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 Auergard Auditorium.

Kenan Distinguished Professor of Sociology of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and former President of the American Sociological Association, Anne 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, Gerald Lesser, 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 contended important policy issues and questions of national and international relevance and significance ranging from American domestic policies to issues of political and economic policies," Lesser said. "Charles Lawrence was both a scholar and an activist. It is this spirit of scholarship and commitment to 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 sociologist 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 1970-2000. He sees the complexity 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.

Kalleberg defined the period of precarious work as originating from the 1970s to the present day and explained how various socioeconomic and political factors such as globalization, technological change, 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. "It leads to major upheavals through massive unemployment, outsourcing of jobs, weakening of the labor union, and an increase in insecurity 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 1890s and the 1930s, a time when "a New Deal" was proposed for a new social contract between workers and government that lasted for a period of certainty and stability up to the 1970s.

"Again, pressures from market forces and other related factors have changed American society, but it has also had a great 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 security to a labor market that is flexible and to try out new strategies of 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 work together to solve the problem and to start the conversation about 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."