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Coalition of Unions Launch Carbon Free and Healthy Schools Initiative at Earth Day Event

Labor Leaders Urge Lawmakers to Fund Energy-Saving Measures at New York City Public Schools

NEW YORK, NY – Today, April 21, 2021, just ahead of Earth Day, the United Federation of Teachers, District Council 37, 32BJ SEIU, the New York City Building and Construction Trades Council, the New York City Central Labor Council, Climate Jobs NY and others launched the Carbon Free and Healthy Schools campaign. This initiative aims to make schools a model for carbon-free buildings by updating antiquated heating and cooling systems, making use of large rooftops to generate solar power, and increasing school buildings' overall energy efficiency. The program would also create thousands of new jobs and save schools millions of dollars in energy costs.

In a virtual event attended by labor leaders, union members, and other allies and supporters of the campaign, members of the coalition—including Gary Labarbera, President of the Building & Construction Trades Council of Greater New York and the New York State Building & Construction Trades Council, Vincent Alvarez, President of the NYC Central Labor Council, Michael Mulgrew, President of the United Federation of Teachers, Henry Garrido, Executive Director of District Council 37, and Kyle Bragg, President of 32BJ SEIU—spoke to the urgent need for significant and immediate improvements to New York City public schools. As a part of this campaign launch, four leading candidates for mayor of New York City pledged to support this initiative if they are elected.

The coalition is urging the federal government, as part of its investments in infrastructure, to support this project in New York City, which calls for funding energy audits on all public schools in the city and providing low-cost, guaranteed financing for building retrofits and solar power. The coalition is also calling on local lawmakers to fully implement the funding already allocated for energy-efficiency retrofits and solar panels on schools, and to make timely and effective use of funding in the American Rescue Act that can support upgrades to HVAC systems in schools.

“New York City educators have been teaching our students how to save the Earth and the environment for years, but we have been doing it from school buildings that are not Green,” **said Michael Mulgrew, president of the United Federation of Teachers.** “We now have the chance to make our school buildings match our words. We owe it to our children, their families, the city and, quite frankly, the world, to get this done.”

“We must take bold action on climate,” **said Henry Garrido, Executive Director of District Council 37.** “We must lead the way out of this economic crisis. Carbon Free and Healthy Schools is a way to do both, while also making our schools healthier and safer, and saving millions of dollars for schools.”

“School cleaners and handypersons work hard every day in buildings with leaky rooftops, rattling windows, and overheated facilities during sweltering summer days,” **said Kyle Bragg, President of 32BJ**

SEIU, representing over 5,000 school cleaners and handypersons. “Having our federal government invest to make our school buildings more energy efficient is critical for the future of our planet. Investing in union jobs with good wages and benefits is a way of investing in our infrastructure. We must do better to create safe and healthy school environments for students and staff.”

“This is the moment when we have to take action on climate at the scale science demands,” said **Vincent Alvarez, President of the New York City Central Labor Council, AFL-CIO.** “This is the moment when we can make real progress on long-standing issues in our school facilities, and make them healthier and safer for kids and the school community. This is the time to move our city forward in ways that also create good union jobs and save millions of dollars for schools.”

“As taxpayers prepare to invest trillions in infrastructure to spur an economic recovery, Carbon Free and Healthy Schools need to be a priority,” said **Gary LaBarbera, President of the Building and Construction Trades Council of Greater New York.** “This program will create thousands of new jobs, make our schools healthier and safer, and position New York City as a leader on the use of green infrastructure to tackle the climate crisis. We aim to stand side-by-side with the city, our federal delegation and other allies to make this happen.”

“This is a moment when we can go big—enlisting federal support and building on earlier work to put solar on some New York City schools—and implement energy-efficiency retrofits and solar power across the city’s public-school buildings,” said **Jeff Vockrodt, Executive Director of Climate Jobs NY.** “Together, we can make New York City schools a model of green infrastructure, make schools healthier and safer for students and the school community, create good union jobs, and save schools millions in energy costs.”

“When the facilities are this old, school cleaners in these buildings have to put in double the amount of effort to do our work,” said **Romay Garcia, a 32BJ member who works as a handyperson at a Queens school.** “Before taking this job over 10 years ago, I served abroad in the U.S. Navy, and I saw the top of the line facilities they have in Italy and Spain and other areas where we were stationed. I think we can and should definitely do more to bring our school buildings to the 21st century.”

“I’m a shop steward in my union, and I am always hearing from my co-workers about the work that the school buildings need because they haven’t been properly upgraded,” said **Jamal Johnson, a 32BJ member and cleaner in a school in Long Island City, Queens.** “Cracks on the walls need to be fixed, ceilings that leak after it rains, aged windows that do not function well, and pipes that don’t run hot water. Doing these major improvements would be a major step for our public schools, and it would better the health and safety of everyone.”

“I’ve been working in this building since 1980, and the windows have never been replaced,” said **Robert Orso, 32BJ member and cleaner at P.S. 29 in College Point, Queens.** “And an addition built on in 2012, has had additional problems. Whenever there’s a heavy rain, the roof leaks. We try to go the extra mile, but the building itself needs major improvements. If investing in solar energy can save major dollars that can be used to make these improvements, then of course we should do it. The more we wait, the more problems there will be later.”

“My building was built in 1953 and it gets pretty hot in the summer which makes it difficult to do the job sometimes,” said **Franklin Peña, 32BJ member and cleaner at P.S./M.S. 200 in Queens.** “We have a really old boiler system that is not energy efficient. I would love to see solar panels on the roof and upgrades to the boilers to improve energy efficiency in the building. Upgrading these systems would improve our

environmental health, promote social awareness about renewable energy alternatives, and highlight choices we can all make in our day to day lives to live more sustainably.”

The New York City Department of Education currently spends about \$275 million per year to power and heat school buildings. With just a 25 percent improvement in energy efficiency and a robust solar power installation program, the City could save about \$70 million per year. There are dozens of case studies of school districts that have successfully saved money by investing in energy efficiency and solar power, including the San Jose Unified School District, which installed solar panels at 14 schools for an anticipated energy savings of more than \$25 million over the 25-year life of the system.

To learn more about this initiative, visit <https://www.carbonfreehealthyschoolsnyc.org/>.

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