

Ithaca's Public Workers address City Administration Committee on Labor Resolution

Ithaca Public Sector Labor Unions: Actions of Council may not be enough to affect meaningful change.

ITHACA, N.Y., Nov. 30, 2022 – We would like to thank the City Administration Committee for the opportunity to speak this evening. We understand that your time is extremely valuable, and there is much work to be done tonight. That said, we will try to keep our remarks brief.

In front of you tonight are the leaders of organized labor representing public workers in the City of Ithaca. Here tonight is Justin Perkins, President of the CSEA DPW Unit; Thomas Condzella, President of the Ithaca Police Benevolent Association, Emily Rodekohr from the Ithaca Professional Firefighters Association and Jeanne Grace, President of the City Executive Association. We are honored to be here on behalf of our members, the workers who keep our community safe and functioning by providing critical public services.

We, as a coalition of workers, want to thank you for hearing our concerns about the treatment of organized labor in our community. We understand that the city has many fiscal priorities, but we think that now is time to get back to the basics. Our foundation is cracking and we need to take decisive, intentional and focused actions to repair it before the house caves in.

The comments of the City Attorney during the November 9th Common Council Meeting continue to disturb us. His remarks about Ithaca's public servants and demands of Council were unprecedented, but very indicative of the hostile culture that has been allowed to persist at City Hall and in local government. Additionally, his comments included incomplete and misleading information. Our reporting of observations of a pattern of behavior was a personal attack on nobody. Instead, workers were alerting the Council of a problem that exists, which is a culture and philosophy in dealing with City employees that has been unproductive, disrespectful and destructive. Furthermore, this culture has not only led to the poor treatment of public workers and deteriorating public services in our community, but it has also led to many voices being marginalized, the same voices who in reality should be part of conversations surrounding matters involving organized labor.

Ithaca's Public Workers know that council is faced with many challenging budgetary decisions and requests for funding and that well informed spending decisions are usually made regarding those requests. How though, can council invest more in City employees if you are left in the dark about what employees are even asking for? For the past decade, it appears that the council has been asked to approve labor agreements with little information about the actual needs of the workers and what we had asked for. It also has become clear that Council may not even be aware of which requests were denied by the city and why, or what concessions were forced on us to settle agreements. We need you involved in these discussions.

In that same vein of decisions of allocating City funds, with a City Attorney and four Assistant City Attorneys, why is there a need to retain outside counsel at all? Why are there always so many attorneys on the City's side of the table from high power law firms like Roemer, Wallens, Gold and Mineux, LLP out of Albany that have been retained by the city for years? These firms are not cheap. To put it into perspective, the City paid outside counsel over \$250,000 to wrestle two years of raises away from the PBA, fighting the Police Officers through negotiations, mediation and eventually arbitration until the 9th hour when the arbitrator acted as a mediator to help settle the matter. The result, public servants without a raise for 10 years, and thousands of taxpayer dollars wasted. Is this money really needed so the city can declare themselves the winner while the workers and community continue to struggle? The adversarial and toxic culture of hostility, noncooperation and disrespect that persists in City Hall must stop now. These matters can be resolved face to face, in partnership, with all primary stakeholders involved in collaboration at the bargaining table, keeping the interests of the city, the workers, but most importantly, the Community in mind. CSEA Admin, CSEA DPW and the Executive Association don't even have legal representation at the bargaining table, why does the City need to?

Couldn't these funds paid to outside legal teams be used in other, more productive ways, to make our community better and safer for everyone? Let's put that money towards raises for the custodian, a member of the CSEA DPW Unit, who after several years of working for the city, has reached the maximum pay of \$17.12 per hour, about 34,000 gross before taxes and health benefit contributions are taken out, hardly a living wage, especially in this climate of inflation. Let's get contracts for the workers who have gone without, let's repair the damage that has been done. Let's invest in the future of our community by treating workers with dignity and respect, and by paying a living wage, with respectable benefits, that make the City of Ithaca a destination not just for workers, but for students, families to visit and live, and businesses to grow and thrive. Let's start getting negotiations started before contracts expire so public servants are not working out of a contract.

To continue pitting your employees against trained attorneys, for basic cost of living raises while always requiring benefit reductions, whether you realize it or not, will continue bankrupting and busting the very unions represented before you here today. It will also serve to create further division. Is this the direction we should be heading? We are all on the same team, we simply want to be treated respectfully and fairly, as valued stakeholders within our community and our government, not as enemies or a necessary evil. We want to serve, and to have the support and resources to meet the needs of our community when the call comes. Stacking the negotiating table with high powered lawyers who have no understanding of our community, our work or the jobs we do, has never worked, it never will work, and is very the reason we are in this critical situation.

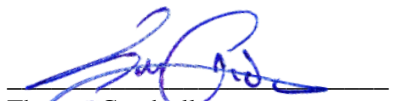
We recognize that you are taking the first critical step towards fixing this situation. We thank you for considering the resolution before you here today. We are supportive of the concept of removing the City Attorney from any matters involving organized labor in general and are hopeful for positive change. We would however be remiss if we failed to say that we are also not confident that this resolution alone will be enough to start reversing the culture in City Hall of using power, authority and taxpayer money to marginalize and bully others, including organized workers, public servants and labor leaders. The resolution itself, and associated letter, on pages 120 and 121 of tonight's agenda, still portrays

misinformation. To clarify one point, the city attorney has only been lead negotiator since the beginning of the former Mayor's administration, not for multiple decades. Furthermore, the assertion that many successful and fair contracts have been negotiated in that time, has already been countered by the number of public workers willing to take the risk and speak publicly to the contrary.

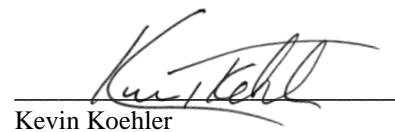
Simply accepting the resolution placed in front of you penned by the City Attorney to change the in-person players at the table will not ensure the much-needed move away from the destructive philosophy and culture that has been allowed to persist in City Hall, unchecked, for several years. We fear that what is being proposed tonight is nothing new. As has been done for years, the City will continue to retain outside counsel at the expense of the taxpayers, to out-lawyer and bully unions into submission, while the root causes of the real issues remain unaddressed.

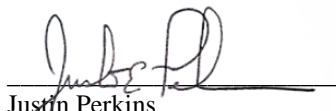
We encourage you to ask yourselves, how can we change the culture and philosophy in City Hall? How can we change the way those in authority view the value and the role of workers in our community? Are we simply a budget line that needs to be managed? How can we partner and collaborate towards meaningful solutions, not just symbolic ones? We need to consider drastic and radical changes now, to reverse course and set the stage for future success because there is too much at stake.

Our coalition of labor leaders and organizations applauds the council for considering first steps and actions in this matter. We would however encourage you to consider actions that are meaningful, practical and new, a product of your own work and collegiality. The resolution in front of you may have the appearance of change, but we fear that the spirit behind it is misguided. We want to have faith and trust in our elected officials to take the right first step in a long journey towards repairing our community and bettering the treatment of workers. Please ask yourself though, regarding the resolution in front of you, is this first step a meaningful one? Are we walking in the right direction, together, hand in hand? Will this resolution help to rebuild the trust of the workers who have been mistreated in our community for a decade if not more? We can't afford any missteps, and again, time is of the essence.


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