NEWS

"Hangin' around, nothin' to do but frown, rainy days and Mondays always get me down."
"RAINY DAYS AND MONDAYS" BY THE CARPENTERS

Local teachers push Board of Education for contract improvements

BY KELLY KONG
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

More than 40 teachers and union leaders packed a Monday Board of Education meeting ahead of a contract negotiation process, toting homemade posters calling for wage increases.

The current contract for New Haven Public Schools teachers took effect in July 2023 and included a 5 percent pay raise and stronger workplace protections. The union is set to begin negotiations with NHPS next Tuesday for the renewed contract, which is expected to go into effect in July and last for three years.

Leslie Blatteau '97 GRD '07, the president of the New Haven Federation of Teachers, told the News that she sees the bargaining process as an opportunity for the union to collaborate with the board and address longstanding issues in New Haven schools.

"We want to come to the board to let them know that teachers in New Haven want to work in New Haven," Blatteau said. "We love New Haven, and there are concerns and obstacles to us being able to do the job that we want to do."

The union's top priority for the upcoming contract negotiations is to increase teacher salaries and benefits.

"Unfortunately, many of us responsible and dedicated educators are struggling," Carmen Cordova-Rolon, a teacher at Roberto Clemente Leadership Academy for Global Awareness, told the board. "Low salaries force many of us to take on second jobs, a practice that drains our energy and time, leaving less for lesson planning and professional development."

Dario Sulzman, an English teacher at Wilbur Cross High School, said many teachers are bringing home less money this year due to increased health insurance premiums offsetting their expected pay raise.

"I'm on the most affordable plan with a high deductible, and even mine jumped from 40 or 50 per pay period to 80 to 90 bucks," he said.

NHPS spokesperson Justin Harmon told the News that the school district wants to provide teachers with the best possible compensation, both because teachers deserve it, and because NHPS wants to disincentivize teachers from moving to higher-paying districts.

To substantially increase teacher compensation, however, Harmon said that NHPS needs increased state funding.

"We've worked very closely with our delegation in Hartford," Harmon said. "But we haven't yet been able to get the funding that we need to do everything that our teachers are calling for."

Teachers also raised concerns about understaffing and overenrollment in schools.

Sulzman said Wilbur Cross faces massive classroom vacancy issues. He said he currently teaches a class of 25 students, but he feels that he can only "really effectively" teach a class of 15.

In her speech to the board, Blatteau said that understaffing and inadequate resources at NHPS has required teachers to put in several hours of work outside of their contractual work day. As a result, teachers face increased burnout and depletion, she added.

"Our members rank job stress higher than job satisfaction," she said. "It does not have to be this way."

According to Harmon, uncertainty in state and federal Title I funding for schools with disadvantaged students has made it difficult for the district to find realistic changes for teachers in the upcoming contract negotiation process.

"There is legislation in the federal government that would reduce Title I funding substantially," Harmon said, alluding to a 27 percent reduction in Title I funds proposed by the U.S. House of Representatives earlier this month. "It's likely that we're going to be seeing some federal funding cuts."

Several teachers also spoke about facility and maintenance issues at their workplaces.

Ben Scudder, who teaches at High School in the Community, said that he has repeatedly heard about black mold, leaky roofs and broken bathroom locks among New Haven schools. Right now, his school's heating, ventilation and cooling system are broken, he said.



KELLY KONG / CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER
Over 40 teachers and union leaders attended Monday's Board of Education meeting, where they outlined their concerns.

"My classroom has been in the 80s multiple days in the past few weeks," he said. "It's not like this is a one day issue or one month issue. There's been years and years and years of neglect of our public schools."

The school district is mitigating a $3.8 million budget deficit and does not have a finalized line item budget for the 2025-26 fiscal year.

During the meeting, Scudder went before the board with a poster that read, "Show us the money in an itemized budget." Having learned from administrators about several repercussions of NHPS's budget crises, from librarian layoffs to minimized salary increases, Scudder demanded transparency in NHPS's budget allocation.

