

the EXCELSIOR

VOLUME EIGHTEEN. ISSUE FOUR

OCTOBER 17, 2011

Prof Proposes New Social Contract

BY LORETTA CHIN

A distinguished Brooklyn College alumnus proposed the idea of a new social contract for America to students, faculty, and staff at the Fourteenth Charles R. Lawrence II Memorial Lecture Series event last week in the Woody Tanger auditorium.

Kenan Distinguished Professor of Sociology of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and former President of the American Sociological Association, Arne L. Kalleberg delivered the lecture, "Confronting Precarious Work: Toward a New Social Contract." The lecture series has a tradition of bringing some of the most distinguished American scholars in the social sciences and humanities to Brooklyn College. It was hosted by the Sociology department and the President of Brooklyn College in cooperation with the Wolfe Institute.

Sociology professor and director of Children and Youth Studies, Gertrud Lenzer, brought the lecture series into existence at BC to pay tribute to an African American scholar of distinction and former member of the Brooklyn College faculty.

"The lectures have contemplated important policy issues and questions of national and international relevance and significance ranging from American domestic policies to issues of political and economic

policies," Lenzer said. "Charles Lawrence was both a scholar and an activist. It is this spirit of scholarship and concern for public affairs, and the general well-being of society that has informed these lectures from the outset and has become their unifying theme."

Kalleberg, an international sociology scholar and the author of eleven books and numerous articles, is the author of *Good Jobs, Bad Jobs: The Rise of Polarized and Precarious Employment Systems in the United States 1970s-2000s*. He sees the complexities of the world of work as a changing core activity in society that links people to each other and locates them within the different classes of society.

He defined the period of precarious work as originating from the 1970s to the present day and explained how various socio-economic and political factors such as globalization, technological changes, and pressures on businesses to be more flexible and competitive with a focus on markets and individualism has led to a shift in how businesses operate.

"Precarious work is employment that is uncertain, unpredictable and risky in the point of the view of the worker," Kalleberg said. This led to major upheavals through massive unemployment, outsourcing of jobs, weakening of the labor unions, and an increase in insecure and low wage part-time employment. Consequences have been the destruction of

the middle class, distress, loss of health insurance, increased debt, mortgage foreclosures, and a host of other problems.

Kalleberg referred to other periods of market instability such as the 1800s and the 1930s, a time when a "New Deal" was proposed for a new social contract between workers and government that led to a period of certainty and wealth up to the 1970s.

"Again, pressures from market forces and other associated factors have changed American society, but it has also had global impact as well due to an expanding global economy," said Kalleberg.

Kalleberg introduced the concept of "Flexicurity," which is a combination of flexibility for employers and security for workers, as a proposal for how America could adapt successful models from Denmark and the Netherlands to the United States. He advocated for moving away from the idea of social movements to effect change and to try out new strategies, pointing out that our economic policy does not work because employment does not always equal productivity.

"The major challenge is to get government, business and labor to take employment policy and the creation of good jobs seriously," said Kalleberg. He proposed a bottom up and top down approach to create a more flexible system that affords worker security while meeting the needs of employers in this new and globally

competitive economy. He suggested the creation of a model that will allow workers to choose types of employment and conditions, and one that integrates diversity within the labor force. He also advocated for integration of immigrants and others into the labor force through regional and community based retraining and lifelong learning. Community colleges would have an important role to play in partnering with businesses to meet their needs in this changing economy.

Kalleberg concluded by saying that the U.S. needs a new social contract based upon the policies and principles of "Flexicurity" and that it will require actions by government, business, and labor at local and international levels.

Audience members were eager to ask questions and make comments at the end of the lecture. Some concerns were raised about jobs going overseas, worker representation vs. concentration of power at the top, the composition of workers then and now, and the historical failure of past social contracts.

Kalleberg said that he has tried to identify an important problem and to start the conversation about ideas of how to address that problem before we reach a crisis situation.

"You can't give up," he said, "It's not the individual's responsibility to address these issues, it's a collective issue."