leaders. Locals,  
chapters and retiree councils may  
reprint all *Organizer* content.

Contact: GERALYN O'REILLY

**Andrew Pallotta**  
President

**Jolene T. DiBrango**  
Executive Vice President

**J. Philippe Abraham**  
First Vice President

**Paul Pecorale**  
Second Vice President

**Martin Messner**  
Secretary-Treasurer

Retiree Services Office  
New York State United Teachers  
800 Troy-Schenectady Road  
Latham, NY 12110-2455

**518.213.6000**  
**800.342.9810**



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## Sonia Basko honored posthumously with Feldman leadership award

"Job. Well. Done."

Small, smooth words, like  
precious stones.

Alexandra Basko carries  
them with her to remember  
her sister, Sonia Basko, who  
was honored posthumously  
with "Not for Ourselves  
Alone:" The Sandy Feldman  
Outstanding Leadership Award  
during the opening session of  
NYSUT's Representative  
Assembly.

A teacher, former president  
of the Penfield Education  
Association, NYSUT Board  
member and then special proj-  
ects coordinator on NYSUT's  
staff, Sonia turned action into  
activism. She enlivened union-  
ism, empowered members, ini-  
tiated campaigns for social jus-  
tice, and organized spirited ral-  
lies, such as the 2014 state-  
wide Picket in the Pines march  
in the North Country.

"She knew that change  
would be more far-reaching  
when we advocated for people



to speak for themselves,"  
Alexandra Basko said. She said  
her sister always had a task for  
her and "made me feel like I  
was magnetic. I felt cherry-  
picked for her challenge." Along  
the way, she realized her sister  
had this same effect on the many  
people she worked with.

In a powerful video tribute,  
Kate Sacco of the Kenmore  
Teachers Association said Sonia  
had a knack for finding

*Continued on page 3*





## RECENT AND UPCOMING EVENTS

### NYSUT Regional Conferences

|                  |        |
|------------------|--------|
| RC 7 & 8 .....   | May 1  |
| RC 10 .....      | May 10 |
| RC 1–3; 44 ..... | May 23 |
| RC 11 & 45 ..... | May 24 |
| RC 4 & 46 .....  | May 24 |
| RC 12 .....      | May 31 |

### Newly Elected Delegate/Alternate Report Form Deadline

Due to Retiree Services..... June 20

### 2017 Retiree Leadership Database Update Deadline

Due to Retiree Services..... June 30

## Sonia Basko honored posthumously *continued from page 2*

people and bringing them to leadership roles. Selena Durio, a NYSUT Board member, said she had a way of making groups a lot more focused.

“Sonia was never too busy,” said John Kozlowski, president of the Monroe County Federation of Teachers, where Sonia had served as vice president.

Andy Pallotta, former NYSUT executive vice president and now president, said Sonia had “a warrior-like attitude.”

Alexandra Basko said her sister’s greatest assets were “self-realization, personal growth, loyalty and dedication.”

As Alexandra Basko accepted the NFOA award on her late sister’s behalf, delegates from around the state rose in a standing ovation. She thanked her mother, Kathy, an immigrant, for passing her strength on to her daughters. Her mother stood bravely in the front row.

The family was also presented with proclamations from the New York State Assembly through Speaker Carl Heastie and from State Comptroller Thomas Dinapoli.

Sonia served as NYSUT staff liaison to the American Cancer Society Making Strides walk. She

died in December of complications from cancer at the age of 43. Sandra Feldman, former UFT and then AFT president who the award is named after, also died of cancer.

“Sonia’s dedication to the labor movement was second to none. Her ‘union first’ work ethic should only be duplicated by all of us. Through her trials and tribulations, she always had a smile and happy demeanor,” said NYSUT Vice President Paul Pecorale.

“Sonia was just irreplaceable,” said Kozlowski, eyes rimming with tears.

## Reminder to council presidents

Expect to receive the annual “Newly Elected Delegate/Alternate Report Form” (typically printed on blue paper) for you to complete and return to Retiree Services by June 20. Since the official ED meeting mailing lists include only those delegates/alternates certified for the 2017 RA, this is your opportunity to add any delegates or alternates elected since the 2017 RA as well as any retiree council presidents that are not elected delegates.

If your council has elected new delegates/alternates that you would like included in the registration process for upcoming ED meetings, complete, sign and return the form to Retiree Services.

If your retiree council elections are scheduled for June and July, please return the database

update form and the completed and signed “Newly Elected Delegate/Alternate Report Form” as soon as your election results are known.

