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Op-ed: The best way for Mamdani to lift workers' incomes

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Workers walking to the office

During his campaign, mayor-elect Zohran Mamdani made a compelling case for the need to address New York City's affordability crisis. Now it's time to turn campaign promises into policy solutions.

Proposals to make things cheaper, or free, like groceries and buses, have plenty of political appeal, but costs lowered by government fiat are hard to sustain against economic forces beyond the control of City Hall, like interest rates, commodity prices, and inflation.

A lasting affordability agenda requires more than steps to reduce New York's high cost of living. We also need policies that help poor people increase their wealth. The new mayor should ensure that New Yorkers stranded in low-wage jobs can enroll in workforce training programs at CUNY community colleges so they can earn the credentials they need to secure raises and promotions.

The key to personal income growth is education. At the same time, a well-educated, highly skilled workforce is essential for regional economic competitiveness. Strategies that increase the skills of low-income New Yorkers drive social mobility while also stimulating private sector investment and job creation.

For an agenda linking education and economic development the new mayor should leverage CUNY community colleges to raise incomes, address the high cost of living, and grow the city's economy. Places like BMCC, Hostos, Kingsborough, and LaGuardia offer vocational training for jobs in healthcare, IT, construction trades, and more. Designed for working New Yorkers, classes are in the evenings and on weekends and lead to the industry certifications required by employers.

Matt Sigelman, president of the Burning Glass Institute, estimates that more than sixty percent of working New Yorkers are professionally "stranded". They're underemployed (they have a college degree but their job doesn't require one), stalled in their career mobility, or both. They can't get a promotion or a better-paying job because they lack the skills and credentials required for advancement in their field.

The challenge for low-wage workers seeking "upskilling" is how to pay for it, since government financial aid has historically been restricted to students pursuing college degrees. Fortunately, these rules are changing. Governor Kathy Hochul has made it possible for students to use New York's Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) for workforce training at SUNY and CUNY.

Notably, the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA), passed into law in July, changed federal regulations so that, for the first time, low-income students will be able to use Pell grants to pay for short-term workforce training programs offered by community colleges. The mayor-elect should jump on this opportunity to secure "Workforce Pell" to subsidize vocational training for low-income New Yorkers hungry for economic mobility.

While learning new skills can be life-changing for a worker stranded in a low-wage job, it is still the case that in today's economy, when it comes to good jobs and rewarding careers, college degrees matter. On balance, students who earn bachelor's degrees get better jobs and make more money than those who don't.

Unfortunately, according to the Center for an Urban Future, there are over 700,000 New Yorkers who started college but never finished their degree. If just one-quarter of them enrolled in CUNY and earned credentials for high-demand occupations, the city's talent pool, tax revenue, and economy would all grow.

City Hall should expand on initiatives like CUNY Reconnect to provide education and training opportunities for as many low-income New Yorkers as possible. A cheaper New York City would be great, but one in which low-income families enjoy rising incomes would be good, too.

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