"I understand federal cuts are coming," he told the board. "I understand the state is not fishing enough money, absolutely. But I don't understand why as a citizen, I can't know where every dollar that I spend in taxes goes."

Dr. Madeline Negrón, superintendent of NHPS, told the News that she is working with NHPS's new chief financial officer to put out an itemized budget document.

"We want to have full transparency, and that is a goal that we're working towards now," she said.

New Haven has 44 public schools.

Contact
KELLY KONG *at*
kelly.kong@yale.edu.

Man detained Sunday by ICE agents on Dixwell Avenue

BY SABRINA THALER
STAFF REPORTER

Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents detained a New Haven man driving on Dixwell Avenue, three blocks away from Yale's Payne Whitney Gymnasium, Sunday morning.

Five unmarked cars surrounded the man as he was driving to visit a potential contracting site for his job as a tile installer, according to two of the man's family members. He was a few blocks away from his home when agents apprehended him on Dixwell Avenue near its intersection with Webster Street, a video posted to social media indicates.

The agents brought him to ICE's Hartford base before he was transferred to the Plymouth County Correctional Facility in Massachusetts, according to ICE's online detainee locator system. In July, ICE detained Esdrás Zabaleta-Ramirez — an 18-year-old student at Wilbur Cross High School — at the same location.

The man's wife, Claudia, who asked for her last name to be omitted because of her immigration status, said agents were waiting for her husband as he left his home and followed him on his way to work. Claudia said the person who posted the video on social media witnessed the entire encounter.

When it appeared the man would not open the door to his car, an agent broke his car window, according to Claudia. Another video from the scene shows the car's passenger-side window almost entirely shattered.

Claudia said her husband told her ICE agents forced him out of the car and handcuffed him.

"He doesn't understand why they were investigating him, because in that same encounter, they told him that he didn't have a record," Claudia said in Spanish.

The man's cousin, who also requested anonymity due to her immigration status, wrote to the News that the man came to the U.S. to secure financial stability for his family in Guatemala. He first attempted to enter the United States in 2011 but was caught and deported. He returned in 2015 and has lived in New Haven since, the cousin wrote.

Currently, the man's family live in New Haven's Dixwell neighborhood. He has no criminal record, Claudia and his cousin said.

ICE's Hartford and Boston offices, as well as the agency's media inquiry email, did not respond to the News' requests for comment on Monday about why the man was detained.

Claudia told the News that her husband is the household's breadwinner and that she was not sure how their family would be able to afford rent without his income. The couple has two daughters, ages 1 and 3, and receives financial support from extended family, she said.

Unidad Latina en Acción, a local organization that advocates for immigrants' rights, is working to raise money for the family and to help them secure a lawyer, the group's community organizing director, John Jairo Lugo, told the News.

Lugo noted how close the arrest was to Yale's campus and said ULA is working to recruit Yale students to support their rapid response line for future cases.

ULA was founded in 2002.

Contact
SABRINA THALER *at*
sabrina.thaler@yale.edu.

Fledgling Independent Party seeks foothold in New Haven

BY ELIJAH HUREWITZ-RAVITCH
STAFF REPORTER

A new party wants to shake up New Haven politics, a realm long dominated by Democrats.

The Independent Party of New Haven launched its own town committee, a body which organizes voters and helps select nominees, in August. Though the party itself was established four years earlier, the committee allows the party to more actively engage in city politics.

Leading the effort is the party's founder and executive director, Jason Bartlett, a figure with a long history in New Haven and Connecticut politics.

Since his controversial ouster from City Hall over allegations of corruption in 2020, Bartlett has been interested in "trying to figure out how to have more than two parties," he said. While Bartlett believes that "the two-party system is not good for the country," he said it can be especially damaging on the local level.

New Haven's legislative body, the Board of Alders, has been composed exclusively of Democrats since 2011, and the city's last Republican mayor left office in 1953. Bartlett said that there has been little competition within the Democratic Party in races for both chambers of state government and on the Board of Alders.