Council presidents will also receive the 2017 annual request to update the Retiree Leadership Database in a separate mailing. Responses are due back to Retiree Services by June 30.

If retiree council presidents have questions about the “Newly Elected Delegate/Alternate Report Form” or the annual request to update the Retiree Leadership Database, contact Joyce Smith at 800-342-9810, ext. 6291.



# Retirees urged to instill their ‘fire and fight’

The survival of this union — and the labor movement as a whole — depends on the one-to-one conversation, outgoing NYSUT President Karen E. Magee told retiree leaders.

“Use the history, the stories you have, the fights you have had. Take what we have done over the years and use it as your passion to instill fire and fight in our younger members.”

In an impromptu address, Magee spoke to leaders during a breakout session at the pre-RA Local and Retiree Council Presidents Conference. She thanked retirees for their passion and commitment in standing up to the serious threats facing the labor movement.

“If the last election wasn’t enough of a wakeup call, I don’t know what is,” Magee said. “We need to have solidarity more than ever before. We can’t show one little crack,” she said, referring to the deep-pocketed opponents who will use any perceived weakness to disarm and dismantle the force of labor.

Magee said the retiree voice is necessary to educate New Yorkers about the real dangers of a state constitutional convention, and to urge them to



vote NO in November on a ballot referendum on whether one should be held.

Such a convention, she said, would make every facet of the state constitution a target, including rights to a quality public education, the ability to bargain collectively, a secure retirement and protections for our environment.

“If you teach two people, they teach two more,” Magee said. “Go out and do what you do best.”

Loretta Donlon, a NYSUT Board member and president of Retiree Council 7, said the cost of holding a constitutional convention — expected to be in the hundreds of millions of dollars — resonates loudly with voters. Retirees can urge citizens to vote NO on the referendum by reminding them “it will hurt their purse,” she said.

Magee’s remarks dovetailed those of Nancy J. Altman, co-director of Social Security Works, a nonprofit organization dedicated to strengthening and

expanding the federal Social Security program.

Altman is also an advocate for Medicare and Medicare expansion. All three vital programs, she said, are in the crosshairs of right-wing politicians who vow to privatize them.

“These programs will be there in the

future — unless we take down our guard,” Altman said.

Recent polls show that, no matter how old or how young, how red or blue, people do understand that Social Security and Medicare are affordable programs that work, and need to be expanded.

Only the momentum of “people power,” she said, will keep the privateers at bay. She noted the masses of ordinary citizens who turned out to protest during the Women’s March on Washington and sister marches across the country, and who spoke out at town hall meetings held by elected representatives in Congress. “This is not a sprint, nor is this a marathon,” Altman said. “It’s a relay race. We are all part of this team.”

For more on the state constitutional convention, visit [www.nonewyorkconvention.org](http://www.nonewyorkconvention.org).

For more about Social Security Works, visit [www.socialsecurityworks.org](http://www.socialsecurityworks.org).





# Retirees applauded for their political energy at RA meeting

Former NYSUT Executive Vice President and now President Andy Pallotta on Saturday thanked retirees from ED 51-52-53 at an early-morning RA meeting for their hard work, calling them the stalwarts of political activism for the union.

He told the nearly 100 retirees that the union would need their help to get out the vote for the May 23 special election for a Long Island Assembly seat. The union is backing Christine Pellegrino of West Islip, a political newcomer, reading teacher and leader of the Long Island Opt-Out Movement.

The heavily Republican district presents a challenge but, Pallotta said, he thinks it can be won and that volunteers eager to help are already mobilizing around the state.

"The K-12 people and the higher ed people got together and formed a tremendous coalition," Pallotta said. "We will depend upon the retirees to get out the vote. You are very relevant."

NYSUT Vice

President Paul Pecorale, whose office oversees Retiree Services, also arrived bright and early to pay his respects to retiree activists: "It's been my distinct honor and privilege to serve and support our retirees." He lauded their engagement and involvement in, and knowledge of, the issues important to their union and to retirees.

One by one, retiree leaders reinforced the important roles retirees play in moving the union's agenda forward.

"We are the ones

who are carrying the entire show" when it comes to NYSUT's political work, said Florence McCue, an at-large director representing ED 51-52-53.

