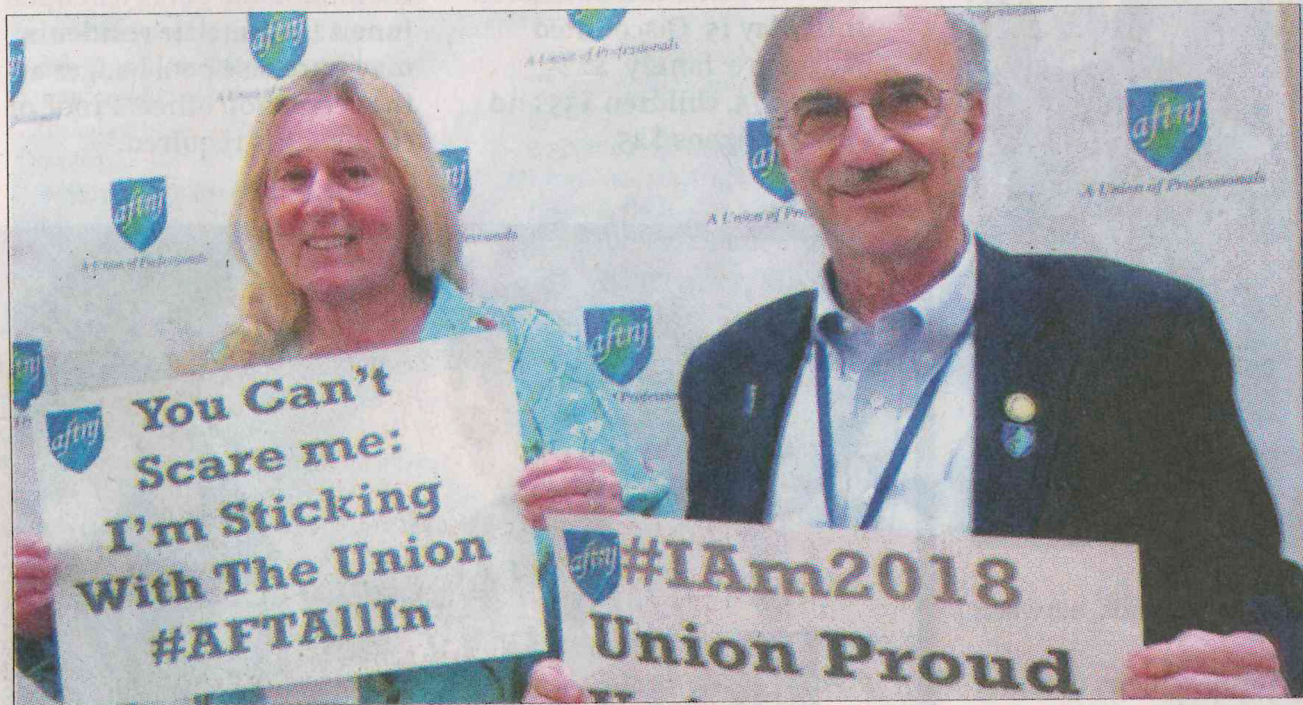


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COURTESY BOB RUSSO

Councilman Bob Russo holds up pro-union signs with AFTNJ President Donna Chiera.

Councilman Russo re-elected to teachers' federation

BY **TINA PAPPAS**
for Montclair Local

Former mayor and present councilman Robert Russo was once arrested — but for a good cause.

As a Newark teacher, he led the 1970 strike for fair living wages and was arrested with 200 other teachers during a demonstration downtown, marching against what he referred to as “a corrupt city government and board of education.”

Recently, Russo was reelected as Vice-President for Higher Education at the American Federation of Teachers New Jersey (AFTNJ) during the annual conference, held in Atlantic City on April 14.

He recalled a period of time in the education system where his fourth grade classroom had broken desks, lacked blackboards and windows could not be opened during hot days. He soon became the building representative at Roseville Avenue School in Newark.

“We see the same issues of bad facilities, low pay and political interference with education decisions playing out all over the country, from West

Virginia to Kentucky, and just recently Arizona and closer to home in Jersey City,” Russo said. “When will this nation devote adequate attention and support to public education and the profession of teaching?”

He started his career in education after graduating from Rutgers-Newark in 1968 as a teacher in Newark, where he joined the Newark Teachers Union. He eventually taught at Belleville High School. Russo moved on to collegiate professors at Essex County College, Rutgers University in Newark and Kean University in Union teaching political science classes in American Government. He eventually got his masters in political science from Rutgers University. At one point, Russo took a position in the New Jersey Division of Consumer Affairs, where he served as assistant to the director and manager of the NJ Lemon Law office. He retired from there in 2007, which allowed him to go back to teaching. Russo is a current adjunct faculty at Montclair State University. He became a leader of the AFT NJ union local at Montclair and then a

Vice President for Higher Education at the State-wide AFTNJ union, the position he was just re-elected to.

Although he has moved on from his early days in Newark, it was there he said he learned to fight for the rights of teachers, as well students.

“We fought for the students and the teachers against an urban political machine that did not negotiate until there was a three-week strike, much like we recently saw in West Virginia,” he said. “I think the need for professionals to organize and join unions is just as relevant today as it was in the 1960s and early 1970s, when I began my teaching career in the elementary schools of Newark.”

This year marks his 50th year in the classroom.

“I love teaching, care about my students, and have great classes in urban public administration and political parties now,” he said. “But I still feel the need to lead on the issues of adequately funding our public schools and colleges and treating our educators with respect. It’s something we can afford to do with a fairer tax system, and cannot afford not to do.”