"The Yale unions have controlled the party since 2011, when they first took control over the alder seats," Bartlett said, referring to collective bargaining units representing Yale employees. "There's no minority representation. That doesn't create balance. It creates an environment with no transparency. It creates a government that doesn't debate issues."

Bartlett was critical of the UNITE HERE unions' involvement in the recent Ward 1 alder race. Ahead of the Democratic primary, supporters of Norah Laughter '26, many of whom identified themselves as union members, tried to dissuade Yalies heading to the polls to vote for Elias Theodore '27, who ultimately won the election. Bartlett called it "an affront to me."

Locals 34 and 35 spokesperson Ian Dunn declined to comment.

This is not Bartlett's first attempt at disrupting what he describes as a union-dominated status quo. In 2024, he organized a group called New Haven Agenda, which sought to challenge eight union-backed Democratic Town Committee ward co-chairs and elect a slate of insurgents.

But in those primaries, "there was no town committee to help the challenger," Bartlett said. "It's very hard to beat the machine."

After working on the unsuccessful mayoral campaigns of Mayce Torres and Tom Goldenberg, both of whom ran as independents in the past five years, Bartlett decided to set up a new local party, an alternative way to get candidates onto the ballot.

"The Independent Party here will be a real party," he said.

Bartlett aims to recruit 30 to 60 New Haveners to join the Independent Party and wants to raise money to hire party employees. Ultimately, he said, the group's goal is to make it possible for candidates who lack the backing of New Haven's politically prominent unions to get elected.

The party is currently focused on five aldermanic candidates running to represent wards across the city in the November general election: Robert Vitello for Ward 12, Luis Jimenez for Ward 13, Rafael Fuentes for Ward 16, Anthony Acri for Ward 18 and Miguel Pittman in Ward 3. Pittman lost to Ward 3 Alder Angel Hubbard in both a special election in 2024 and the Democratic primary earlier this month.

Bartlett, who is himself a registered Democrat, emphasized that the Independent Party will be pluralistic in nature.

"We'll have Democrats, Republicans and unaffiliates," he said. "There's not going to be an ideological purity test."

Nickelle Cooper, an educator and the Independent Party's chair, said in a Friday interview that education, affordable housing and homelessness have all fallen by the wayside in the mayoral administrations of the past several decades.

"I'm a teacher by trade, and I'm all about education and changing the way that we do things," Cooper said. "Things have to change in order to get better. It's not going to be easy, but let's put out the conversation."

Cooper is also keen on dispensing with partisan politics for the sake of local change. She said that she hopes the Independent Party will enable "people to think outside of Republican or Democrat."

"I just would like people to know that there's a third option and just be open and willing to change or listen," Cooper said. "Because New Haven has to go in a different direction."

For now, the party's core tenets have to do with the mechanics of the democratic process itself: ranked choice voting and ethics reform. But Bartlett is eager for more input.

"We want to attract people to the party, so I'm hoping that people will come forward with their own ideas. There's plenty out there," he said.

Bartlett calls himself a "bad Democrat," and he thinks that there are many more of his ilk both nationwide and in New Haven.

"I think that even establishment Democrats would agree that there's too many people who stay in office way too long, and that the Democratic Party here in New Haven and across the state is hungering for younger people, fresh blood, turnover," Bartlett said. "Will that manifest into energy for the Independent Party in New Haven? That remains to be seen."

Bartlett added that the rising political polarization might make a party without the baggage of the national Republican or Democratic parties more appealing.

To be sure, the Independent Party may face a steep climb to establishing legitimate political power in New Haven.

"With all due respect for the union people with their aldermanic strength, it's still a 1 party system," Douglas Rae, a longtime Yale professor and a historian of New Haven, wrote to the News. "I doubt that the new party will shake things up much."

Still, Cooper is optimistic about the fledgling party's future.

"Change has to come," she said. "Change is not easy and change is hard. So I'm always hopeful. It's the beginning of the conversation."

The Independent Party of New Haven currently has 506 members, according to Lisa Milone, New Haven's Republican registrar of voters.

Contact
ELIJAH HUREWITZ-RAVITCH
at
elijah.hurewitz-ravitch@yale.edu.