"There are very few groups of delegates that are up this early for breakfast and we're one of them,"

said Loretta Donlon, NYSUT Board member and president of Retiree Council 7, referring to the 6:15 a.m. breakfast start time. But that was to be



Andy Pallotta



Florence McCue

expected, she said, since retirees are characteristically determined to succeed at and are committed to their duties, working to assure a financially secure retirement for all Americans.

Rosemary Catanzariti, a NYSUT Board member representing ED

52, said her group of retirees would make a critical difference in the Pellegrino campaign, whose election could be a bellwether for future races.

And Tom Murphy, a NYSUT Board member representing ED 53, noted that 2017 marks the 100th birthday of President John F. Kennedy, who inspired Americans to join public and

community service efforts. "The comparison is stark" to the occupant of the White House today. Retirees are of the generation that remembers when national leaders were inspiring," he said, adding, "Let's keep the good work up."



Tom Murphy



Loretta Donlon



Paul Pecorale

# Retiree postcard campaign highlights 'Con Con' risks

With a Nov. 7 constitutional convention vote on the horizon, NYSUT retirees are putting pen to paper this spring to educate members about its dangers.

Leaders will set aside time at retiree council gatherings statewide so attendees can write pre-addressed and stamped postcards detailing the risks of holding a constitutional convention and asking fellow retirees to vote no. The initiative is spearheaded by NYSUT's Legislative/Political Department and the union's network of retiree council leaders and consultants.

"A retiree getting a handwritten note from another NYSUT retiree makes you more likely to respond and act," said NYSUT Second Vice President Paul Pecorale, noting that the campaign mirrors earlier successful efforts by the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association.

The member-to-member postcard campaign began after research showed that many retirees think their pension benefits are protected from future change — a dangerous misconception.

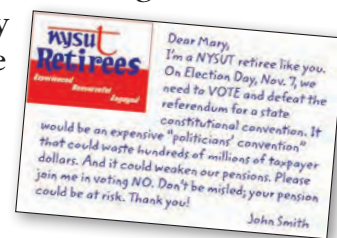
"Spreading the word that a constitutional conven-

tion puts retiree pensions at risk is a top priority," said NYSUT President Andy Pallotta, who explained that having retirees speak directly to other retirees is the most effective means of reaching them.

Set to launch in early May and run through Nov. 7, the campaign will initially include mailing 200 postcards to likely retiree voters in most of NYSUT's 45

retiree councils. Writers can select one of five sample messages. Leaders expect to send out nearly 25,000 postcards before the November vote.

New York State voters are asked every 20 years whether to hold a convention to alter the state constitution. Experts estimate a convention could cost hundreds of millions of dollars and open important rights to wholesale change, including pension and environmental protections, the right to bargain collectively and the social safety net. Retirees are particularly at risk since most rely on their pensions for living expenses.



## Shopping and travel programs designed for the NYSUT retiree

As a retiree, your NYSUT membership allows you the opportunity to enjoy the benefits of the more than 40 endorsed programs and services, ranging from important products to protect your loved ones to a variety of travel, entertainment and shopping options, offered by NYSUT Member Benefits.

Below is just a sampling of the programs available to you:

### **Abenity Discounts**

Enjoy access to approximately 290,000 exclusive member discounts across 10,000 U.S. cities, including discounted tickets for entertainment and sporting events; a variety of travel opportunities; and numerous local deals. Save on the latest blockbuster movies or theater events, theme parks, museums and

attractions, zoos, major appliances/televisions, restaurants, groceries, gym memberships, and much more!

### **Tunstall Medical Alert**

Get the peace of mind that comes from knowing you have a personal emergency response system to provide immediate assistance in the event you or a loved one are in distress. Both traditional landline and cell phone systems are available for purchase.

### **Wyndham Hotels & Endless Vacation Rentals**

Enjoy up to 20 percent off the best available rate at more than 7,500 participating hotels with the endorsed Wyndham Hotels program, or save 25 percent at more than 200,000 resort condo rentals in 100 countries with

Endless Vacation Rentals.

When you participate in any Member Benefits-endorsed program or service, you also get the peace of mind of knowing you have an advocate on your side. If you ever encounter an issue with any Member Benefits-endorsed program, please contact Member Benefits immediately so your needs can be addressed quickly and efficiently.

Visit [memberbenefits.nysut.org](http://memberbenefits.nysut.org) to learn how you can save or call 800-626-8101 with any questions.

*For information about this program or about contractual endorsement arrangements with providers of endorsed programs, please contact NYSUT Member Benefits.*

*Agency fee payers to NYSUT are eligible to participate in NYSUT Member Benefits-endorsed program.*